

Toward a Typology of *Nien-fo*: A Study in Methods of Buddha-Invocation in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism

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I. INTRODUCTION

AS STUDENTS IN THE WEST study Pure Land Buddhism in East Asia, they learn a number of standard facts. They learn that there is a Pure Land “school,” that it originated in China with Hui-yüan’s (334–416) “White Lotus Association,” and was popularized by a series of eminent teachers: T’an-luan (476–542), Tao-ch’o (562–645), Shan-tao (613–681), and a few other figures. The prime import of their teaching was that the ordinary person (Ch. *fan-fu*), lacking the skills and leisure of the monastic religious virtuoso, could call upon the name of the buddha Amitābha in faith, and the buddha would come to them at the time of death, lift them out of samsara, and take them to rebirth in the Pure Land called Sukhāvati, an ideal location for study and practice. Once there, they would be assured of eventual enlightenment and buddhahood.¹ This school fed directly into the formation of the major lines of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan, which stress the unworthiness and inability of believers to effect their own liberation through traditional Buddhist practices (denigrated as “self-power,” Jpn. *jiriki*) and the need to call upon Amitābha’s name in trust and sincerity, believing that he will do what is necessary on the believer’s behalf.

In this construction, there are few elements, and Pure Land teaching and practice look like simplicity itself. The main practice of the “school,” called *nien-fo* in Chinese and *nembutsu* in Japanese, consists of the oral invocation of the Buddha’s name, in response to which the buddha will bring one to rebirth. This is a practice that can be taught and practiced effectively without much nuance, variety, or theological-philosophical depth to it.²

Over time, however, a steadily-accumulating body of research has increasingly called the hegemony of this understanding of Pure Land into doubt, particularly in the case of its Chinese manifestations. Some scholars are now questioning the legitimacy of referring to Pure Land as a “school”

at all, citing its lack of institutional coherence and continuity, textual tradition, or clear-cut lineage of teachers and students.³ Others, while not disputing the existence of the “school” as such, point out that a great deal of Pure Land practice and writing took place outside the bounds of the “school” as generally conceived.⁴ Others have brought forward for attention the various conceptions of Pure Land practice beyond simple *nien-fo/nembutsu*.⁵ Our picture of Chinese Pure Land thought and practice is becoming more complex all the time.

In addition to doubts in these areas, another topic within Chinese Pure Land studies in which some fine-tuning seems necessary is the core practice of *nien-fo* itself. Many years ago, Hori Ichirō published an article in English entitled “Nembutsu as Folk Religion,” which pointed out, among other things, that within the generally simpler world of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, people could and did perform *nembutsu* for all kinds of reasons, not all of which had to do with gaining rebirth.⁶ As I have spent much time over the past several years reading through a wide variety of Chinese Pure Land materials, mostly dating from the Sung dynasty (960–1279) or later, I have also noticed significant variations in the way individual authors, both in and out of the Pure Land “school,” present the practice of *nien-fo*. While all accept this as the fundamental practice of the “easy path,” their exposition of the nature and methods of the practice show that the term, in fact, is quite elastic. One finds various answers to the following questions: (1) In what does the practice of *nien-fo* consist? (2) Is there one or are there many ways to *nien-fo*? (3) If many, are they random (the “84,000 medicines” model), or do they form a graded path (the *mārga* model)? (4) What results should one expect from one’s chosen method(s) of *nien-fo*, either in this life or after death? (5) How does (do) the chosen method(s) of *nien-fo* work to bring about their results?

In one brief article such as this, it is not realistic to expect a full rehearsal of all the answers to all of the above questions regarding Chinese Pure Land Buddhism *in toto*; such a study may well turn into a monograph as I continue to pursue it. I wish to limit myself here to the relatively simple question of how different practices relate to each other. This breaks down into two subsidiary questions: First, how does *nien-fo* relate to other practices within Buddhism? Second, if there is a variety of ways in which to perform *nien-fo* itself, how do these methods relate to each other as well as to non-*nien-fo* practices?

The intention of this study is not to lay out a table of methods, in which any one way of positioning and doing *nien-fo* occupies a single, discrete place along a continuum. As the reader will see, the material does not lend itself to such neat organization. Rather, I wish to pose the following analysis as a heuristic, a way of querying the material in order to see relationships with other practices that cut across the spectrum of Chinese Buddhist praxis in a number of directions at once. One may ask a series of

questions of the materials at hand; the answer to one question may position the practice of *nien-fo* in one way for a particular authority, but in another way when a different question is asked of that same authority. Such an investigation must not be deemed unsuccessful if it fails to yield a rigorous and consistent taxonomy of practice; it simply gives us a way to think more systematically about the variety of *nien-fo* methods that have appeared in the history of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.

II. WHEN NIEN-FO IS ONE PRACTICE AMONG MANY

Some Pure Land teachers based their understanding of *nien-fo* on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* rather than the traditional “Three Sūtras” (Ch. *ching-t’u san pu*), and so positioned the practice of *nien-fo* within its scheme of multiple practices. In the case of Hui-yüan, we find a clear instance where the practice of *nien-fo* is construed as a certain type of practice intended to reach a certain kind of result, both of which differ considerably from the way they are usually presented in works on Pure Land Buddhism. If we look into the *Ta-ch’eng ta yi chang* (“Chapters on the Great Meaning of the Mahāyāna,” a compilation of correspondence between Hui-yüan and Kumārajīva found at *Taishō*, vol. 45, no. 1856, pp. 122–143), we find that Hui-yüan, explicitly basing his question on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, asks Kumārajīva how it is that a buddha seen in dreams, being an image manufactured by the practitioner’s own mind, could teach one things one does not already know, as the sūtra says. The specifics of the question and answer need not detain us here; we need only observe that Hui-yüan (1) clearly bases his practice on a scripture outside of the usual “three Pure Land sūtras,” (2) that he intends the practice to lead not only to rebirth in Sukhāvati, but also to the *nien-fo samādhi* and a vision of the buddha Amitābha in the present life, and (3) part of the purpose of this visualization-leading-to-vision is so that the buddha can bestow teachings on the practitioner.⁷ In addition, this is only one of a number of concerns Hui-yüan raised with Kumārajīva; like the sūtra itself, his range of learning and practice included many other elements in addition to those centering on the Pure Land of Amitābha. All of these factors present a significant contrast to more traditional methods of *nien-fo*, and tended to be ignored or glossed over by later Chinese Pure Land thinkers, even as they elevated Hui-yüan to the status of first “patriarch” of Pure Land.

