

***Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists.* By Chenxing Han. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2021. 344 pages. \$17.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1623175238.**

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“Where are all the young adult Asian American Buddhists, and what can we learn from them?” In answering these questions, Chenxing Han’s *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* combats the erasure of Asian American Buddhists in representations of American Buddhism. Despite making up two thirds of the American Buddhist population, Asian Americans are frequently left out of histories of American Buddhism. In “raising the voices of young adult Asian American Buddhists,” Han has created a new American sutra that is at once memoir, ethnography, history, and cultural critique.

*Be the Refuge* is based on ethnographical research and interviews with 89 young adult Asian American Buddhists (26 interviewed from December 2012 to September 2013, primarily in California, the rest conducted over email). Her focus on young adult Asian American Buddhists fills a crucial gap in the fields of Asian American religious history and American Buddhism and stands out against prior ethnographies of Asian American Buddhist temples whose subjects are primarily older adults. Han herself could be considered the ninetieth Buddhist, as she skillfully weaves her own experiences and journey as an Asian American Buddhist throughout her writing. As the book progresses, we observe Han’s quest to find other young adult Asian American Buddhists. Alongside this discovery, we learn about Han’s friendship with Aaron Lee, who died in 2017. *Be the Refuge* is both tribute to Aaron Lee, whose memorial and funeral bookend the work, and documentation of his significance for Han’s own thinking. She attributes to his

blog, “Angry Asian Buddhist,” a critical role in her own thinking about the erasure and stereotyping of Asian American Buddhists.

*Be the Refuge* is particularly valuable for its intervention in the racializing assumptions inherent to scholarship that divides the American Buddhist landscape into “two Buddhisms,” one consisting of white converts, and the other of Asian immigrants and their children. The former is frequently characterized as being interested in meditation, while the latter engages primarily in devotional rituals. While on the surface this typology speaks to the varying interests and experiences of the two groups, its impact has been racializing in nature for the way it marks Asian Buddhists as a perpetual religious and racial “Other” in the American religious landscape while portraying white Buddhists as the presumed normative subject. Han and her interlocutors demonstrate a keen awareness of the racializing impacts of this binary, even as they cultivate their Buddhist practice in ways that adapt, circumvent, or defy these stereotypes. The young adult Asian American Buddhists in *Be the Refuge* “refuse to be reduced to Oriental monks, superstitious immigrants, and ‘banana Buddhists.’” Instead, they “champion nuanced representations,” cultivate inclusive sanghas, and “embody the boundless possibilities for interconnection” in American Buddhism (p. 17).

The book is divided into four parts and twelve chapters, each one tackling various components of the two Buddhisms typology, the impacts of its religio-racial framework (a term not employed by Han, but that I borrow from Judith Weisenfeld),<sup>1</sup> and the resistance of Asian American Buddhists to hegemonic religio-racial categories. The end material includes a Benediction and five appendices. Part 1, “Trailblazers,” combines history with ethnographic description to follow the activities of Shin Japanese Buddhists who brought Buddhism with them to the United States and were instrumental to Buddhism’s adaptation and spread in America. Han counters the “Erasure” (chapter 1) of Shin Buddhists from American Buddhist history by outlining the history of the establishment of Shin Buddhist sanghas in the United States in the face of their portrayal as “heathen” religious and racial “Others.” It is this religio-racialization that would eventually lead to the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. Chapter

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1. Judith Weisenfeld, *New World Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity During the Great Migration* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

2, “Belonging,” extends on this history, highlighting the continued innovation of Shin Buddhists who reject their religio-racialization “as perpetual foreigners in a purportedly white and Christian nation” (p. 39) and “defy the stereotypes of insularity and sectarianism ... often associated with Shin Buddhists” (p. 43) by cultivating diverse communities. By invoking the “Lineage” (chapter 3) of Shin Buddhists in America, Japanese American Shin Buddhists today resist their erasure and assert, in the words of Aaron Lee, that “Asian Americans are interwoven into the history of Buddhism in the United States going back well over a century” (p. 53). Together, these chapters eschew stereotypes of Shin Buddhists as “traditional” in favor of an emphasis on their role as trailblazers, on their innovation, and on their grounding in American religious history. They also tell an alternate history of Buddhism in the United States that centers Japanese American Buddhists in the making of American Buddhism.

