Foreword

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When Chün-fang Yü back in the 1960s chose the Ming-dynasty monk Yunqi Zhuhong (Yün-ch'i Chu-hung) for the focus of her Columbia doctoral dissertation and her future book, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China*, it was by every measure an unusual decision. A handful of Japanese, Chinese, and Euro-American intellectual historians were drawn to Ming Buddhist figures such as Zhuhong for their involvement with Neo-Confucian literati culture, but Zhuhong and Buddhism in the Ming were at best a distant and marginal interest among mainstream historians of Buddhism in China.

For any aspiring historian of Chinese Buddhism coming out of an American or European university during this period, the place to hone research skills, familiarize oneself with cutting-edge scholarship, and complete doctoral research was in one of the dedicated graduate institutes for Buddhist studies housed in private Buddhist universities and top-tier national universities in Japan. Many, if not most of those institutes were sponsored by established denominations of Japanese Buddhism, their resident faculty not infrequently of sectarian clerical background. Thus scholarly interest in Chinese Buddhist history gravitated quite naturally to figures, textual classics, and syntheses of Buddhist doctrine and practice that were regarded in retrospect as formative to established denominations and their orthodoxies. In contrast to a more recent broadening into Buddhist cultural (*bunkashi*) and social history (*shakai-shi*), that scholarly agenda has come to be known among Buddhist historians as “sectarian-oriented Buddhology” (*shūha gaku*).

The upshot of the sectarian historiographical focus was manifold. By and large, it led to syntheses of Buddhist teaching forged by patriarchal forbears in medieval Sui and Tang China, to which the major traditions of East Asian Buddhism, including those of Japan, had long traced their origin. Regarded as a golden age of “Buddhist sinification,” that era marked in the historical imagination the height of Buddhist creativity and autonomy in China—an efflorescence in which Chinese Buddhists, secure in their grasp of the vast array of received texts and teachings, broke from a previous India-centered gaze and boldly set forth the true vision of the historical Buddha as they perceived it. Set against this idealized period, eras prior to the golden age of sinification and the millennium of Chinese Buddhist history that followed it were fated teleologically to be measured against its heights. Thus the tenth through nineteenth centuries in China became tantamount to an era of progressive Buddhist ossification, popular assimilation, and “decline.”

As famously portrayed by Arthur Wright in his influential *Buddhism in Chinese History* (1971), that decline was marked in part by a deepening “fusion with Daoism and folk religion” as elite “patrons” and persons of “talent” turned to Neo-Confucian teachings and the monastic sangha was left with no recourse but to recruit members and seek material support from an uneducated local populace. The literary creativity and intellectual vitality that had marked Buddhist flourishing in the Tang accordingly gave way to a deadening institutionalized formalism, while a once lofty aspiration for Buddhist truth and awakening gave way to a superstitious and venal ritual service to local gods, ghosts, and ancestors.¹ By definition, to take scholarly interest in topics and periods other than the great patriarchal luminaries, groundbreaking treatises, and lofty doctrinal systems of the Tang “golden age” was to concern oneself with the vestiges of a Buddhist tradition in “decline”—an entity that was, in effect, no longer truly “Buddhist.”²

To most of us today—Japanese, Chinese, and Euro-American historian alike—that story is by now tired and familiar, a tale of what seems a time long past. Yet, four to five decades ago, when Dr. Yü as a fledgling Buddhist historian chose the late-Ming figure of Yünqi Zhuhong for her doctoral research and future book, that choice of subject and period was most unusual, even to the point of being professionally perilous.

Zhuhong was active at the very end of the Ming dynasty, nigh on a millennium after the glories of the Tang golden age—a pale and paltry shadow of its foregone creative vitality. At best he might be cast as an ardent apologist or reformer, a brief flicker of Buddhism’s once-great luminosity in an era of darkness. At worst, he was a poster child for the very “decline” that Buddhism

experienced after the Tang. Throughout his career Zhuhong wrote and preached extensively on programs of study, practice, and ritual performance that were directed explicitly to concerns of the lay public, the regimens of which he actively propagated through various forms of voluntary merit making and devotional association. Such traditional Buddhist goals as awakening to the inner Buddha nature or rebirth in Amitābha's western Pure Land of Highest Bliss remained front and center. But alongside those long-range goals Zhuhong promoted a panoply of ritual practices and tracts that addressed such concerns as aversion of illness and personal calamity, the quest for worldly blessings, avoidance of wine and meat, ledgers for tabulating good and evil deeds, acts of public charity and compassion (including the ritual blessing and release of captured creatures), and elaborate intercessory rituals directed expressly to such questionable enterprises as liberation of restless dead, pacification and conversion of local gods, exorcism, and weather control. Indeed, in his missives, ritual tracts, and sermons we find not only the entire gamut of what one might call "this-worldly" and "otherworldly" concerns of a Ming-period elite and non-elite public but also a reflection of the entire, expanded demonic cosmos of the Ming, with its teeming mélange of Buddhist, Daoist, and popular deities; local spirits and ancestral dead; purgatorial netherworlds; and sundry visible and invisible beings.