Chih-i’s “constantly-walking *samādhi*” was also based on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*. As described by Daniel Stevenson,⁸ this practice was a complicated and difficult one, to be attempted only by clergy who had already demonstrated great tenacity, devotion, and adherence to the disciplinary and procedural precepts of the monastic order. In this case,

the term *nien* denotes both visualization and oral invocation, as the meditator is directed to construct a highly detailed eidetic image of the buddha while slowly and sonorously reciting the name. At the same time, the meditator is to realize the empty nature of the visualized buddha as a manifestation of his or her own mind (something also affirmed by the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra* at *Taishō*, vol. 13, no. 418, p. 905c).⁹ Thus, the purpose of *nien-fo* here is not only to gain a vision of the buddha(s), but also to realize wisdom at the same time. Finally, we should note that the “constantly-walking *samādhi*” is only one of four different modes of practice contained in the *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, others of which contain within themselves further subtypes, constituting a broad palette of possible practices.

Both Hui-yüan and Chih-i, then, clearly saw *nien-fo* in a certain way based on the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, which differed from the stripped-down *nien-fo* practice of other teachers, in addition to which they saw it as only one mode of practice among many.

III. WHEN *NIEN-FO* IS THE ONLY PRACTICE, BUT TAKES MANY FORMS

Another approach to Pure Land practice was to recommend *nien-fo* as a single practice, but to take this “single practice” as itself multiform. In other words, while recommending *nien-fo*, one also analyzed it into several varieties. When a teacher takes this approach, two other possibilities emerge: (1) one may see the varieties of *nien-fo* as simply different modes of practice suited to different practitioners, an approach that resonates with traditional Buddhist views of methods of cultivations as “medicines” directed toward the treatment of distinct “ailments.” (2) One might also try to arrange the various types of *nien-fo* into a sort of graded path, in which case a single practitioner would begin at the beginning with the simplest practice and then progress through the more advanced levels.

A. *Nien-fo* as Medicine Cabinet

As an example of the “medicine cabinet” approach, I have chosen the eminent Buddhist figure Yin-kuang (1861–1940). Revered since his death as the thirteenth “patriarch” of the Pure Land movement, Yin-kuang dedicated his entire monastic career to defending and advancing Pure Land practice. Hundreds of devotees were deeply affected by personal visits to his cell at the Ling-yen Shan Temple in Suchou, and thousands of others were (and are) moved and inspired by his writings, recently collected and published as the *Complete Works of the Great Master Yin-kuang* (*Yin-kuang ta-shih ch’üan chi*).¹⁰

Surveying Yin-kuang's works, one finds a few systematic expositions of Pure Land thought and practice, but his writing appears to have been driven by practical rather than theoretical concerns. One sees him engaging in apologetics or pastoral work in his writings (the former in his treatises, the latter in letters to his disciples). Thus, if what I have seen of his writing so far holds true for the corpus of his work *in toto*, then it would seem that he never set out Pure Land practice as a graded path, but recommended practices for individuals as the need required.

To give an example, among the memorial essays written after Yin-kuang's death, we find one entitled "The Great Master Taught Me the Method of *nien-fo*" (*ta shih chiao wo nien-fo fang-fa*), in which a disciple named Tz'u-chou describes the method this way: Yin-kuang told him to recite the name of Amitābha ten times mentally, but without actually counting from one to ten. In other words, Tz'u-chou was simply to be aware of his oral recitation and, without counting or using a rosary, know when he had recited ten times. This method, clearly based on the Ch'an technique of counting breaths, served not only the purpose of gaining the devotee rebirth in Sukhāvati, but also of increasing his concentration in the present life.¹¹

In a letter to another disciple, Yin-kuang defined *nien-fo* as both recitation and visualization, and stressed the need for constancy in practice. One's *nien-fo*, he said, had to take place in a context of faith in Amitābha's primal vows, and one's own vows to be reborn in Sukhāvati and return the merit of one's practice to all living beings. He described the practice in quasi-esoteric terms as consisting of acts of body, speech, and mind, and gave advice to this disciple on factors of practice that would affect the quality of the *samādhi* he would attain, clearly indicating that he considered *nien-fo* a serious practice that, as with the other discipline mentioned above, would produce benefits even prior to gaining rebirth. At the end of the letter, he denies that mere oral invocation will produce any benefit, in this life or after death, without the proper framework of genuine and unremitting aspiration for rebirth and effort.¹² Done within this framework, however, *nien-fo* could produce marvellous results; Yin-kuang even credited the practice with curing him of conjunctivitis.¹³

One could spend a lot of time gathering up the scattered fragments of Yin-kuang's teachings and recommendations and try to bring some system and order into it. The point here is that Yin-kuang himself did not do so, and it appears that, while he had some basic ideas about *nien-fo* that held in all cases (such as the need for aspiration and constancy of practice), he also did not hesitate to vary the practice for different people (as seen in the variety of recommendations that appear in his letters), and to vary it for different purposes (achieving rebirth, attaining *samādhi*, or curing illness). The fact that Yin-kuang never tried to systematize the practice, or put his various methods into any kind of order, demonstrates that, for him, it was like

medicine to be administered for specific purposes, and not a graded path where one moved from easier to more difficult practices. This contrasts with the systems to be presented below.

B. *Nien-fo* as Graded Path

1. Kui-feng Tsung-mi's Fourfold Typology

As my first example of the "graded path" approach, I have chosen Kui-feng Tsung-mi (780–841), even though I am aware that this choice is loaded with difficulties. As a Hua-yen patriarch and Ch'an master, it may seem more logical to include him in the above section, among the teachers who saw *nien-fo* as one practice among many. This is the very difficulty stated in the introduction with attempting to position any single authoritative figure in a discrete place on a kind of table of practices and teachings.

