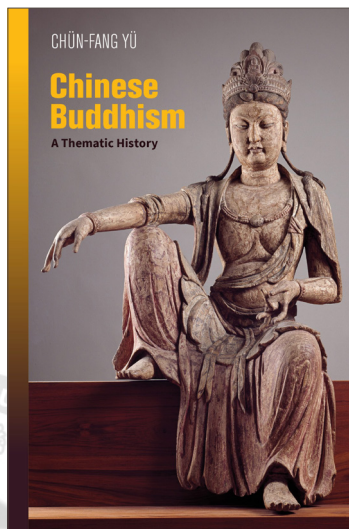


# Book Review

Yü, Chün-fang. *Chinese Buddhism: A Thematic History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020. E-book US\$10, paperback US\$28, hardcover US\$74.



This book is a parting gift to teachers and students of Chinese Buddhism from the eminent scholar Chün-fang Yü, now Sheng Yen Professor Emerita of Chinese Buddhism at Columbia University, after four decades of teaching. As she explains in the preface, she set out to write the book she needed and did not have.

Such a book, she explains, should be accessible to undergraduates. It should offer a more extensive treatment of Chinese Buddhism—defined as the Buddhist tradition of the Han people, not the Buddhist traditions of Tibet or ethnic minorities in China—than is found in surveys of the Buddhist tradition or of Chinese religion. It should neither be limited to philosophical and doctrinal questions, nor overly focused on the Chan (Zen) tradition famous in the West and widely studied by academics. It should take up the long, complex interaction of Buddhist ideas and practices with the rich religious culture already established in China as well as the interaction of the Chinese state with Buddhist people and institutions. It should reflect the scholarly work refuting the idea of post-Tang decline in Chinese Buddhism and demonstrate the vitality of Chinese Buddhist intellectual and institutional life in the Song dynasty and after. It should also describe

modern Chinese Buddhism, including dramatic persecution and post-Mao revival in the People's Republic of China and remarkable flourishing and innovation in Taiwan.

This book is, in other words, an extremely ambitious attempt to present a comprehensive and up-to-date description of Chinese Buddhism for undergraduates, and Yü succeeds in much, if not all, of what she sets out to do.

As the title indicates, the book combines attention to history with thematic treatments of features of Chinese Buddhist thought and practice. After an introductory overview of early and Mahāyāna Buddhism and the various religious beliefs of the Chinese before the arrival of Buddhism, the chapters move through a series of aspects of the Chinese Buddhist tradition; these include the most important *sūtras* and treatises, the most widely venerated buddhas and bodhisattvas, the major festivals and the most popular rituals, the monastic order, the Tiantai, Huayan, Chan, and Pure Land traditions, and the issue of gender. The final chapter builds on all the previous chapters to describe the vicissitudes, triumphs, and developments of Chinese Buddhism in the modern period.

The strengths of the book arise from Yü's extensive scholarship on topics as far-flung as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara's transformation into the wildly popular Chinese deity Guanyin, the iconographic pairing of the bodhisattvas Guanyin and Dizang, Song and Yuan Chan, the dynamism of late Ming Buddhism, Chinese Buddhist pilgrimage, gender in Chinese Buddhism, and contemporary Taiwanese nuns. More generally, her persistent interest in not only the elite and intellectual but also widely shared Buddhist ideas and common practices results in particularly useful chapters ('Cults of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas', 'Buddhist Festivals and Rituals', 'The Monastic Order', 'The Devotional Tradition: Pure Land Buddhism'). Some of us will undoubtedly find these chapters to be of use not only in classes on Chinese Buddhism but also in classes on Buddhism and Chinese and East Asian religion more generally.

Throughout the book, Yü includes passages of primary texts, from *sūtras* to hagiographies to miracle tales, and this is particularly effective in the above-named chapters. In them, she also frequently relates small details of practice that bring the topic to life. To give one example, she

describes the custom of Guanyin devotees not only visiting temples but also wearing small images of the bodhisattva as talismans in the hair or on the head. The inclusion of this sort of tangible everyday practice frequently prompts students to think comparatively as well as empathetically and contributes to the teaching potential of the volume.

The chapter on festivals and rituals brings together historical research from specialized scholarly sources with passages from primary sources and ethnographic reports. The result is highly readable and compelling, not only informative but also evocative in its exploration of the annual and monthly rhythms of traditional Buddhist life in China and the problems Chinese Buddhists have sought to resolve through ritual. In the discussion of mortuary rituals, Yü does not shy away from the widespread criticism in the late imperial period, both internal and external to the tradition, of too heavy a focus on ritual performances and the revenue they generate. This discussion sets the stage for the chapter on the monastic order, in which she pointedly describes not only the ideals but the realities of monastic life, as well as the final chapter on Buddhism in modern China.

