

Heng-ching SHIH, *The Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism*. Asian Thought and Culture, Vol. 9. New York: Peter Lang, 1992. xi+278 pp. Hardcover, n.p. ISBN 0-8204-1681-9.

Heng-ching Shih's book is a welcome contribution in many respects. It throws light on post-T'ang (including contemporary) Buddhism in China—a field certainly not studied to excess; it poses, in a very concrete way, the question of the value of religious syncretism; it explains an enlightening case of how Pure Land Buddhism was reconciled with mainstream Mahāyāna; it offers us one of the still-too-few English translations of Chinese Buddhist texts; and, finally, for the student of Japanese Buddhism, it illumines, by contrast, the sectarian character of Japanese Buddhism.

The subject of the book is Yung-ming Yen-shou 永明延壽 (Jpn. Yōmyō Enju, 904–975), a Buddhist monk and prolific writer of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms era. Yung-ming was a Ch'an master of the Fa-yen 法眼 house but also appears in some chronicles as “the sixth Pure Land Patriarch” (pp. 142–43). He is presented here as a pivotal personality in the transition from the scholarly and sectarian pre-T'ang Buddhism to the syncretic and popular post-T'ang Buddhism, and, more specifically, as “the instrumental figure for the promotion and popularization of Ch'an–Pure Land syncretism” (p. 3).

Here a word of criticism seems in order. While the importance of Yung-ming for Chinese Buddhism is presupposed from the beginning, very little concrete evidence of the man's actual influence—for example, quotes from

later writers who rely on him—is offered, even when the question of his influence is, finally, taken up in chapter 6.¹

The book consists of two parts: a study of Yung-ming's life and work (pp. 7–192), and a sparsely annotated and partial English translation of one of the most important of his many works, the *Wan-shan t'ung-kuei chi* 萬善同歸集 [Treatise on the unification of myriad goods]. On this second part I can be brief. Concretely speaking, the translation covers the first of the three *chüan* in the original work.² The text is interesting and fully corresponds to the problematics introduced in part 1 of the book. As far as I can ascertain on the basis of my limited knowledge of Chinese, the translation is faithful to the original, and only occasionally marred by an unfelicitous use of the English language, the most regrettable being on page 212, where 不可思議 becomes “It is inconceivable to realize that....”

Part 1 needs a more detailed presentation. It is admirably structured: from a general consideration of the problematics involved, it zooms in, step by step, on the concrete figure of Yung-ming, finally broadening out again to a more general perspective. Thus, *chapter 1* takes up the general problem of the meaning and nature of the issue “Syncretism in Chinese Buddhism,” defending it, spiritedly, against some negative Western evaluations. *Chapter 2* then considers the particular case of syncretism central to the book, succinctly expressed in the chapter's title: “The Interaction between Ch'an and Pure Land prior to Yung-ming.” Here again the problematics are taken one step back to some of the elements in Mahāyāna Buddhism that facilitate syncretism: Buddha-nature thought, the nonduality of subject and object (sentient being and Buddha), and the Hua-yen theory of non-obstruction between phenomena 事々無礙. I personally am disappointed that the question of the compatibility of Pure Land doctrine with the Buddha-nature theory is not discussed.

The two sides of the question are then taken up in two sections of chapter 2: “Meditational Practice in the Pure Land School” and “*Nien-fo* Practice in the Early Ch'an School,” respectively. Both treatments are among the most systematic I have seen in the English language. In the former, the author attributes the presence of meditative elements (or “thought and practices that parallel Ch'an teaching,” p. 46) in all branches of the Chinese Pure Land tradition to, first, the fact that meditation is so central to the Buddhist path as such, and second, to the fact that “the mentality of Chinese people is so imbued with the notion of self-cultivation (self-powered practice) that no master went so far as to set aside all other practices and to rely on ‘faith and faith only’, as Shinran...did” (p. 46).

In the second section, the author claims to detect *nien-fo* 念仏 (Jpn. *nen-butsu*) practice in the Ch'an school as early as the fourth patriarch, Tao-shin

¹ Yung-ming's direct influence is indicated only in the case of the Korean monk Chinul (p. 102, note 22: “In his writing, Chinul quoted extensively from Yung-ming's works.”).

² To be found in T #2017, 48.957b–969a.

荀信 (Dōshin 580–651), a claim that some may find surprising. The author, however, carefully circumscribes the meaning of this early Ch'an *nien-fo* practice as not exclusively devoted to Amida Buddha and as having the character of a self-powered practice and a skillful means for purifying the mind (p. 71).

Chapter 3 examines the sociopolitical background of Yung-ming's life, and finds there further reasons why Ch'an–Pure Land syncretism came to the fore at this particular time. Religious persecution had caused the disappearance of the more doctrinal sects so that only these two remained, and in the social disorder that characterized the times the masses desperately needed the type of religious support that a pure, elitist Ch'an could not have provided.