According to Mochizuki Shinkō's *Chūgoku Jōdokyōri shi*, in the fourth fascicle of his *Hua-yen ching p'u-hsien hsing-yüan p'in shu ch'ao* (Subcommentary on [Ch'eng-kuan's] Commentary on the "Chapter of Samantabhadra's Practice of his Vows," *Zoku zōkyō* 7, p. 773ff)¹⁴ Tsung-mi set out four different types of *nien-fo*, each with its own scriptural basis. These are:

1. Oral invocation (*ch'eng ming nien*), which he based on a passage relating to the "single-practice *samādhi*" (*yi hsing san-mei*) found in the scripture *Wen-shu-shih-li suo shuo mo-ho pan-juo po-lo-mi ching* (The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra Preached by Mañjuśrī, *Taishō*, vol. 8, no. 232, pp. 726–732), which recommends selecting a particular buddha (not necessarily Amitābha), facing that buddha's direction, and calling upon his name out loud until one achieves a vision of all buddhas of the present world. This, of course, is reminiscent of the practice outlined in the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*, except that it does not involve visualization, only oral recitation of the name. Tsung-mi presented this as a sufficient means to gain the vision of the buddhas.

2. Contemplating the image (*kuan hsiang* 觀像 *nien*), which involves contemplating a physical image or picture of the buddha. He based this on the *Ta pao chi ching* (Great Collection Sūtra, also called *P'u-ming p'u-sa hui*, *Taishō*, vol. 11, no. 310–43, pp. 631–638). This says that, in contemplating an image of the buddha, one realizes the non-duality of the image with the buddha, and in this way one achieves the five powers (*wu t'ung*) and the *samādhi* of universal light (*p'u kuang san-mei*).

3. Contemplating the characteristics (*kuan hsiang* 觀相 *nien*), in which one contemplates the major and minor marks of a buddha's body. One may select one mark upon which to focus, or contemplate them all simultaneously. The first is based on the scripture *Fo shuo kuan fo san-mei hai ching* (Sūtra on the Samādhi-ocean of the Contemplation of the Buddha, *Taishō*, vol. 15, no. 643, pp. 645–697), which speaks of gazing at the tuft of white hair between the buddha's eyes. The second is based on the *Tsuo ch'an san-mei ching* (Sūtra on the Samādhi of Seated Meditation, *Taishō*, vol. 15, no. 614, pp. 269–286), which recommends constant contemplation of the buddha's body as a means of "entering the buddha-way." If one can do this, and not set one's mind on "earth, wind, fire, water, or any dharma," then one will gain a vision of all the buddhas of the ten directions and the three times, and will eliminate countless kalpas of karmic guilt.

4. Contemplating the True Mark (*shih hsiang nien*), which is for advanced practitioners with an enlightened vision of the world. In this, one contemplates the buddha's *dharmakāya*, which in nondual terms is also the contemplation of one's own true self and the true nature of all phenomena. This is also based on *The Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra Preached by Mañjuśrī* (*Taishō*, no. 232), which describes the true nature of the buddha as "unproduced and unextinguished, neither going nor coming, without name and without feature, that alone is called 'buddha'." The scripture also calls this the "single-practice *samādhi*," and Tsung-mi cites other perfection of wisdom literature, such as the *Ta chih-tu lun* in support of this view of the buddha.

Mochizuki Shinkō, in listing these techniques, says that Tsung-mi presented these four methods of *nien-fo* as a graded path going from easiest/shallowest to most difficult/most profound.¹⁵ For our purposes, we can observe several relevant features of his thought. First, his outline rests on different scriptural bases than traditional Pure Land practice. Second, it is clearly aimed at gaining a vision of the buddha in this life and on attainment of wisdom and/or enlightenment (as opposed to gaining rebirth in the Pure Land after death). Third, and perhaps most problematically, he does not appear to use the term *nien-fo* to describe these practices, but only the single word *nien*. This may call into question the identification of Tsung-mi as a Pure Land figure, but whatever his own intentions may have been in setting out this scheme, his typology and path have come to be used by later Pure Land teachers in need of a graded curriculum of practice. For example, I first ran across this typology in an essay entitled "*Ssu chung nien-fo*" (Four types of *nien-fo*) by the contemporary Taiwan-

based Pure Land master Chih-yü, where he sets it out as a set of techniques for his own disciples.¹⁶

2. Yün-ch'í Chu-hung's Deepening Realization

A second example of a master who saw Pure Land and *nien-fo* as an unfolding or ascending path of practice is the Ming dynasty monk-reformer Yün-ch'í Chu-hung (1535–1615). One may find an extended statement of his vision of Pure Land practice in the first fascicle of his *A-mi-t'o ching shu ch'ao* (Subcommentary to the Commentary on the *Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha-sūtra*, *Zoku zōkyō* 33, pp. 326–491).¹⁷

At the outset, Chu-hung states that he sees the purpose of practicing *nien-fo* (for which he also uses the terms *ch'eng-ming* [recite the name] and *ch'ih-ming* ["hold" the name]) is to achieve the "single, unperturbed mind" (*yi hsin pu luan*) or the buddha-recitation *samādhi*, two terms he clearly holds to be synonyms (p. 334a–b). He then makes a strong statement of what he feels the nature of the buddha and his Pure Land to be, and the way in which *nien-fo* works. Following the teachings of the second chapter of the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, he states,

Now thoughts / contemplations / recitations (*nien*) are empty, and production enters into non-production [or, birth enters into non-birth], and to *nien* the buddha (*nien-fo*) is to *nien* the mind. Birth there (i.e., in the Pure Land) does not mean leaving birth here (the present defiled world). Mind, buddha, and sentient beings form one body, the middle stream does not abide on [either of] the two banks. Therefore, we say "the Amitābha of one's own nature; the Pure Land of mind-only" (p. 334b11–12).

