JGB

Journal of Global Buddhism 2021, Vol.22 (1): 245–249
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4727607
www.globalbuddhism.org
ISSN: 1527-6457 (online)

Book Review

Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists.

By Chenxing Han. Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, xv + 344 pages, ISBN 978-1623175238 (paperback), $17.95.

Reviewed by Hsiao-Lan Hu
University of Detroit Mercy

> "Alas, data are no safeguard from erasure." (9)

The data as revealed by the 2013 Pew Research Center survey, with methodological improvement from the center's previous survey, shows that more than two-thirds of the US adult population who say they are Buddhists are Asian American (8). Yet if you get your idea about "American Buddhism" from reading the popular Buddhist magazines in the US, such as *Tricycle* or *Shambhala Sun* (which has been renamed and relaunched as *Lion's Roar*), you would think "American Buddhists" are overwhelmingly white.

Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* is the result of rich ethnographical research that challenges this incomplete representation of "American Buddhists." It is also a deeply personal account that lifts up the voices of ninety young Asian American Buddhists (eighty-nine interviewees, plus the author herself) who are either stereotyped as "immigrant Buddhists" or completely left out by the archaic "two Buddhisms" typology of "Asian immigrant" versus "white convert." Not all Asian American Buddhists are "fresh off the boat" immigrants. Many, especially in the Jōdō Shinshū tradition, have been practicing Buddhism in America for four or five generations. In fact, their families were the first people who brought Buddhism to America (part one, "Trailblazers"). Many others (thirty-six of Han's eighty-nine interviewees; 67) are second-generation Asian Americans whose primary language is English. They may have familiarity with their parents' Buddhism but also learn Buddhism through books written by converts and/or in traditions different from their parents' (part two, "Bridge-Builders"). Still others are second- or third-generation Asian Americans whose parents are atheist (e.g., the author herself; 114), or who were raised in a different religion (Catholicism, Judaism, or Hinduism), or who

are of mixed heritage (thirteen of the author's interviewees, including the "Angry Asian Buddhist" Aaron Lee, a.k.a. arunlikhati). They found Buddhism on their own but do not necessarily consider themselves converts as many do not feel the need to renounce the tradition in which they were raised and their affiliation with Buddhism was not a sudden transition—the process of adopting Buddhist practices or identifying as Buddhists is more like water becoming tea (part three, "Integrators"). These young Asian American Buddhists that Han interviewed do not easily fit into the two Buddhisms typology.

What these young Asian American Buddhists have in common is neither ethnicity nor a specific Buddhist lineage. Their practices cannot be neatly filed into the meditation vs. ritualistic/devotional practices typology, and their understanding of Buddhism varies from each other's (and from their parents'). They are by no means "a unified, harmonious bloc" (118). In fact, they are incredibly diverse, as appendix five shows. What they have in common seems to be an experience of erasure, as well as a pervasive sense of loneliness that asks, "Where are all of the other young Asian American Buddhists?" (97) Actually, forget the modifier "young"—many cannot name, and do not know, Asian American Buddhists who are famous, or famous Asian Americans who are Buddhists (chapter eleven), which is astonishing because, again, Asian American Buddhists constitute more than two-thirds of Buddhists in the US. As one of the interviewees sighed, "It's like we're invisible not only to the mainstream but also to each other" (186).

Underneath the erasure is "false dichotomies: traditional-modern, rational/devotional, meditating-chanting, immigrant-convert, and so on" (254). The originators of the various two Buddhisms typologies may or may not have intended to conceptualize Buddhisms in America along racial lines, but the dichotomies they drew produced exactly such a result. Add to the mix how Asian Americans have been treated as perpetual outsiders and never quite "American" (no matter how many generations their families have been in the US, Asian Americans are asked "Where are you *really* from?" and complimented for their "unaccented" English; 114), and voilà—the term "American Buddhists" is used to refer to white Buddhists (with a few notable Black teachers) who supposedly have a modern and rational understanding of Buddhism and practice meditation, while Asian American Buddhists are typecast as traditional, devotional, ritualistic immigrants who are not real Americans and so not real American Buddhists, despite the fact that they are Buddhists who were born and raised in America. "When stereotypes are deployed as qualifications for identifying 'real' Buddhists," Han writes, "entire groups of people can find themselves defined out of existence" (179).

