

# Pure Land and Netherworld: An Essential Combination\*

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**Abstract:** In their inscriptions for the halls of the White Lotus movement in the Southern Song and Yuan period, literati criticized the adherents for imagining the Pure Land as something concrete and tangible. They saw it more as an inner goal or state. Nonetheless, for many the Pure Land was a very concrete place that could be reached in a variety of ways. In this paper I will investigate how the Pure Land was imagined, in miracle stories, ritual practices and the writings of new religious groups.

**Keywords:** Pure Land (jingtū 淨土), Amitābha (E/Amitufo 阿彌陀佛), *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志, *baojuan* 寶卷 (previous scrolls)

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## Introductory Comments

When we look at Chinese religious culture we still tend to split it up in Buddhist, Daoist and other aspects or dimensions, and even experts often know much on one part and very little on the rest. From the perspective of local believers from all social and educational backgrounds, the picture was very different. As is well known, traditional China lacked a single dominant church that prescribed and, with the help of the state, enforced at least the semblance of a single religious worldview and practice. As a result, a broad range of religious beliefs, stories and practices functioned next to each other, whether in direct competition or filling different socio-educational niches, influencing each other, and providing for different needs.

In this small contribution I wish to show that the idea of the Pure Land (*jingtu* 淨土) of Amitābha is an example of a religious narrative that may have been ‘Buddhist’ in provenance, but functioned in a much broader socio-religious context. For this I look at non-doctrinal sources from different periods, first to show how this ideal was often identified in a layperson’s imagination and then to illustrate how the narrative of the Pure Land was combined with other practices or beliefs, such as funerary ritual and beliefs in a variety of ghosts. All the while, we will see that in this material the Pure Land was often very concretely present in the Chinese landscape or made present through ritual practice, but it was not owned by a single religious tradition. Hopefully, this perspective can supplement more strictly Buddhological approaches which tend to isolate the Pure Land narrative from its local religious context.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhist inspired religious culture brought new fears and new solutions to China, including the fear of eternal rebirth and punishment in the afterlife. Until then death was a unique event for each person, although it was accepted that one might continue to suffer

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<sup>1</sup> I looked at the Pure Land as well in my early work on the White Lotus movement and some overlap cannot be avoided. See ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings, passim*.

from hard work and/or punishment in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup> Many new practices were now introduced directed at avoiding such punishment and minimally positively influencing someone's status after rebirth, if not entirely avoiding it. Very ideally one might even attain the Pure Land itself, where one would be free of karmic defilements and therefore freed of the cycle of being born and dying (*shengsi* 生死), or reincarnation. The most common Pure Lands in the Chinese context were those of the future Buddha (and formally still Bodhisattva) Maitreya (Mile fo 彌勒佛) in Tuṣita Heaven (*doulütian* 兜率天) and the Buddha Amitābha (E/Amitufo 阿彌陀佛<sup>3</sup>) in the Western Paradise. Maitreya's Pure Land was most commonly referred to as the Gathering at the Dragon Flower (*longhuahui* 龍華會), where those gathered who had been guaranteed a place in his next aeon or *kalpa* in Buddhist terms. Maitreya's rule over the next *kalpa* was commonly said to be many thousands and thousands of years away, but there was also an important literature that projected his advent into the present or very near future, giving rise to rich messianic beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

Here my concern will be with the Pure Land of Amitābha, especially from the Song onwards. People could attempt to reach it by various means, but the sincere recitation of this Buddha's name was the most common method. Since this particular Buddha was believed to reside somewhere in the west, it is often referred to more specifically as the Western Land (*xitu* 西土) or Western Regions (*xifang* 西方). Ascent to this particular Pure Land could also be envisaged as a return to one's original state, hence the phrase 'Return to Western Heaven' (*gui xitian* 歸西天). In scholarly work we also refer to it as

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<sup>2</sup> For this reason, people buried small figurines in graves to perform this labour and suffer punishment instead of the deceased. See Wang, 'Zhongguo gudai renxing fangshu ji qi dui riben de yingxiang'. On the early fear of postmortem punishment and even lawsuits, see Strickmann, *Le Taoïsme du Mao Chan*.

<sup>3</sup> There is a modern convention of pronouncing the first character as e, but I am uncertain how far back this went in time, or how widely this practice was shared. The term is usually transcribed as Amitufo.