Based on this, one might think that Chu-hung is espousing the position of "mind-only Pure Land," (*wei-hsin ching-t'u*) a position that came later into polemical opposition to a more literal reading of Pure Land cosmology called "Western Direction Pure Land" (*hsi-fang ching-t'u*). Taking this with his earlier statement that one is to use *nien-fo* to put an end to scattered thoughts and achieve the "single, unperturbed mind" and a state of *samādhi*, one may well think that he was putting forward a path of practice aimed at an élite audience of religious virtuosi.

However, he has also stated that he includes oral invocation under the rubric *nien-fo*, indicating an easier level of practice. This apparent contradiction resolves itself somewhat when he brings in the vocabulary of principle (*li*) and phenomena (*shih*) at page 334a. In a subsequent section entitled "Broadly demonstrating what *ch'ih-ming* covers," which begins at page 335a10, he says that the "one mind" divides into two types, the "one mind of principle" (*li yi hsin*) and the "one mind of phenomena" (*shih yi*

hsin). Here he clarifies that his use of the vocabulary of mind-only Pure Land is to be understood as pointing to the "one mind of principle," and in fact represents only one end of a duality that must be interfused with the other end in order to achieve the highest wisdom. In fact, he does not approve of those who one-sidedly claim that Amitābha is *only* a manifestation of one's own nature, or that the Pure Land is *only* this world as seen by a purified consciousness. At the level of the "one mind of phenomena," Amitābha and his Pure Land are separate and distinct from the practitioner, existing countless buddha-lands off to the west. Only a truly enlightened being can see both of these truths at once.

The ordinary practitioner of the Pure Land path, alas, is stuck at a lower level of realization, and here Chu-hung makes a crucial recommendation. Since unenlightened beings can only hold one end of the principle/phenomena dyad at a time, it is actually better to lean toward phenomena than principle. He decries those who, based on "crazy wisdom" (*k'uang hui*) assert a bland monism that collapses all distinctions and undermines religious practice and achievement. Better, he says, to be an ignorant peasant ardently reciting the buddha's name in hopes of rebirth in the Pure Land than an educated monk with a little realization who thinks that he has already run the race and attained the vision of non-duality. At least the foolish practitioner will recite the name continuously and keep the precepts. They will achieve rebirth in the Pure Land (*wang-sheng*) and attain a purified body (*ching-shen*).¹⁸

In a later passage, Chu-hung goes on to list ten advantages of the Pure Land path. While the first nine are general and serve a hortatory function, the tenth presents practical instructions for practice which Chu-hung relates directly to the teachings of the *Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha sūtra*. After praising the superiority of *nien-fo* over all other gates of practice, Chu-hung states that there are many "gates" to *nien-fo* itself.¹⁹ When he lists the four types, one finds that he uses Kui-feng Tsung-mi's typology as given above, but in reverse order, and with the caveat that ordinary practitioners will find Kui-feng's numbers two through four too difficult and dangerous. His final recommendation is that everyone begin with the easiest practice, that of *ch'ih-ming* or "holding the name," as it is the simplest and the quickest. One cannot expect to "begin to contemplate the true mark and grasp the true mark." (p. 346b10). Just as *nien-fo* is the "shortcut among shortcuts," so *ch'ih-ming nien-fo* is the "shortcut among shortcuts" with respect to the varieties of *nien-fo*. This is why both the *Larger* and *Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha sūtras* take the teaching of *ch'ih fo ming hao* (holding the Buddha's name) as their main import.²⁰

Chün-fang Yü, in reading this same commentary, discovered in the second fascicle other recommendations. For instance, depending upon the situation, "holding the name" could indicate audible recitation of the name, silent contemplation of the name, or contemplation accompanied by

barely-audible whispering of the name.²¹ She also notes that, further on in the commentary, Chu-hung details two specific ways of performing *nien-fo*, or, more accurately, two different states of mind within which one performs the practice, that lead to the attainment of the “one mind of phenomena” and the “one mind of principle.” The first, called “phenomenal holding of the name” (*shih ch’ih-ming*), consists of mental/oral invocation of the name where one remains concentrated on the syllables of the name. This creates the “one mind of phenomena,” which means a mind cleared of defilements, calmed, and focused. It creates concentration, not wisdom, and so corresponds to the “calming” (*chih*) phase of the two-part *chih-kuan* meditation. The second, called “noumenal holding of the name” (*li ch’ih-ming*), moves the focus from the name to the mind that holds it, realizing the non-duality of practitioner and buddha. This leads to the attainment of wisdom in the “one mind of principle” that Chu-hung had earlier identified with the higher attainment.²² However, as we have seen earlier, this was a dangerous practice, entailing the risk of becoming fixated on principle and non-duality to the denigration of phenomenal reality.

While this represents nothing more than a very brief summary of a long and intricate argument in favor of Pure Land practice, we should notice at least this much with regard to Chu-hung’s thought: First, he clearly recognizes the superiority of Pure Land practice over all other types of Buddhist cultivation.²³ Second, while recognizing a variety of methods of *nien-fo* based mainly on Tsung-mi’s typology, he turned Tsung-mi’s list on its head and asserted the superiority of the most basic form of practice, that of “holding the name.” Third, he nevertheless maintained a graded hierarchy of practice, even if he was less optimistic than Tsung-mi about the possibility that beings in this life could progress past the first of the four stages. Fourth, he built upon this multiplicity of methods subsumed under the term *nien-fo* and turned it into a complete system of practice that could potentially accomplish for all practitioners any Buddhist objective, from rebirth in the Pure Land to the completion of the Six Perfections to the realization of the highest wisdom. Finally, he recognized several levels of attainment that accrue from completion of the various stages: from rebirth in the Pure Land as a result of “holding the name” to the attainment of *samādhi* and the realization of the perfect interpenetration of principle and phenomena accompanying the arising of the “single, undisturbed mind.”

IV. WHEN *NIEN-FO* IS A SINGLE PRACTICE: CHI-HSING CH’O-WU (1741–1810)

Not all Pure Land masters took the view of *nien-fo* as a graded path, and among these, we can take as an example another figure from the list of Pure Land “patriarchs,” the former Ch’an master Chi-hsing Ch’o-wu. He

had abandoned the practice of Ch'an somewhere in mid-life, perhaps due to illness or some other circumstance that led him to question the real benefit of Ch'an enlightenment. While he practiced "dual cultivation" for a while, he came in the end to abandon Ch'an and advocate only the practice of *nien-fo*. Ch'o-wu's literary remains are rather sparse, and so it is difficult to know whether we have access to the entire range of his thought, but within his *Recorded Sayings*,²⁴ we can find only a single idea of how one ought to *nien-fo*.