Yü's familiarity with modern and contemporary Chinese Buddhist developments animates the valuable final chapter on 'Buddhism in Modern China'. She has been a pioneer in scholarship on late imperial Chinese Buddhism, and her deep awareness of the dynamic nature of the tradition underlies her presentation of the last century. That said, some brief comparison of the practices and views of modern Chinese Buddhists to those of modern Buddhists elsewhere, as discussed in the work of David McMahan and others, would have been welcome. It would also have been worthwhile to compare more explicitly the relative size, strength, and orientation of contemporary Buddhist communities in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan. As Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer have observed in *The Religious Question in Modern China*, the political realities of the modern period have resulted in 'alternative trajectories' for Chinese religion under different regimes and in multiple states.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, Yü's attention to interaction with the non-Buddhist

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<sup>1</sup> Goossaert & Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 201–2.

traditions of China, one of her stated goals for the book, is somewhat uneven. When she does discuss these issues—as when presenting Confucian objections to monasticism—the resulting analysis is helpful. However, students would also have benefited from learning that Buddhist monasticism not only weathered these criticisms but inspired the development of a monastic Daoist tradition. (Indeed, I wish the book included more discussion of where the Chinese Buddhist tradition as described in this book fits into ‘Chinese religion’, a term Yü sometimes uses but does not fully explicate.) Along similar lines, the volume includes only scattered references to the rest of East Asia and almost none to Central Asia after the early days of the transmission of the tradition. Even if the links of Chinese Buddhism to Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, and Mongolia are not a focus for the volume, the handful of such mentions are useful, as when Yü discusses the nature of Chinese Buddhist ‘schools’ in comparison to Japanese Buddhist schools.

The chapters not yet singled out are not necessarily not useful, but those with a heavy philosophical focus—‘Major Buddhist Sutras and Treatises of Chinese Buddhism’, ‘The Doctrinal Traditions: Tiantai and Huayan’, and to a lesser extent the introduction—do not draw on the most recent scholarship. Perhaps even more important is the fact that it is generally difficult to introduce undergraduates to the intricacies of Buddhist philosophy, and many students will find these chapters hard-going. Those wishing to use these chapters may want to break them up into sections to be digested separately and supplement them significantly with interactive lectures and extensive discussion so that students understand the context for these various teachings and schools—and what is at stake philosophically and religiously.

Other sections of the book may also need additional context and discussion for students to absorb. An example might be the discussion of self-immolation and related practices of self-injury, which Yü introduces matter-of-factly. In my experience, any mention of these practices stops students in their tracks—and, when handled carefully and thoroughly, leads to excellent discussions of asceticism, views of the body, religious virtuosi, and more.

Yü’s decision to organize the book both thematically and historically is successful at some points, especially as she demonstrates how practices

and ideas change, but at other points, that historical dimension is missing, and Chinese Buddhist traditions are described generically without historical nuance. At times, it is also difficult to distinguish the stories told by Buddhists and the findings of historians. For example, while the story of the seventh-century Pure Land teacher Daochuo creating the first set of ‘counting beads’ reveals the close connection between this object and Pure Land recitation, students would benefit from knowing that such rosaries or *mala* almost certainly originate in India, as John Kieschnick has discussed in *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*.

While Yü offers teachers some excellent resources in this volume, it would be remiss of me not to mention some overall shortcomings. While the relative scarcity of citation to primary and scholarly sources appears to be a deliberate choice to streamline the presentation for undergraduates—and, no doubt, to keep the book shorter and less expensive—the citation is, in my view, so paltry as to lessen the usefulness of the volume. Students should be able to use a survey like this as a jumping off point for research. While each chapter listed a handful of sources for ‘further reading’, these sources often left out several sources that were crucial for the chapter’s content.

The use of the term Hīnayāna throughout the book was also jarring. While appropriate in context, i.e., when discussing Mahāyāna rhetoric, teachers assigning part or all of this book will want to make sure students do not adopt this language. Similarly, most scholars have abandoned the expression ‘counterfeit dharma’ since Jan Nattier argued convincingly in *Once Upon a Future Time* for ‘semblance dharma’ as a more appropriate translation.

While the volume includes images, not all of them are clear enough to be as effective as the use of primary sources or ethnographic material.

The volume unfortunately suffers from persistent errors in romanization, with some names remaining in Wade-Giles and others having been converted incorrectly to pinyin. Similarly, the choice to refer to some modern organizations by their English names (e.g. Buddha Light and Compassion Relief) without providing the romanization means that a reader who has not encountered Fo Guang or Tzu Chi may not connect the dots.

In sum, those who teach about the Buddhist tradition and/or

about religion in East Asia will find this volume valuable for their classes, especially in combination with other materials. Those who research these topics will also find reading it a worthwhile exercise in comparing one's own knowledge and views against those of an outstanding scholar. Whether one agrees in full, in part or not at all with Yü's approach to this book or success in it, she has made a valiant effort in an enormous task that allows all of us to take stock.

### **Bibliography**

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