Be the Refuge calls attention to the existence of Asian American Buddhists who are both the majority of American Buddhists and have been here longer. The focus on young Asian American Buddhists highlights the most obvious limitation of any two Buddhisms typology—in all its formulations, the two Buddhism typology unfortunately and invariably became racialized and does not capture the current generational shift. "So if a white convert raises their children Buddhist, these children would also be 'converts'? But why wouldn't the children of, say, an Asian American Christian who converts to Buddhism also be considered converts?" (120) Whether they are "trailblazers," "bridge-builders," or "integrators," the young Asian American Buddhists interviewed do not fit into either side of the binary because they contain the binary within themselves (247).

Lest the reader get defensive, thinking this book is about identity politics or about flipping the binary and portraying Asian American Buddhists (instead of white Buddhists) as the "real" American Buddhists (as indicated by part four, "Refuge-Makers"), Han's goal is simply to show that the two Buddhisms dichotomy (or *any* dichotomy) fails to capture the reality of the huge diversity within American Buddhism and American Buddhists. One of the author's interviewees, Shubha, gives us this vivid and delightful analogy: "It's easy to feel out of place when you're one grape in a bowl of apples, but a grape in a bowl of mixed fruit feels welcoming" (125). The point is not to replace apples with grapes; it is to recognize that American Buddhism is a fruit salad and to urge people to stop showcasing only the apples and start paying attention to all other different kinds of fruit. The point is, in the words of "Angry Asian Buddhist" Aaron Lee, "Be the refuge you wish to see in this world" (204) and build American Buddhist community together.

Much of *Be the Refuge* is a tribute to Aaron Lee, who died of lymphoma in 2017 but remains an inspiration to many of the young Asian American Buddhists in the book, including the author herself. Despite the provocative title of "Angry Asian Buddhist," Aaron Lee wrote his blog advocating for inclusion of diversity, not confrontation.

> I'd like to think the reason why diversity is so important is because each of us sees the world through a different lens. We only see a very narrow piece of the world. And so when you get all of our perspectives together, we have a better understanding of what the world is, and how things work. We have a better understanding as Buddhists of how people suffer, and how to alleviate suffering, and how to work together as a community, and support each other as a community. (225, quoting Lee).

Aaron Lee's point is very much picked up by Han, not only as a researcher but as a practitioner. If a practitioner only sees "a very narrow piece of the world," how much wisdom can they possess? If a practitioner does not understand "how people suffer" and does not care to learn, do they really have any compassion? How can a Buddhist vow to liberate all sentient beings, or at least claim to have loving-kindness for all sentient beings, and not even want to know the lives and practices of the majority of Buddhists in their own country? The concluding chapter of *Be the Refuge*, perhaps not coincidentally also the longest chapter in the book, is entitled "Solidarity." Through excerpts of interview transcripts, Han brings to the fore the point that "our Buddhist lives are multifaceted and ever influenced by race, class, gender, age, sexuality, ability, education, and so much more" (246). The final chapter calls people to recognize that "*all* Buddhists are cultural Buddhists. All of us have inherited cultural roots, all of us are being shaped by—and are always shaping—the cultures we live in." Again, even though it is through showcasing young adult Asian American Buddhist voices, the point is not at all to elevate or center Asian American Buddhists, but to call people to "build a refuge big enough for all of us" (249).

Be the Refuge is a necessary addition to the study of American Buddhism because it restores some of the pieces that should have been in the picture all along and thus calls attention to the pieces that may still be missing—it "makes space for many other communities who feel unseen, erased, or forgotten in our tradition," as Lama Rod Owens comments in the front matter. The book points to

"how we might build a more inclusive Buddhist community—," a blurb by Jan Willis also states, "one big enough to hold our *multiple* identities, whether of race, ethnicity, and culture, or of gender and tradition."

To highlight the issues Han's book probes, I will share an illustrative personal experience. When I taught "Buddhisms in America" for the first time at my current university, a colleague who has no training in religious studies (and certainly not in Buddhism) but had been meditating on and off for about twenty years (but does not really self-identify as Buddhist), volunteered to guest speak in my class. As guest speaking typically happens by invitation when the instructor recognizes that someone else might have expertise that they themselves do not have, that volunteering struck me as exceedingly odd—it sounded like, "I don't think you have enough knowledge to handle it. Let me help you out." He volunteered and volunteered and volunteered, and, as I was new at the university and I did not know how much I might offend that colleague if I declined his offer, eventually I said yes. At this point, every time he saw me he would ask what I covered in class, and every time I would send him my syllabus. The day before he was scheduled to speak, he called and there was unmistakable panic in his voice as he asked "What do you want me to say in your class?" I replied, "You were the one who volunteered, and I thought that meant you already had something in mind." He said, "But I don't know what you cover in your class." When I replied, "I sent you my syllabus three times and all topics are listed there," he protested "I still don't know what you do in that class." So, I went over all the topics, briefly explaining each to him, including Buddhist takes on social issues. He then asked, "When you said you talk about social issues, do you talk about American Buddhist points of view?" I said, "Well, this class IS called 'Buddhisms in America;' how can I NOT talk about American Buddhist points of view?" "But you are not American. I mean AMERICAN Buddhists, not people from Asia," he protested. When I replied "You do know that this is one of the areas of my study?" he angrily declared, "This conversation is going nowhere!" and hung up on me.

