

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

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As something of a disclaimer, I want to open this reflection with an acknowledgment that my interest in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism comes via Japan. That is, my work focuses on Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism; not only that but Shin Buddhism in the contemporary, primarily Western, world. It was through my work with the *Pacific World* and the Institute of Buddhist Studies that I was exposed to Mochizuki's work and how I came to be involved in this project, contributing a chapter on English language studies of Pure Land Buddhism in China. I offer this disclaimer to help explain what motivates my reflections on Shinkō Mochizuki's *Pure Land Buddhism in China: A Doctrinal History*, as well as Pure Land Buddhism in China more generally. Because, intellectually, I am focused on the modern period, when asked about Chinese Buddhism, my mind immediately goes to the present or the recent past—to robot monks for millennial Buddhists, for example¹—not to the seventh century or Shandao. This is to say that I am interested in the *life* of religion—in material culture, the arts and religious practice, monastics not just as monks and nuns but as actual persons with complicated and messy lives.

Writing a literature review on English language sources on Chinese Pure Land Buddhism for the publication of Leo Pruden's translation of *Pure Land Buddhism in China* was a fairly straightforward project, albeit slightly outside my area of expertise. Upon publication, Richard Payne organized a panel, sponsored by the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies and held at the annual meeting of the American

1. See Courtney Bruntz, "Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Chinese Millennial," in *Methods in Buddhist Studies: Essays in Honor of Richard K. Payne*, ed. Scott A. Mitchell and Natalie Fisk Quli (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

Academy of Religion, inviting the contributors to “update” the work. I took this charge of updating to mean two things: first, to locate new sources that had been published since I wrote my original essay or sources overlooked when I had done that work; and, second, to revisit Mochizuki’s *Pure Land Buddhism in China* and engage it in conversation with more recent scholarship. Thus, it seems appropriate here to begin with a reflection on the work itself.

What strikes me most about *Pure Land Buddhism in China* is its comprehensiveness. Mochizuki has something to say about nearly everything—starting with the introduction of Buddhism to China in the second century all the way through to the twentieth. His work is encyclopedic in scope and yet filled with depth and insight. This is the kind of scholarship we do not see much of anymore, the kind that is almost actively discouraged. Today, scholars are asked to *specialize*. We focus in on a specific area or time or even person. I may be a specialist in Jōdo Shinshū, for example, but I am the first to admit that I am hardly a specialist in Jōdo Shinshū *doctrine*. History (mostly modern), contemporary practices, social issues, yes; but if one is looking for a lengthy discourse on *shinjin* or *tariki*, I will gladly defer to my colleagues.

In other words, in my view, contemporary scholarly practice dictates that we know what we know and, equally important, that we know what we *don’t* know, and that we, in a sense, stay in our lane. I would argue that the current scholarly climate makes the kind of work Mochizuki is doing here improbable. Whatever limitations we might find in his work from our current vantage point, I think we should also marvel at its ambition, at its scope and scale.

Virtually everything is in *Pure Land Buddhism in China*. This comprehensiveness leads to an obvious strategy to guide my research for the purposes of this reflection. As I searched for new or previously unmentioned sources, I would cross-reference those topics with Mochizuki. If I discovered an essay on any given topic or historical figure, I would go back to Mochizuki and see if he had also commented on the topic. If said topic was covered by Mochizuki, then we could engage in dialogue on different scholarly takes on a single subject; if not, then we could chart new territory. Of course, nearly everything I uncovered in those library searches, every topic, every historical figure, Mochizuki has covered in *Pure Land Buddhism in China*. And I will say here as an aside that I am grateful to the editors for including appendices for

converting Pinyin to Wade-Giles—extremely handy for those of us who can't do this in our sleep.

In addition to revisiting *Pure Land Buddhism in China*, I also revisited my own contribution to the new publication. In that essay, I wanted to expand our view beyond Pure Land doctrine and include works on Buddhism as a lived religion, what it means to practice Pure Land Buddhism in China. This expanded view included the visual arts and, looking back, I rather think I should have spent more time on this issue, especially the inter-relationship between Buddhist practice and the arts.