The practice began with several prerequisites. The practitioner needed to have generated *bodhicitta*, the altruistic resolve to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. He or she also needed to generate faith in the Pure Land path, and a genuine aspiration to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land.²⁵ In addition, one needed four other "minds": a sense of shame at past wrongdoing, joy at having learned of the Pure Land path, sorrow at the weight of one's karmic obstructions, and gratitude to the buddha for having taught this path.²⁶ With these minds firmly set, one moved to the practice of *nien-fo* itself.

Like Chu-hung, Ch'o-wu used the term *ch'ih-ming* to indicate both audible recitation and silent internal contemplation of the name. Ch'o-wu specifically recommended keeping Amitābha's name in one's mind at all times to purify it. Whereas Chu-hung used the image of a lion emerging from its den, whose roar silences all the other beasts to indicate the power of the name held in mind,²⁷ Ch'o-wu compared the name to a *mani* gem which, when dropped into turbid water, clarifies it instantly. It is also important to note that Ch'o-wu only made use of the name, and eschewed visualization of the buddha's form. Indeed, for him the two were equivalent. He argued that the buddha would not even merit the name "buddha" if he were not already fully endowed with all the virtues, merits, and bodily adornments of a buddha, and so the name could serve as a placeholder for the full image, rendering complex and difficult visualization exercises unnecessary.²⁸ Thus, while he seemed indifferent as to whether one's *nien-fo* were audible or silent, he was quite clear that to *nien-fo* meant to "hold the name" and nothing else.

Even though he constricted Tsung-mi's and Chu-hung's typology of *nien-fo* from a four-stage graded path to this single practice, he still held that this one practice could lead to both this-worldly and post-mortem benefits. That the practice led to rebirth in the Pure Land after death seemed obvious to him. But he also echoed Chu-hung's assertions that the very process of performing *nien-fo* led to a purification of the mind and attainment of wisdom. However, Chu-hung had separated "holding the name" into two aspects of phenomenon and principle, one leading to purification and the other leading to wisdom. Ch'o-wu, on the other hand, predicated both results on the one practice, and did not require his students to contemplate their own state of mind and its non-duality with the buddha.

Instead, he asserted that the non-duality was simply a given, and that the very practice of *nien-fo* caused the practitioner's innate buddha-wisdom to manifest spontaneously, without the student necessarily realizing that such a thing was happening.

This was because Ch'o-wu gave Amitābha Buddha a more active role in the process. Chu-hung seemed to think that realization of non-duality and manifestation of buddha-wisdom was the practitioner's responsibility. Ch'o-wu stated that, because in *nien-fo* both the buddha and the practitioner hold each other in their gazes, the buddha's wisdom automatically became part of the practitioner's purified mind, even if the practitioner was unaware of this happening:

Now if at this present moment, my mind is focused on Amitābha, the Western Region, and on seeking rebirth in the Pure Land of utmost bliss, then at this very moment the proper and dependent [recompense] of the western region are within my mind, and my mind is within the proper and dependent [recompense] of the western region. They are like two mirrors exchanging light and mutually illuminating each other. This is the mark of horizontally pervading the ten directions. If it firmly exhausts the three margins of time, then the very moment of contemplating the buddha is the very moment of seeing the buddha and becoming the buddha. The very moment of seeking rebirth is the very moment of attaining rebirth and the very moment of liberating all beings. The three margins of time are all a single, identical time; there is no before and after Awakening to this principle is most difficult; having faith in it is most easy.²⁹

Thus, in Ch'o-wu we have an example of a master who saw *nien-fo* as a single practice, not a graded path or even a heterogeneous variety of practices, but a practice which nevertheless could fulfill all of the possible goals of Buddhist cultivation.³⁰

V. WHEN *NIEN-FO* IS SUBORDINATED TO OTHER PRACTICES

Not all of those who recommended Pure Land practice to their followers qualify to be called Pure Land masters. Others, particularly in the Ch'an school, sometimes taught some form of Pure Land practice, but clearly as a subsidiary practice or within their own school's understanding of how it might work. I am making this a different category than those who teach Pure Land and *nien-fo* as one path among many, because in this instance one sometimes finds Pure Land denigrated as a last resort or redefined so

as to eliminate it as competition, not as one respectable practice among others. Two examples of this kind of teaching will suffice.

V.A. Han-shan Te-ch'ing (1546–1623), the late Ming-dynasty Buddhist reformer, was very clear in his own thought that Ch'an meditation was much better than Pure Land practices, and he never hesitated to say so, even when speaking to gatherings of Pure Land devotees. Nevertheless, he did not dismiss the practice outright; instead, he assigned it a place within an overall scheme of practice that culminated in Ch'an. His various talks and writings have been anthologized in the collection known as *Han-shan lao-jen meng-yu chi*, or "A Record of Elder Han-shan's Dream Travels," from which the following is derived.³¹

In an essay entitled "Instructing Laity to Form a *nien-fo* Society" (*Shih yu-p'o-sai jie nien-fo she*), Han-shan begins by extolling the rich variety of Buddhist practices, comparing it to the rain that falls on all plants alike without differentiation in itself. Plants, on the other hand, have differing capacities, and so absorb only what they are able: grass absorbs what is suitable for grass, trees absorb what is suitable for trees. He then related the story of ten laymen who came to him once to receive the five lay precepts and some instruction in practice. He saw that they were sincere, but very unenlightened and not capable of much realization, at least in the near future. Thus, out of compassion, he instructed them in the Pure Land path, and directed them to perform oral invocation (*ch'eng-ming*) and repentance three times daily, and to meet once a month together. They were to generate a genuine aspiration for rebirth in Sukhāvātī. Han-shan indicates that this is a low-level practice for beginners, but is a valid practice nonetheless. Since it will make their faith more steady and purify their minds, how can it be false? However, he still clearly expected them to outgrow the practice as soon as possible and move on to more productive methods of cultivation.³²