Half an hour later he did call back to apologize "for being curt," but through those phone calls I finally understood why he volunteered in the first place: he thought I wouldn't know anything about American Buddhism because I am not American as, in his mind, Asian Americans are not real Americans. (Of course the irony with that line of thinking is that, by the same logic, I could ask him what makes him think he understands Buddhism given that he didn't grow up in a Buddhist environment, but I was too polite to point that out.) He eventually decided to make his guest lecture about the Beat generation, a generation he is obsessed with, and basically said to my class that there would not be Buddhism in America without the Beat generation. After he left, my students immediately commented, that was obviously false: Buddhism came to America with the Chinese and Japanese immigrant workers in the 19th century!

While it was deeply gratifying to know that my students had been paying attention, it has been frustrating dealing with white Americans who are convinced that only their version of Buddhism counts as "American Buddhism"—even if they have absolutely no academic training in Buddhism and even if they do not really identify as Buddhist and do not know anything about Buddhist cultures. As long as they are white and have dabbled in meditation, they automatically assume they have more right to speak for American Buddhism than Americans of Asian descent who have actually studied

Buddhism and practiced it their whole lives. Unfortunately, the attitude and assumption of my colleague is not an isolated incident. Two other white colleagues, again with zero background in Buddhism, also attempted to lecture me about American Buddhism. In my chapter in *Buddhism and Whiteness*, I recounted my experience with the renowned Buddhist feminist Rita Gross, who advocated to a group of white American Buddhist women, most of whom do not have much background in Buddhism even though they do identify as Buddhist and do practice meditation, that they should work to establish a genuine American Buddhism without Asian influence—as if the Buddhism practiced by Asian Americans is not also American Buddhism.

Every time I have taught "Buddhisms in America" I have changed some material, the main reason for this being that Asian American Buddhists are so marginalized and under-represented in the publications about American Buddhism that it is not easy to find writings that directly represent or indirectly discuss Asian American Buddhist perspectives. For this reason, I am very happy to see the publication of this wonderfully recounted research, and I am already planning to use a couple of the chapters in my classes, especially when discussing the idea of American Buddhists in general and old-line Buddhists that are the Chinese and Japanese immigrants arriving since the late 19th century, and their American descendants.

My final note is about the author's mastery of weaving personal accounts and theoretical analyses into an enjoyable narrative while paying a profoundly moving tribute to her inspiration, Aaron Lee. Even as I value ethnographical work and admire ethnographers for being able to do what I cannot do very well (due to my disposition), I am typically somewhat bored when reading ethnographical work (also due to my disposition). But not when reading this work. Han's narrative is refreshing and gripping as she organizes her data in such a way you feel you are just following along on her deeply emotional journey of struggling to find peers, gradually feeling less lonely and less angry, and eventually losing a dear friend. In addition, she has a powerful way of summarizing a segment with triple phrases that add a lyrical quality to her narrative: "Angry letters, ad hominem attacks, defensive indignation" (56); "Enduring incarceration. Resisting marginalization. Fighting for freedom" (60); "Social stigma. Generational gaps. Language barriers" (77); "Karma and contribution, propagation and inspiration, catalysts and affinities and embodiments" (133); "Invisibility and marginalization. Orientalization and exotification. Appropriation and commodification" (171); "Discrimination as a racial and religious minority. Confusion and anger at the appropriation of Buddhism. Conviction that her Buddhist faith and her belief in social justice are inseparable" (212).

"Are the conditions of one's life acknowledged, welcomed, explored in the sangha?" Alan Senauke asks in the book and goes on to answer, "I suspect the answer is sometimes yes, and too often no" (195). Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge* is a lovely and loving narrative that acknowledges, welcomes, and explores the conditions of the life of many young Asian American Buddhists. It is a valuable contribution to the field of American Buddhism and an enjoyable read.

Reference

George Yancy and Emily McRae, editors. 2019. *Buddhism and Whiteness: Critical Reflections*. Langham, MA: Lexington Books.