Zhuhong also penned a number of exacting scholarly commentaries and sub-commentaries to influential scriptures such as the *Amitābha* (*Amituo*), apocryphal **Sūraṅgama* (*Shoulengyan*), and *Fanwang* (**Brahmajāla*) sutras. That repertory included influential historical compendia directed to Chan and Pure Land cultivation and generic Buddhist subjects such as karma and its retribution. Tellingly, the Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769), who is traditionally hailed for having rediscovered the classic "investigation of a phrase" (*kanna*) approach to Rinzai Zen practice popularized by the Song-dynasty Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163), is said to have come to that rediscovery by fortuitous encounter with Zhuhong's *Whips to Urge One Through Chan Barriers* (*Changuan cejin* 禪關策進, T. 2024) a compendium of famous disquisitions on Chan *huatou* or "crux of a saying" practice drawn from the sermons of noted Chinese Linji masters of the late Song and Yuan, of whom Dahui was one. Moreover, it was precisely through that encounter with Dahui's letters via Zhuhong that Hakuin was inspired to undertake his epoch-making reform, creating the archetypal, iconoclastic Rinzai (Linji) Zen practice that has dominated scholarship on Chinese Chan/Zen history down to today.³

On an equally revealing note, Hakuin, despite his admiration for Zhuhong's *Chan Whips*, was utterly scathing in his criticism of Zhuhong's ideas regarding

the “dual cultivation” of Chan and Pure Land practice. That approbation extended implicitly to intercessory lay-oriented ritual programs promoted by the likes of Zhuhong and the Ōbaku Zen line of Yinyuan Longqi (Ingen Ryūki), newly arrived in Japan from Ming China. Dramatic, rich in material and visual simulacra, and wildly popular in China—even in Chan circles—the rites for releasing living creatures (*Fangsheng yi* 放生儀), bestowal of food and release of hungry ghosts (*Fang yankou* 放焰口/*Shishi egui* 施食餓鬼), and the plenary water and land rite (*Shuilu fahui* 水陸法會) might easily be dismissed as incompatible with the true aims of Zen/Chan practice.

Zhuhong’s ritual eclecticism and his leaning toward dual cultivation of Pure Land and Chan also betokened that he and his views would receive but marginal attention from early generations of Japanese scholars of Jōdo and Jōdo Shin clerical background who were bent on “sectarian-oriented” (*shūha*) modes of inquiry. Both the Jōdo and Jōdo Shin traditions traced their original inspiration to the Tang-dynasty Chinese master Shandao (613–681), the pivotal figure in Chinese Pure Land history. A conspicuous qualitative line was thereby drawn between a “pure” or “true” Pure Land teaching beholden to Shandao’s presumptive emphasis on inner “faith” in the “other power” of Amitābha and celebratory (nonmeditative) calling of his name, and a “compromised” stream of Chinese Pure Land given to admixtures of Buddhist teaching and self-cultivation that diminished Shandao’s “exclusivist” emphasis. Much as Zhuhong and “dual cultivation” were marginalized in Zen scholarship for their perceived erosion of a “true” and “pure” Zen/Chan teaching of the late Tang and Song, he and his like were similarly sidelined in Pure Land scholarship as examples of the genetic regression that Shandao’s “genuine” Pure Land teaching suffered in the era of post-Tang Buddhist “decline.” Anything beyond these two historical paragons of the “golden age” of Chinese Buddhist history was, by definition, “syncretic,” “compromised,” and less than truly “Buddhist.”⁴

With the exception of the occasional scholar drawn to broader themes of Buddhist cultural and social history,⁵ Chinese Buddhist historians were largely focused on these subjects at the time Dr. Yü embarked on her study of Zhuhong and his lay Buddhist entailments in the late Ming. Over the past four to five decades, that horizon of interests has expanded significantly. Neglected interstices between Buddhist clergy, laity, and the larger, diversified field of Chinese elite and popular religiosity have received increasing attention, bringing to the fore such topics as the strategic posturings of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian moral and ritual polemic; contestations between mainstream Buddhist ecclesiastics and Buddhist-inspired “heretical” redemptive movements; Buddhist-Daoist apocryphal scriptures; and the pan-religious appropriation of topoi such as the purgatorial courts of the Ten Kings of Hell. With it has come an

interest in media of social practice and cultural formation alternative to the scholastic world of canonical texts and doctrinal systems, including such elements as ritual performance and its sensory aesthetics, textual production, oral narrative, and bodily practice. Nor have these shifts in focus come at the expense of continuing work on classic periods such as the Tang. They have occasioned a revisionist return to pivotal developments in Chan and Pure Land, which increasingly suggests that the “mainstream” of Chan and Pure Land teaching may have more closely resembled the “compromised” image of those two traditions than the “pure” Chan and Pure Land of the textbook.