In another talk entitled "Instructions in the Essentials of *nien-fo*" (*Shih nien-fo ch'ieh-yao*),³³ Han-shan gives a more theoretical treatment of the practice of *nien-fo*, in which the reasons for his low estimation of the practice become apparent. The problem for him is not in the practice itself, but in the fact that people use it as a stand-alone practice without contextualizing it in an overall picture of Buddhist thought. Precisely because people believe that the practice of *nien-fo*, however conceived, works automatically without any further input on their part, they make no further progress on the path beyond what this bare practice has to offer. They must always remember, he says, that the "great matter" is to "penetrate birth and death" so as to liberate themselves from it. When practitioners fail even to acknowledge that they have this task, then *nien-fo* in hopes of gaining rebirth in Sukhāvātī becomes just another form of clinging, and thus obstructs progress. Here is how he puts the matter:

The practice of *nien-fo* seeking rebirth in the Pure Land was originally aimed at penetrating the great matter of birth-and-death. That is why it was stated as, "*nien-fo* and penetrate birth-and-death." People of today generate the mind to penetrate birth-and-death, but they are only willing to *nien-fo*. [They think that by] merely saying "buddha," they will penetrate birth-and-death. If one does not know the roots of birth-and-death, then in what direction can you *nien*? If the mind that engages in *nien-fo* cannot cut off the roots of birth-and-death, then how can it penetrate birth-and-death?³⁴

In other words, the phrase "*nien-fo* and penetrate birth-and-death" (*nien-fo liao sheng-ssu*) has been misconstrued at a basic, grammatical level. Whereas the original meaning was something like "perform *nien-fo* and then go on to penetrate birth-and-death," contemporary practitioners have interpreted the phrase to mean "perform *nien-fo* by saying the word 'buddha' and you will penetrate birth-and-death." This basic grammatical misreading, as well as the misunderstanding that *nien-fo* entails nothing more than oral recitation of the buddha's name, have led to a serious distortion of the practice and the results one may reasonably expect from it.

V.B. Hsü-yün (1840?–1959), the modern Ch'an master, was once proposed as a candidate for the title of thirteenth patriarch of the Pure Land school, an honor that went instead to Yin-kuang. When one looks through the thoughts and speeches recorded in his "Chronological autobiography" (*nien-p'u*), one can indeed find approving and instructive speeches about the Pure Land gate. However, I wish to argue that, like Han-shan, Hsü-yün was not among those presenting Pure Land as one valid path among many, because, like many Ch'an masters, he took the position of "mind-only Pure Land" (*wei-hsin ching-t'u*), and subsumed it within a Ch'an framework and assumed that it aimed toward Ch'an goals.

For example, in December 1952, he gave a dharma-talk before followers of Yin-kuang on the occasion of the latter's twelfth death-anniversary. In this speech, he charged those who chose the Pure Land path to keep to their original vow, firm in their faith. The worst mistake that one can make in Buddhist practice, he said, is to jump from one method to another indiscriminately. Therefore, he praised Yin-kuang's unremitting devotion to the practice of reciting Amitābha's name and commended it to those assembled.

However, when Hsü-yün brought Pure Land in for comparison with Ch'an, he found no difference in the results to which both methods lead. In this extract, it becomes clear that Hsü-yün saw *nien-fo* and Ch'an *hua-t'ou* practice as equivalent:

Ch'an and Pure Land seem to be two different methods as seen by beginners, but are really one to experienced practitioners. The *hua-tou* [*sic*] technique in Ch'an meditation, which puts an end to the stream of birth and death, also requires a firm believing mind to be effective. If the *hua-tou* is not firmly held, Ch'an practice will fail. If the believing mind is strong and if the *hua-tou* is firmly held, the practitioner will be mindless of even eating and drinking and his training will take effect; when sense-organs disengage from sense data, his attainment will be similar to that achieved by a reciter of the Buddha's name when his training becomes effective and when the Pure Land manifests in front of him. In this state, noumenon and phenomenon intermingle, Mind and Buddha are not a duality and both are in the state of suchness which is absolute and free from all contraries and relativities. Then what difference is there between Ch'an and Pure Land?³⁵

That final rhetorical question gets its obvious answer (i.e., there is no difference) from the fact that Hsü-yün describes *nien-fo* as just another kind of *hua-t'ou* practice. One sees here no indication whatsoever that reciting the buddha's name could have any effect other than to produce a Ch'an-style enlightenment experience—no rebirth in the Pure Land even for the simplest practitioners, none of Ch'o-wu's ebullient confidence that *nien-fo* puts one's mind into resonance with Amitābha's and thus guarantees rebirth, only a phrase to which one holds on with firm faith until it detaches one from the "dusts of this world" and leads one to realize the nonduality of principle and phenomenon. For Hsü-yün, one penetrates the word "Amitābha" just as one penetrates Chao-chou's "wu."

These two Ch'an figures represent what some (Yin-kuang included) have considered the illegitimate colonizing of Pure Land by those of other schools. This kind of praise for the Pure Land path is, for them, the more pernicious because it appears positive on the surface, but when one looks into the substance behind the words of praise, one finds Pure Land practice redefined so as to become indistinguishable from the methods of the Ch'an school. Once this happens, then much that is special and distinctive about Pure Land disappears, having been absorbed into the framework of its rival. This represents, then, a form of teaching about *nien-fo* in which the practice becomes a gateway out of the Pure Land context and into other understandings of Buddhist practice and attainment. For this reason I have created this special category for teachings of *nien-fo*, and not simply placed them as other examples of *nien-fo* as one practice among many, as in section II above.