Chapter 4, "The Life of Yung-ming Yen-shou," describes the different periods of his life (he started out as a not-too-scrupulous tax official), then turns to Yung-ming's religious practices. Here it becomes clear that the man was a true "universalist": he is credited with no less than one hundred and eight different practices, ranging over the whole Buddhist spectrum from the recitation of sūtras (although, strangely enough, not Pure Land sūtras) to the release of living beings, and including *nien-fo* recitation morning, noon, and night (without, apparently, counting the number of times).

It is *chapter 5* that, finally, focuses sharply on Yung-ming's syncretic thought. It is divided into two sections. The first, entitled "Yung-ming's Syncretic Ch'ang-chiao Thought" (meaning: synthesis of Ch'an practice and doctrinal study), shows us a Yung-ming "particularly critical of the anti-scriptural attitude held by some Ch'an monks" and "insisting that textual investigation is needed to verify one's insight" (pp. 122 and 123). Here Yung-ming's basic thought is presented as it appears in his major work, the one-hundred fascicle *Tsung-ching lu* 宗鏡錄 [Record on the principle as mirror], wherein he tries to harmonize the various Buddhist philosophies on the basis of the principle of "One Mind," relying mainly on the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* and Hua-yen teaching.

The second section, "Yung-ming's Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism," starts with a discussion of Yung-ming's position in the Pure Land School. When the author says that "since the 13th century, Yung-ming's position as the sixth Pure Land patriarch has never been challenged" (p. 143), what she means, of course, is "within the Chinese tradition"—the author herself later compares the Chinese and Japanese versions of the patriarchal line and states: "The Japanese version...runs as follows: T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o, Shan-tao, Hui-kan..., and Shao-k'ang" (p. 144). She also adds the comment: "Apparently the Japanese version includes only Pure Land masters from the 'Shan-tao branch', which emphasizes the practice of invocational *nien-fo*..." (p. 144). It is certainly true that Yung-ming is not recognized as one of the patriarchs by any of the Japanese Pure Land sects (except possibly in Tendai), but unfortunately the author does not tell us on which authority her Japanese list of patriarchs is based. Also, while it is accurate to say that the Japanese Pure Land sects favor invocation, listing T'an-luan among those preferring the recitation of the Name to the meditative *nien-fo* is a rather

doubtful proposition.

The author next examines the way Yung-ming understands Pure Land religiosity, characterizing it as follows: “Coming from a Ch’an background and adhering strongly to Hua-yen philosophy, Yung-ming based his Pure Land thought more on these two schools than on orthodox Pure Land teachings” (p. 146). This made me wonder a moment. Does not Heng-ching Shih’s book rather indicate that one cannot really speak of a Pure Land orthodoxy in China? But then again, does not the concept of syncretism itself presuppose that of orthodoxy?

At the end of the chapter the author turns again to the melting together of Ch’an and Pure Land. First, the apparent opposition of the two is emphasized: self-power over against Other-power, and meditation over against recitation. Yung-ming’s particular way of uniting them is then considered once again, this time focusing on his invocation of the nonduality of the two truths (or again, of *li* 理 and *shih* 事) and the necessity of returning to conventional truth (concretely speaking, to religious forms and practices). I fear that Japanese Pure Land scholars would find the reconciliation of Other-power and self-power as it appears here rather unsatisfactory.

The final chapter, *chapter 6*, considers the influence of Yung-ming’s thought and makes a general evaluation of Ch’an-Pure Land syncretism. With regard to the first point, Yung-ming is credited with the later development of the *nien-fo kung-an* 念佛公案 (Jpn. *nenbutsu kōan*), which consists in meditation on the question, “Who is it that does *nien-fo*?” (p. 179), and with the spread of lay Buddhism “in the form of lay associations of *nien-fo*” (p. 82). The author’s evaluation of Ch’an-Pure Land syncretism is completely positive: it did not make the Ch’an practice impure nor did it alter the fundamental Pure Land doctrines, and it had a positive impact on post-Ch’an Buddhism by correcting Ch’an’s intellectualism and neglect of other Buddhist practices and by helping Pure Land practitioners on the way to *nien-fo samādhi*. The general conclusion is, thus, an unequivocal one: “Yung-ming’s Ch’an–Pure Land syncretism has made a positive contribution to Chinese Buddhism” (p. 192).

This valuable book would have greatly profited from a more thorough editing. Even if one overlooks the “Taiwanese English” of the foreword, typographical errors are really too numerous, the list of abbreviations is not complete, and, on page 108, a mix-up between the *Heart Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra* has slipped in. But, notwithstanding my occasional reservations—the most fundamental of which may be the author’s apparent, although understandable, lack of knowledge of the Japanese Pure Land tradition—I do not hesitate to recommend Heng-ching Shih’s book to anyone interested in Ch’an, in Pure Land Buddhism, or in both.

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