Stuart Young’s new book, *Conceiving the Indian Buddhist Patriarchs in China*, is framed as a study of India through the medieval Chinese Buddhist looking-glass—an inquiry into how East Asian religious communities over a half-millennium of time (early fifth through late tenth century CE) “conceived repertoires of Indianness” (11) when they engaged with one or more of the three Buddhist scholar-saints Aśvaghoṣa (Maming 馬鳴), Nāgārjuna (Longshu 龍樹), and Āryadeva (Tipo 提婆), who all allegedly lived and authored outstanding works of verse and philosophy in second-century CE India. Young shows how representing these patriarchs as exegetes, ritual-masters, and deities functioned to “bridge the Sino-Indian divide,” reinforcing while reinterpreting pre-Buddhist understandings of what saints (sheng 聖) do and are. The monograph traverses traditional areas of Buddhological concern for this period: the development of hagiography as a genre; the accumulation of Buddhist systems of thought; the periodization of the dharma; the defense of the sangha vis-à-vis the state; the assemblage of sectarian lineages; and the growth of esoteric Buddhist practice. Overall, Young charts new points of data within these well-established paradigms.

At a methodical level, in my reading, Young rehabilitates the historiographic trope of “sinification” under the new banner of “localization”—the book’s titular “conceiving” signals at first the reception of Indian material, but more pertinently the creation of new representational “models” or “resources” for Chinese consumption (14). The new paradigm is signaled through copious deployment of the words “local,” “locally,” and “localize” where an earlier generation may have expected the words “Chinese” or “Sinify.” The author purports to dispatch with the timeless cultural essences presupposed by “Sinification” paradigms while embracing the agency of diverse, “local” actors in plotting their own readings and practices of a putatively “foreign” or “universal” Buddhism. But Young’s is still at heart a “Sinification” study: even if it disclaims any interest in the content of the Indian patriarchs’ writings (4–5), the story still begins with the patriarchs “conceived” as the authors of treatises read by the ecclesiastic elite and ends with them as deities petitioned by a broader populace. Every engagement with the patriarchs discussed is made to speak to questions of identity and alterity, distance and presence. Young’s contribution would have been stronger had it more clearly negotiated its resemblances to “Sinification” paradigms: Does the success of his study suggest something positive can still
be wrested from them? Do its debts intimate something potentially unsettling about “localization” as well?

All cultural practice is “local.” But not all historical actors imagine their actions to be “local,” or even “localizing.” Rather, Mahāyāna rhetoric quite often self-consciously dismisses the “local” (this body, this life, this family, this world, this form of lesser Buddhism) to encourage pursuit of universal goals. Young answers his question, “What did it mean to be Buddhist in medieval China?”: Buddhists embraced their “partly non-Chinese identity” by “instantiat[ing] repertoires of Indianness” (243) among their communities. In this view, Chinese Buddhists self-consciously sought to “Indianize” themselves and their worlds through representational practice, affixing the recognizably foreign names of the patriarchs to local phenomena: the biographies and treatises they read, the identities they emulated, the caves they worshipped in, the Chinese patriarchs they obeyed, the rituals they crafted, and the silk industry they supported. In my reading, however, it is not clear that in popularizing the patriarchs they were aiming to define or promote “Indianness” as such, so much as these Mahāyānists were actively working to transcend or nullify what was present, earthly, common. . .in a word, local. I want to suggest that readers can read Young’s study not only to observe how a “gap between India and China was both negated and exploited” (3) through engagement with the patriarchs, but also how it was constructed or ignored in the first place.

In the first three chapters, Young catalogs images of the Indian patriarchs in early canonical Buddhist literature to argue that they reinforced regnant conceptions of sainthood and authorized contemporary careers in debate, wonder-working, dharma-transmission, and above all, commentarial authorship. Young so seamlessly integrates the Indian patriarchs’ saintly functions into the broader context of medieval Chinese sainthood, however, that the net effect serves to almost underscore their marginality to mainstream Chinese Buddhist thought and practice, casting them as repetitions of the glorious Buddha on the one hand, and as thaumaturgic exegetes who were converting contemporary Chinese audiences on the other. In their earliest incarnations, then, these marginal figures served to assure the “borderland” Buddhists of early medieval China that awakening and sainthood were still possible and the dharma still available. Whereas chapter 1 elucidates images of the patriarchs in treatise-prefaces authored by the Kumārājivan cohort in the early fifth century, chapter 3 shifts the temporal focus to the Sui-Tang and expands the generic range under consideration to commentaries and travelogues as well as prefaces. The earlier generation of exegetes concerned themselves with building Buddhism by reviving the dharma “in a world without a Buddha” while the