VI. WHEN *NIEN-FO* IS NOT FOR REBIRTH

As mentioned at the outset, Hori Ichirō noted some thirty years ago that in Japan, the *nembutsu* became, at the level of folk religion, an incantation credited with the power to provide a variety of this-worldly benefits in addition to assuring rebirth in the Pure Land after death. Ogasawara Senshū once noted a similar tendency in China since recent times to posit this-worldly benefits from *nien-fo*,³⁶ but in fact the trend goes back at least to Sung times. Daniel Getz has called attention to the fact that when the Sung-dynasty T'ien-t'ai reformer Ssu-ming Chih-li (960–1028) organized his Pure Land society in the early eleventh century, one of the purposes he envisioned for the society's practice was to "extend the emperor's longevity and contribute to the prosperity of the people."³⁷ In addition, Getz reports that a layman who, having lost his sight, recited the buddha's name 360,000 times, filling four printed charts, whereupon his eyesight was restored.³⁸ This story reminds one of the modern reformer Yin-kuang's use of *nien-fo* to cure his conjunctivitis, as mentioned above.

All this is merely to call attention to the fact that not everyone who practiced *nien-fo* in China did so for the purpose of gaining rebirth in the Pure Land, or to achieve the *nien-fo san-mei*, or the "single, unperturbed mind," or to attain a vision of the buddha, or for any other specifically Buddhist purpose. It appears to be easy for people to regard a short, mantra-like invocation as having magical power to grant wishes in this life. Not a profound point, granted, but one that needs mention in this catalogue of *nien-fo* practice.

I will finish by reporting on a text whose provenance I am still trying to determine. Called "Forty-eight Ways to *nien-fo*" (*Nien-fo ssu-shih-pa fa*) by one Cheng Wei-an, it has been reprinted many times in many formats, both as an independent treatise and in anthologies of Pure Land texts.³⁹ It contains brief presentations of forty-eight different methods of performing *nien-fo* and describes the situations in which one might wish to use each one.

Even though we have seen that there are many ways to *nien-fo*, this text does not give any method of mental contemplation or visualization. Each technique is described as a way to *ch'ih-ming*, to "hold the name," and all seem to point to some form of oral invocation of Amitābha's name. To give a few examples: When one is sleepy or one's thoughts are scattered, then one ought to recite the Buddha's name in a loud voice (p. 55). If one is tired, one may rest by reciting quietly for a time, restoring the buddha-*ch'i* (*fo-ch'i*) until one is again able to recite loudly (p. 55). If one is in a place unsuitable for any audible practice, then one may try the "vajra recitation," in which one moves only the lips, or the "silent recitation" in which one keeps the mouth closed and moves only the tongue (p. 55). There are

instructions for reciting the name in various other circumstances: when walking or sitting straight (p. 56), at fixed times of day (p. 57), before a buddha-image (pp. 57–58, in which case one faces the image and does not worry if one is not facing west, and also seeks nothing more than a respectful realization of one's nonduality with the buddha). There are other methods marked by certain moods or attitudes, such as extreme respect (p. 58), in grave misfortune (p. 59), or with utter sincerity (p. 59). Others are meant to accompany other Buddhist acts or liturgies, such as making offerings to buddhas or clergy (p. 61), or giving alms (p. 62). Some seem quasi-esoteric, such as the one called "Holding the name in the midst of light" (p. 63), in which one lets the sound of one's recitation revolve around the space within the heart, visualizes the sound turning into light, and then dwelling in the midst of this light, still reciting the name (or perhaps contemplating? The text reverts from the word *ch'ih-ming* to *nien-fo* here).

And so the text proceeds, until at the end one finds ways to hold the name in dreams, in sickness, at the end of life, and finally, while making vows and performing repentances (pp. 69–71). It may appear at first that this text really belongs in another section of this paper, among those who hold to many methods of performing *nien-fo* without organizing them into a graded path; this text does have that kind of *ad hoc*, "medicine chest" character about it. However, I include it here, not because the methods described are not aimed at rebirth in the Pure Land, but because, assuming this goal, it posits different methods of *nien-fo* or *ch'ih-ming* for their "side effects." That is, within the assumption that the practitioner would like to achieve rebirth in the Land of Utmost Bliss, it seems to ask the question: as long as you plan to perform *nien-fo* anyway, why not vary the practice to achieve other, more immediate goals, such as arousing the mind, cheering oneself up when feeling self-pity, or to return your parents' kindness?

VII. CONCLUSIONS

At this early stage of the work, I am not sure what this brief paper has accomplished. It began with my noting the wide variety of methods of Pure Land practice found throughout the long stream of Chinese Pure Land literature, and wondering if there might be some way to organize them and understand them in terms of the technique presented, the goal it seeks to achieve, and the rationale by which the practitioner understands it to bring that goal about.

Having made this first attempt at systematizing the profusion of methods that I found in this (admittedly incomplete) survey of the literature, it seems clear that much refinement is necessary, both in terms of determining categories to be used, and in the placement of various authors

within these categories. Nevertheless, I find value in this attempt as a first approach to the task of looking more systematically at a practice that is too easily seen as simple and homogeneous and finding that, when authorities recommend that their followers engage in the practice of *nien-fo*, they may in fact have very different ideas about what this means. Here I have only asked the single question of how *nien-fo* relates to other practices, or, in cases where *nien-fo* itself takes different forms, how these forms relate to each other. Many other analytic questions could be raised, as indicated in the opening, and I hope to continue pursuing this line of investigation until I have a clearer idea of what, exactly, one does when one practices *nien-fo*.

NOTES

1. This is the gist of the section on Pure Land in China as presented in Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 338–350. This work is still used as a textbook in many classes on East Asian Buddhism.
2. An anecdote: When I first presented this paper at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the AAS, a colleague noted that these stereotypes were at least twenty years out of date, and perhaps needed no further belaboring. Later that same day, however, these very views were articulated by another colleague whose research was in Chinese religion, but not Buddhism. Evidently, specialists in Pure Land studies need to work harder to communicate advances in the field to others.
3. See, for example, Daniel A. Getz, Jr., "T'ien-t'ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, ed. Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p.477; and Robert H. Sharf, "On Ch'an-Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," a paper presented at the Third Chung-hwa International Conference on Buddhism, Taipei, Taiwan, July 1997, pp. 2–3.
4. Daniel. Getz, "Siming Zhili and Tiantai Pure Land in the Sung Dynasty" (Ph.D. diss. Yale University, 1994), which examines the founding of Pure Land societies by T'ien-t'ai figures, and Kenneth K. Tanaka, *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine: Chingying Hui-yüan's Commentary on the Visualization Sūtra* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), which looked at the Pure Land writings of a figure not normally thought of as a member of the "school" and whose work covered many other facets of Buddhist thought and practice as well.
5. See, for instance, Richard K. Payne, "The Five Contemplative Gates of Vasubandhu's *Rebirth Treatise* as a Ritualized Visualization Practice," David Chappell, "The Formation of the Pure Land Movement in China: Tao-ch'ó and Shan-tao," and Roger J. Corless, "T'an-luan: the First Systematizer of Pure Land Buddhism," all in *The Pure Land Tradition: History and Development*, ed. James Foard, Michael Solomon, and Richard Payne (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1996), as well as Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), particularly chapter three.
6. Hori Ichirō, *Folk Religion in Japan: Continuity and Change*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Alan L. Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 83–139.

