

A Brief Reflection on Mochizuki Shinkō's *Pure Land Buddhism in China: A Doctrinal History*

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There is only one book that I own in three languages. I have a copy of Mochizuki Shinkō's 望月信亨 1942 *Chūgoku jōdo kyōri shi* 中国淨土教理史 in the original Japanese, a Chinese translation called *Zhongguo jingtu jiaoli shi* 中國淨土教理史, translated by Ven. Yin Hai 釋印海 and published in 1974. Now I also have the newly-published English version, called *Pure Land Buddhism in China: A Doctrinal History*.¹ Aside from Buddhist primary sources, there is no other book that I have in even two languages, let alone three.

To anyone who studies Pure Land Buddhism, this comes as no surprise. Mochizuki's book is only one of two comprehensive histories of Chinese Pure Land that I know of (the other being Chen Yangjiong's 陈扬炯 *General History*).² Daniel Getz has already noted what an extraordinary achievement this work was and placed it within its biographical and historical context, so I do not need to rehearse those themes further.³ I will add that to fully appreciate what Mochizuki accomplished,

1. Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨, *Chūgoku jōdo kyōri shi* 中国淨土教理史 (*Pure Land Buddhism in China: A Doctrinal History*), 4th printing (Kyōto: Hōzōkan 法藏館, 1942); Wangyue Xinheng (Mochizuki Shinkō) 望月信亨, *Zhongguo jingtu jiaoli shi* 中國淨土教理史, trans. Ven. Yin Hai 釋印海 (Taipei 臺北: Zhengwen 正聞出版社, 1974); Mochizuki Shinkō, *Pure Land Buddhism in China: A Doctrinal History*, trans. Leo Pruden, ed. Richard K. Payne and Natalie E.F. Quli, 2 vols. (Moraga, CA: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, 2016).

2. Chen Yangjiong 陈扬炯, *Zhongguo jingtuzong tongshi* 中国淨土宗通史 (A General History of the Pure Land School in China) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Classical Publishing 江苏古籍出版社, 2000).

3. Daniel Getz, paper presented as part of the panel discussion "Mochizuki's Doctrinal History of Pure Land Buddhism in China," annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Boston, MA, November 17, 2017.

I have to put myself imaginatively back in a time when we did not have a wealth of studies already in our libraries to draw on; to a time when Buddhist texts were not digitized and the only way to find anything was to read them; to a time when the Taishō treasury of Buddhist literature was only just coming into existence; and a time when we did not yet have all the dictionaries and encyclopedias we now enjoy ready to hand. Mochizuki had to read and digest a massive amount of literature and keep copious and very well organized notes to do the work he did. That deserves recognition.

Daniel Getz's biographical sketch has also already noted how extraordinary it was that Mochizuki chose the subject matter for this book. Both the fact that he decided to examine Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, and that he chose to pursue it from its inception right up to modern times, was very unusual.

Nevertheless....

As I have used this book for many research projects, I have found that in some respects it does not serve my scholarship well, and in others I need to use it critically and keep an eye out for Mochizuki's own agenda and methodology.

First of all, I have never found his *Pure Land Buddhism in China* to be a book I would sit down and read through. His approach is entirely documentary and only rarely theoretical or analytical. Individual chapters present large swaths of data, and they often end very abruptly with no conclusion to tie things together.

When Mochizuki does engage in analysis, it tends to be unhelpful to the modern scholar. Here are a few examples:

1. Right at the outset Mochizuki offers a definition of "the Pure Land teachings" (Leo Pruden's translation of *jōdo kyō*, 淨土教). His definition is entirely too wide, encompassing *any* text or teaching about *any* buddha who has a buddha-field and preaches to beings that are reborn there. This is an etic definition that Mochizuki imposes upon the material; no Chinese Buddhist to my knowledge ever thought of the Pure Land tradition in that way. After a few further historical considerations, he states that the form of this pure land teaching that entered China centered predominantly on the Buddha Amitābha, and says that he will confine his remarks to that tradition. Looking at the matter another way, he begins by saying that Pure Land is "a separate tradition within Mahāyāna Buddhism," but then describes a set of beliefs that one may find throughout Mahāyāna. He then says he will

restrict his remarks to only one part of that tradition simply because it proved most popular.