Whence and how, then, might an aspiring scholar such as Chün-fang Yü, educated in the modern Buddhist studies academy of her day, have come to a figure such as Yunqi Zhuhong, much less a monograph bearing the title *The Renewal of Buddhism in China*? Whence also the enduring interest and impact of Dr. Yü’s work among the subsequent generations of young scholars of Buddhism in Ming and Late Imperial China?

In the dedication of her book, Chün-fang Yü credits her maternal grandmother with having “first introduced her to Buddhism through her simple piety,” and her father for “instilling in her a Confucian love of learning.” Those references are revealing—all the more so alongside assessments of Zhuhong’s historical significance offered by the likes of the Buddhist monastic scholar and historian Dongchu. In his *History of Buddhism in Modern China* (*Zhongguo fojiao jindai shi*, 1974), Dongchu 東初 notes how Zhuhong and like-minded late-Ming contemporaries “became the touchstone for Buddhist learning and practice over the three centuries that followed,” their most conspicuous contribution being the “eclectic inclusivity of their Buddhist thought, which avoided clinging one-sidedly to any single given school or sect.”⁶

Educated originally in Taiwan, Chün-fang Yü as a graduate student at Columbia University in New York was mentored by William Theodore de Bary, who with his expanding interest in the broad spectrum of Yuan and Ming dynasty intellectual life pointed her toward Yunqi Zhuhong. During subsequent years of doctoral research in Taiwan and Japan, she worked closely with the eminent Chinese scholar monk Nanting and the eminent Kyōto scholar Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, who pioneered the novel field of dubious and apocryphal Chinese Buddhist scripture.⁷ During her extended time in Kyoto, Makita himself—apparently taken with her interests in Zhuhong and his lay entailments—insisted on having a desk for Chün-fang brought into his office, where he could readily share his extensive library and learning with her. Back in New York, as she completed her dissertation and made strides toward its revision, Chün-fang frequently visited the Chinese Buddhist monastic and lay community at the Dajue Si (Temple of Enlightenment) in the Bronx. There she

consulted with the likes of Ven. Minzhi 敏智, Chan master, former abbot of the imposing Tianning Monastery in Changzhou (Jiangsu), and a graduate of Taixu's reformist Wuchang Academy; Ven. Renjun 仁俊 and Ven. Richang 日常, both of whom were disciples of the noted Buddhist reformer and scholar Yinshun; and Chan master and Buddhist historian Shengyan, who had recently arrived from Japan with a Ph.D. on Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1655) in hand. It was there, at the Temple of Enlightenment in the mid- to late 1970s, that I also had the good fortune as a young graduate student to meet and come to know Chün-fang.

That range of personal and scholarly influences gave Chün-fang Yü a purchase on Buddhism and Buddhists in China that was rather unusual for its day—and that showed Zhuhong and his “eclecticism” to be far more vital and enduring than previously imagined. As Chün-fang Yü's work demonstrates, Zhuhong in his copious missives and writings drew far less on Tang-dynasty Buddhist patriarchal figures and their “classics” than on works by Song-period authors—writings of such Song luminaries as the Chan masters Dahui Zonggao and Yongming Yanshou, Pure Land treatises and commentaries of the Tiantai master Siming Zhili and Vinaya master Lingzhi Yuanzhao, assorted tracts by the likes of the Tiantai master Ciyun Zunshi against the taking of life and consumption of meat and wine, and ritual guides by Zhili and Zunshi for the ritual liberation of captive creatures. Zhuhong also undertook recodifications of existing manuals for the massive Water and Land Assembly and Rite for Release of the Burning Mouth Hungry Ghosts, the texts of which have guided orthodox performance of those rituals to the present day.

That wide range of interests and writings authored over the course of Zhuhong's career reveals a Buddhism that is fully and functionally engaged with an array of diversified religious idioms, obligations, and entities extending well beyond the proverbial “monastery wall”—that is to say, the hermetic domain of concern that we often imagine Buddhism as a “religion” in China to have properly inhabited. Scholarly forays into those varied domains over the past half century have increasingly shown those interactions to be not confined strictly to an era of post-Tang Buddhist “decline” but endemic to the Buddhist landscape and religious imagination from the time Buddhist teachings first took root in China. One might profitably liken Zhuhong's Buddhism to a defining “mainstream” in Chinese Buddhist history rather than a marginal “compromise” or “exception,” even during the “golden age” of Buddhist sinification. Dr. Chün-fang Yü's 1981 study of Yunqi Zhuhong has contributed to that broadened horizon, which gives her work its continuing relevance today.