7. As an aside, one may also note the similarity between this Buddhist practice and Taoist practices of the period, also aimed at visiting deities and receiving teachings.
8. Daniel B. Stevenson, "The Four Kinds of *samādhi* in Early T'ien-t'ai Buddhism," in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), pp. 45–98.
9. For an English translation of this *sūtra*, see Paul Harrison, trans., *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*, BDK English Tripitaka 25–II (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1998).
10. Yin-kuang, *Yin-kuang ta-shih ch'üan chi* (The Complete Works of Great Master Yin-kuang), rev. and expanded, ed. Shih Kuang-ting, 7 vols. (Taipei: Fo-chiao Shu-chü, 1991).
11. *Yin-kuang ta-shih ch'üan chi*, vol. 7, pp. 471–72.
12. *Yin-kuang ta-shih ch'üan chi*, vol. 1, pp. 39–43.
13. Shih Chien-cheng, *Yin-kuang ta-shih te sheng-p'ing yü ssu-hsiang* (The Life and Thought of the Great Master Yin-kuang), (Taipei: Tung-ch'u Publishing Co., 1989), p. 20. He recommended *nien-fo* to others to cure illnesses; see his letter to "a certain layman" in *Yin-kuang ta-shih ch'üan chi*, vol. 1, pp. 327–28.
14. The following four types of *nien-fo* are outlined in Mochizuki Shinkō, *Chūgoku jōdokyōri shi* (A History of Chinese Pure Land Thought), (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1942), pp. 309–311. The title is a variant of that given in Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 319, and I have to assume they are talking about the same work. The reference in the *Zoku zōkyō* is also different, as I consulted the Hsin Wen Feng edition published in Taipei.
15. Mochizuki, *Chūgoku jōdokyōri shi*, p. 311.
16. Chih-yü, "Ssu chung nien-fo" (Four Kinds of *nien-fo*), in *Ch'ih-p'an lien ch'ao*, vol. 2 (San-hsia: Hsi-lien Ching-yüan, 1986), pp. 71–80.
17. Again, the volume and page numbers refer to the Hsin Wen Feng reprint edition printed in Taipei.
18. *Zoku zōkyō* 33, pp. 35b1–336a10.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 346a13–14 (commentary), 346b4ff (subcommentary).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 347a7–16.
21. Yü, p. 59. Yü cites the edition of Chu-hung's commentary found in the anthology *Lien-ch'ih ta-shih fa-hui* ("The Dharma-words of Great Master Lien-ch'ih [i.e., Chu-hung]"), and so I have not yet been able to correlate it with the *Zoku zōkyō* version.
22. Yü, pp. 59–60.

23. Chu-hung's denigration of efforts at self-cultivation that led to pride in one's accomplishments explains why later, the Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) vehemently objected to recognizing him as a Zen master as well as a Pure Land thinker. See Hakuin's critique in Philip Yampolsky, ed. and trans, *The Zen Master Hakuin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), pp. 147–148.
24. Chi-hsing Ch'o-wu, *Ch'o-wu ch'an-shih yü-lu* (The Recorded Sayings of Ch'an Master Ch'o-wu), *Zoku zōkyō* 109, pp. 750–790.
25. *Zoku zōkyō* 109, p. 757b9–16.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 772b5–8.
27. *Zoku zōkyō* 33, p. 334a15–17.
28. *Zoku zōkyō* 109, pp. 762b5, 767b7.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 756a3–9.
30. For more information on Chi-hsing Ch'o-wu, see Charles B. Jones, "Mentally Constructing What Already Exists: The Pure Land Thought of Ch'an Master Jixing Chewu (1741–1810)," *Journal of the International Society of Buddhist Studies* 23-1 (2000), pp. 43–70.
31. Han-shan Te-ch'ing, *Han-shan lao-jen meng-yu chi* (Record of Elder Han-shan's Dream Travels), ed. T'ung-chiung, 4 vols (Chiang-pei: Chiang-pei k'o ching ch'u, 1879; Rpt., Taipei: Hsin Wen Feng, 1992). In subsequent notes, this will be abbreviated as *Meng-yu chi*.
32. *Meng-yu chi* 1, pp. 107–110.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 336–340.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 336–337.
35. Hsü-yün, *Empty Cloud: the Autobiography of the Chinese Zen Master Hsü-yün*, trans. Charles Luk; rev. and ed. Richard Hunn (Longmead: Element Books, 1988), pp. 153–54.
36. Ogasawara Senshū, "Chūgoku kindai jōdokyō no ichi kōsatsu" (An inquiry into the modern Chinese Pure Land school), *Ryūkyō shidan* 34 (1951), p. 12.
37. Getz, "T'ien-t'ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate," pp. 494–495.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 501.
39. My copy of the text is found in Cheng Wei-an, "Nien-fo ssu-shih-pa fa" (Forty-eight Ways to *nien-fo*), in Ching-tsuo yao-chüeh yü nien-fo fa-yao (Essential instructions for meditation and an outline of *nien-fo*), ed. Yüan Liao-fan and Mao Ling-yün (Taipei: Ch'ang-ch'un shu), pp. 54–71. To avoid a profusion of footnotes, page numbers will be given in the text of this article, all referring to this edition.