This will not do. In China, it is very clear that the term “Pure Land,” understood emically, refers *only* to beliefs and practices about how devotees may attain rebirth in Sukhāvātī even if they have not acquired enough merit or purified themselves sufficiently to accomplish this on their own.

2. The lack of an adequate definition at the outset leads Mochizuki to include some figures and texts that I would have omitted. *Pace* to my good friend Dr. Ken Tanaka, I would not have placed Jingying Huiyuan (*Jīngyǐng Huìyuǎn* 淨影慧遠, 523–592) as part of the tradition, though I would certainly have noted his influence on its initial development. Neither would I have devoted a chapter to Kuiji (*Kuījī* 窺基, 632–682) or Jizang (*Jízàng* 吉藏, 549–623). Inclusion of figures such as these comes naturally from defining the tradition so vaguely.

3. Some problems arise from imposing Jōdo shū 淨土宗 categories onto the material. For example, he adopts Hōnen's (法然, 1133–1212) identification of “three traditions” (三種教系) of Pure Land in his analysis. Hōnen identified the three eminent masters Lushan Huiyuan (*Lúshān Huìyuǎn* 廬山慧遠, 334–416), Cimin (*Címǐn* 慈愍, 680–748), and Shandao (*Shàndǎo* 善導, 613–681) as the fountainheads of these traditions.⁴ Mochizuki takes this up, but says the three traditions “merged” in later Chinese history.⁵ This sheds no light on the history of Pure Land in China. Shunjō Nogami 野上俊靜 observed that Chinese Pure Land Buddhism was never divided into these three streams.⁶ Saying that they once existed but later merged is questionable simply as a statement of fact, and gives us no analytic benefit.

In addition, I have noticed while reading this in pre-publication that Mochizuki identifies some strains of Chinese Pure Land as orthodox here and there. When he does so, it is clear that he is using Jōdo shū orthodoxy as his standard.

4. See Hōnen, *Hōnen's Senchakushū: Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow* (*Senchaku hongān nembutsu shū*), trans. and ed. Senchakushū English Translation Project (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 62.

5. Mochizuki, *Pure Land Buddhism in China*, 1:85.

6. See Shunjō Nogami 野上俊靜 et al., *Zhong guo fo jiao shi gai shuo* 中國佛教史概說, trans. Sheng Yen 聖嚴 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan 臺灣商務印書館, 1993), 83.

4. Because he uses his own faith as a standard of orthodoxy, he misses aspects of Chinese Pure Land that distinguish it from its Japanese counterpart. For example, the strict differentiation of “self-power” from “other-power” is a major theme in Japanese Pure Land schools of all kinds, and so Mochizuki is alert for the roots of this distinction in the Chinese material. Consequently, I do not believe he ever acknowledges that Chinese Pure Land never made such a strict distinction or valued one over the other. Rather, as I have shown elsewhere,⁷ the Chinese tradition always saw rebirth in the Pure Land as an accomplishment of the devotee and the Buddha combining their powers and working together.

Aside from these points, I want also to consider things that Mochizuki perhaps does not discuss. As the title of the book says clearly, this is a *doctrinal* history of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. As such, it does not go into very much detail about other aspects of religious life: rituals, social groupings, art, and so on.

The real strength of this work, and the way in which it can benefit scholars most, comes from Mochizuki’s astonishingly broad reading and his mastery of a vast body of literature. Not only does he draw upon Buddhist sources to explain historical developments, but he also shows familiarity with non-Buddhist historiography as well (e.g., dynastic histories). In a time when one did not just conduct a digital search for keywords, one imagines that he spent many long hours poring over difficult texts. As a result of this, he is in a good place to begin an investigation into a specific topic. If he has touched on it, then the reader will get a good overview of it and see the primary texts that she or he should consult.

In conclusion, I have my three copies of Mochizuki and I will most likely continue to look at them regularly for as long as I pursue research in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. I use it as a kind of reference work. I don’t read through it, but I use it to look up information on various figures that I happen to be studying. In that capacity, I can say that it is truly “encyclopedic.”

7. Charles B. Jones, *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice*, Pure Land Buddhist Studies Series (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2019), chap. 4.