Part 2, “Bridge Builders,” depicts the experiences of 36 second-generation Asian American Buddhists. Together these Buddhists represent thirteen different backgrounds, and Han notes that this still does not begin to cover the wide array of Asian American ethnicities and nations of origin. The experiences of these Buddhists are situated between numerous “Gaps” (chapter 4). Second-generation Buddhists note that they often feel the need to bridge gaps between their parents’ form of Buddhism and their own—which does not always “mirror the ethnicity, language, or denomination of their upbringing” (p. 67). As such they also illustrate a critical fault in the “two Buddhisms” typology, which assumes that second-generation Asian Americans practice the same form of Buddhism as their parents. In response to this shared challenge, Han observes a “Reclamation” (chapter 5) of Buddhism on their own terms. Second-generation Asian American Buddhists innovatively construct and enact their Buddhist identities, frequently by leaving the sanghas in which they grew up. This demonstrates that their identity is not merely ascribed (inherited), but also achieved (constructed). While navigating the tensions between their parents’ Buddhism and their own Buddhism, second-generation Buddhists demonstrate an awareness of their own internalization of the “two Buddhisms” typology, which stereotypes the devotional practices of their parents as “superstitious.” To combat it, these Buddhists generate “Compassion” (chapter 6) for their parents’ traditions and attempt to find common ground. In documenting this process, Han reveals that

everyday and community-oriented practices are just as meaningful as doctrine and texts for constructing Buddhist identities.

Part 3, “Integrators,” focuses on Asian American Buddhist converts—a category that, according to the two Buddhisms typology, should not exist. This is also the group with which Han herself identifies. This section begins with a discussion of the “Tension” (chapter 7) convert Buddhists feel by straddling both sides of the “two Buddhisms” divide and its racializing effects. One such tension is that convert Buddhists might lack familiarity with Asian Buddhism, even while they are alienated in white Buddhist communities. “Integrators” concludes with two chapters that problematize the normative religious and racial assumptions behind the language of “conversion” that has led some scholars to assume that Asian Americans cannot convert at all, rather they only “revert” to Buddhism (p. 119). Such a concept, Han notes, “contains hints of biological determinism, as if Buddhism was not just culturally but genetically transmitted among people of Asian heritage” (p. 147). In chapter 8, “Affinity,” Han and many of her interviewees reframe the language of conversion, providing alternate concepts such as “karma and contribution, propagation and inspiration, catalysts and affinities and embodiments” (p. 133). Chapter 9 (“Roots”) continues this discussion by troubling the concept of “reversion.” Convert Buddhists, Han acknowledges, do feel “the need to grapple with a Buddhist heritage, whether that heritage is real or imagined, assumed or discovered, sought out or wished for” (p. 148). But in engaging their Buddhist roots, convert Buddhists are far more innovative and eclectic in their practice than the language of reversion suggests, with many practicing in multiple Buddhist traditions rather than in sanghas consisting of a single Asian ethnicity (p. 150).

In Part 4, “Refuge Makers,” Han brings her interviewees into conversation with each other to explore themes that Han observed across generational belonging, ethnicity, and sectarian affiliation. This includes “Anger” (chapter 10) at social injustice and an interrogation of the various intersectional dynamics of “Privilege” (chapter 11)—in terms of who has the privilege to safely speak for Buddhism, the privilege that it is to be Buddhist and to be human in this lifetime, and privilege as a form of power to either help or to harm. Part 4 concludes with a discussion of “Solidarity” (chapter 12) between Asian American Buddhists of various ethnicities (and of all Buddhists). In this chapter, Han challenges models of American Buddhism that simultaneously

suppose that Asian American Buddhists do not come together to consolidate a shared identity while supposing an unbreachable “social chasm” between the two Buddhisms. Han focuses on “stories of interconnection overcoming conflict, solidarity healing division,” “friendship that traverses boundaries of race and ethnicity, age and generation, sect and tradition, gender and sexuality, class and ability, language and ability” (p. 211). By emphasizing interconnection and solidarity, Han deftly avoids the potential pitfall of obscuring differences and further racializing Asian Americans that might come with a pan-ethnic approach. Instead, Han successfully explores “the contours of a shared Asian American Buddhist identity” (p. 207) while highlighting the diversity of American Buddhism.

What do we learn from young adult Asian American Buddhists? That “Two Buddhisms is part of the story of American Buddhism, but it is not the only story, and it is certainly not the whole story” (p. 246). In the end, American Buddhists “do not fit easily into two Buddhisms, because what we live is an intersectional Buddhism” (p. 246). By documenting this story, *Be the Refuge* provides a glimpse into a rich landscape of Asian American Buddhism. And in doing so, Han reveals a close relationship between American Buddhism and race. Han illustrates that young adult Asian American Buddhists share an experience of religio-racialization and erasure while simultaneously drawing her readers’ attention to the rich diversity within Asian American Buddhist communities. In doing so, *Be the Refuge* provides an example of how scholars of Buddhist studies might acknowledge hegemonic religio-racial categories in the United States even while decentering them to prioritize the religio-racial subjectivities of Asian American Buddhists. Future scholars could expand on this important foundation in many ways, particularly by further probing the intersection of religion and race with gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, and inter- and transnational identity formation, as well as by attending to specific geographical regions within the United States (particularly outside of the West Coast). Asian American Buddhists have a lot to teach both practitioners and scholars. To learn from them, we must continue to raise their voices and listen to what they have to say.