For example, in a contribution to the 2002 volume of *Pacific World*, “Practice of Visualization and the *Visualization Sūtra*,” Nobuyoshi Yamabe argues that this sutra should be studied in the context of other meditation manuals to discern its origins, to determine where it—or parts of it—were written. However, he also suggests that:

[W]e should not limit our scope of study to only written sources. Since the meditative methods described in the *Visualization Sūtra* ... are highly visual, we can easily expect such practice to have left some trace in visual art. If examined properly, some pieces of art may give us valuable “hard evidence” linking the *Visualization Sūtra* ... to a particular geographical area.²

Yamabe believes such “hard evidence” exists in the Toyok caves at Turfan, northwest of the more famous Magao caves at Dunhuang. His article is a detailed comparison of cave paintings and inscriptions and the *Visualization Sutra* itself. And he’s particularly interested in artistic motifs such as fire, which may variously be interpreted as fire or rays of light, and comparing these motifs not only to the *Visualization Sutra* but to other visualization and meditation texts as well.

Through this analysis, Yamabe comes to believe that the paintings were created in conversation with several overlapping visualization and meditation texts. Some of these undoubtedly were part of an oral tradition that was still in transit along the Silk Road. Others were already composed texts from India or Central Asia, while still others were local compositions. Yamabe argues that, at least in one case, the paintings clearly reflect an awareness of what we now know as the

2. Nobuyoshi Yamabe, “Practice of Visualization and the *Visualization Sūtra*: An Examination of Mural Paintings at Toyok, Turfan,” *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd ser., 4 (2002): 124.

Visualization Sutra but that this work visually overlaps with related texts and their associated practices.

Yamabe states that “In order for this model to work well, the texts must be local products. If the texts were composed elsewhere and imported as already established religious authorities, one would hesitate to deviate from them too much. They would be followed respectfully as ‘the words of the Buddha.’ ”³ And he further suggests that this was the case at Dunhuang as well.

Thus, by bringing into conversation art and text, Yamabe is arguing that we can better discern the origin and evolution of texts. I would go further and suggest we can also trace the development or evolution of practices, texts, and even institutions over time and place. But what I want to call our attention to here is how Pure Land is deeply embedded in the religious/artistic life of a Silk Road Buddhist community. As is well known, the idea of a discrete lineage or sect of Pure Land Buddhism in China is an anachronism; it should not be surprising to find Pure Lands painted on cave walls all along the Silk Road, to see Pure Land visualization practices a one among many in Buddhist China.

Nevertheless, I still think it is worth teasing out the specifically Pure Land elements of Buddhist thought and practice in this way. The narrative that Pure Land represents something outside normative Buddhism is undermined by the existence of Pure Land thought and practice at all levels of Chinese Buddhism going back millennia. Visual arts are an ideal way to demonstrate this fact, as they are a literal visual manifestation of Pure Land’s import across Buddhist China. Several recent museum exhibitions focusing on the Dunhuang site have been particularly helpful in this regard, especially the shows in which the images are supplemented by virtual reality or augmented reality, thus allowing viewers to be in the Magao caves while also having a more immersive/educational experience.⁴

As mentioned earlier, my academic interests are rooted in the contemporary, in Buddhism as a lived religion. Buddhism as a lived religion is not constrained to doctrine, philosophy, or texts, but spills out into the world, manifesting in art, music, dance, family, politics, and so forth. To find evidence of this fullness of Buddhism-as-lived-religion,

3. Ibid, 142.

4. See, for example, Sarah Kenerdine, “‘Pure Land’: Inhabiting the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 56, no. 2 (2013): 199–218.

one must necessarily be willing to look outside canonical texts, and here is where Jennifer Eichman's work, *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections*, is relevant.

The central figure in Eichman's work is the Ming dynasty monk Lianchi Zhuhong and epistolary materials documenting his monastic career, as well as debates and discussions with fellow monks and disciples. Being the Ming dynasty, Chan and Pure Land were in dialogue as well as Buddhism and Confucianism, each vying for political influence and patronage. In *Pure Land Buddhism in China*, Mochizuki devotes an entire chapter to Zhuhong, focused, unsurprisingly, on his doctrinal treatises. Epistolary materials and other non-canonical works in Eichman's study certainly reveal doctrinal issues, particularly debates between Buddhists and their Confucian interlocutors, as well as between those who favored Chan cultivation versus Pure Land recitation. However, epistolary materials reveal more than just doctrinal debates. Eichman writes:

Epistolary exchanges reveal a more personal side to lay participation, as letters chronicle how through their relationship with Zhuhong, other monks, and each other, these men nurtured their Buddhist ambitions. An analysis of Zhuhong's epistolary collection and other epistolary writings, including letters exchanged between precept-disciples, was indispensable to uncovering this fellowship, to discovering which Buddhist topics these men considered important, and to determining whom they regarded as their Buddhist friends.⁵

The bulk of Mochizuki's treatment of Zhuhong is a detailed exposition of his commentaries and discussion of Pure Land and Chan practice. Zhuhong was clearly concerned with reconciling apparent contradictions between Chan and Pure Land approaches to awakening. Chief among these was the notion that *Sukhāvatī* is a literal place in the physical world and the Chan notion of non-duality—that when the mind is pure the land is pure, or so the saying goes. Zhuhong was clear—the Pure Land is a real place and people are literally reborn there. And yet, he also argued that there was no distinction between mind and buddha. From Mochizuki:

5. Jennifer Eichman, *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 3.

[Zhuhong] adopted the theory that “there was no distinction between the mind, the buddhas, and sentient beings”; to [Zhuhong] the mind was identical to the buddhas and the buddhas were identical to all sentient beings, and since there is no difference between these three, when we recite the nien-fo this is actually nothing more than all sentient beings who are dwelling within the minds of all the buddhas reciting the names of these same buddhas, who are, in their turn, dwelling within the minds of these devotees.⁶

Eichman, in her analysis, suggests that, rather than trying to put Chan cultivation and Pure Land recitation on equal footing, Zhuhong is arguing that reciting the name encompasses all Buddhist practice.

Zhuhong promoted the doctrine of the interfusion of principle and phenomenon to claim that recitation of the name Amitābha Buddha embodied all other practices, no matter how superficial or abstruse. Zhuhong further attempted to allay Chan questions over the subject-object dualisms that seemingly arose from using a recitative device and from positing the Pure Land as a geographic location external to the mind.⁷

Eichman’s analysis of Zhuhong’s Pure Land practice is within the context of what she labels “family practices,” i.e., those practices that were suitable for the laity. She notes that Zhuhong accepted the scriptural assertion that women were born in male bodies in the Pure Land, and prohibited women from attending the monastery. At the same time, by bringing epistolary materials into her analysis, she is able to expand our view of Pure Land practice beyond doctrinal debates. Included in her analysis, for example, is Zhuhong’s *Rebirth Biographies* (*Wangsheng ji* 往生集), a catalog of deathbed scenes over the course of a millennium which, for Zhuhong, proves the efficacy of Pure Land practice—since each of these deceased persons were reborn in Sukhāvatī. (Mochizuki has very little to say about this work—almost nothing, in fact, other than mentioning that Zhuhong wrote it.) *Rebirth Biographies* includes the accounts of several women who were reborn in the Pure Land—and here is where her analysis of epistolary and other non-canonical sources is most helpful. Whereas Zhuhong only wrote letters to his male disciples and counterparts, “[o]ther letters reveal further rare

6. Shinkō Mochizuki, *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), vol. 1.

7. Eichman, *Chinese Buddhist Fellowship*, 257.

insights such as Fellowship members improving female religious literacy by teaching their mothers Buddhist doctrine.”⁸ And the *Rebirth Biographies* themselves include “biographies of recently deceased disciples or their family members and is an invaluable document for the study of household recitation practices. It helps us imagine a less religiously stratified world, linking domestic practice at all levels, inclusive of household servants and, more importantly, female family members.”⁹

Mochizuki does not include an analysis of the *Biographies* in his *Pure Land Buddhism in China*—it is a *doctrinal* history after all. So, despite my claim that he is trying to say something about everything, when paired with Eichman’s *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship*, clearly there is more to be said. Pure Land practices are infused within Chinese Buddhist religious life generally, and when we take an expansive view inclusive of non-canonical sources, epistolary writings, artistic representations, and so forth, our vision of the Pure Land in China is equally expanded.

I will conclude this reflection with a note of appreciation to the editors of this new version of Mochizuki’s *Pure Land Buddhism in China*—Richard Payne and Natalie Quli—whose vision to see this work updated and expanded will surely enhance our understanding of Pure Land Buddhism in China for years to come.

8. Ibid, 259.

9. Ibid, 258.