<sup>4</sup> Convenient starting points are Ownby, 'Chinese Millenarian Traditions' and Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects*.

the Western Paradise, which translates the Chinese phrase ‘World of Extreme Joy in the Western Regions’ (*xifang jile shijie* 西方極樂世界). The belief in this ideal world in the west is commonly associated with ‘Buddhism’, but if we mean by this the earliest Buddhist culture in northern India we are probably wrong. It has long been realized that the beliefs around the figure of Amitābha as we encounter them in China developed in large measure in the course of transmitting Buddhist beliefs and practices from India to China, first in the world of oasis kingdoms in between and then continued in China itself.<sup>5</sup> Whatever its historical origins, it matched quite well with the indigenous belief in a blissful world governed by the Queen Mother of the West that we can trace back to well before the introduction of Buddhist religious culture and doctrine.<sup>6</sup>

### The Palatial Paradise

The central element in traditional imaginings of the Pure Land was the lotus flower. In early China, the lotus was already depicted on the wooden ceilings of early palaces, or the Heavenly Well (*tianjing* 天井), as a talisman protecting against fire. In graves made of stone, it also symbolized the radiance of the moon and sun. Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik makes the interesting point how the lotus ornament took on elements of the solar tree, which was itself part of an ancient religious tradition in which nine suns would rest in this tree while a tenth sun would cross the sky during daytime. Thus, the lotus represented Heaven as a protective sphere and as the source of light or life. These various associations are well-attested in surviving visual and textual evidence, and remained alive well into the Period of

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<sup>5</sup> De Groot, ‘Buddhist Masses’, especially 23–24 already notes this. For historical approaches to the origin and nature of the Pure Land as a strictly Buddhist phenomenon, see for instance Nattier, ‘The Realm of Akṣobhya’; Strauch, ‘More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism’. For some of the variety involved, see Halkias & Payne, eds., *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts*.

<sup>6</sup> A good starting point is Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion*.

Disunion (221–589).<sup>7</sup> Importantly, the lotus symbol predates the gradual advent of Buddhist religious culture. Its positive omnipresence in larger architectural complexes such as palaces and graves can only have contributed to its acceptance as a metaphor in a Buddhist inspired context.

The lotus also has been an important metaphor in the religious culture of the Indian subcontinent for a long time. Again, this was not necessarily confined to what we now see as Buddhism. The leaves of the lotus float freely on the pure water, while its roots are mired in the dirty mud at the bottom of the pond. The flower is carried a little bit higher still by a stalk that sticks above the leaves, allowing it to regulate its temperature independently of the water. Thus, the lotus can be used to symbolize how good can still arise from contaminated karmic origins.<sup>8</sup> As such it was also adopted in Buddhist narratives, as a throne on which a Buddha could sit without being contaminated by muddy karma. We find it amongst others in Pure Land scriptures when they described their ideal world, which is presided over by the figure of Amitābha, but also in visual representations, which will have been accompanied by oral narratives.<sup>9</sup> In the late Tang dynasty wall painting from Dunhuang reproduced below, the Pure Land is represented as a palatial building with a lotus pond in front.<sup>10</sup> A huge Amitābha figure is sitting on his lotus throne in the pond, towering high above much smaller figures seated in their lotus posture on a lotus leaf. In the two smaller pools on the side sit his assistants, Mahāsthāmaprāpta (Ch. Dashizhi 大勢至) and Avalokiteśvara (Ch. Guanyin 觀音), amongst others. As the painting shows, the term ‘paradise’ is slightly misleading, since it is more commonly associated with pastoral imagery, as in the Biblical narrative of the Garden

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<sup>7</sup> Building on the work of Hayashi Minao and others, see Suhadolnik, ‘A Re-interpretation of the Lotus in the Han Wei Jin Tombs’.

<sup>8</sup> Aamir & Malik, ‘From Divinity to Decoration’.

<sup>9</sup> Ten Grotenhuis, ‘Visions of a Transcendent Realm’ and Wong, ‘Four Sichuan Buddhist Steles and the Beginnings of Pure Land Imagery in China’.

<sup>10</sup> Wall painting from Dunhuang Cave 217, reproduced for instance in Zhongguo lüyou chubanshe, ed., *Dunhuang feitian*.

of Eden. This Buddhist ideal world or heaven was a realm without death or rebirth, and thus without suffering, but nature as we think of it played only a minor role in it. The positive connotations of the lotus as a symbol of heaven in pre-Buddhist culture could be transferred without much effort into the ideal world of Amitābha.



Reproduction from <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c6/Dunhuang217.jpg>.

Both the palatial buildings and the lotus pool depicted here are clearly imagined as the product of human architectural activity. Similarly, this-worldly status hierarchies may have been imagined for the Pure Land as well. Thus, in one twelfth-century account a highly placed lady affiliated with the Song imperial family of the late eleventh century is guided through the Pure Land, which is imagined as two pools of water. Amongst other things, she sees two high officials and lay practitioners sitting in courtly dress, one of them bedecked with a jeweled crown and intricate necklaces. The

lady herself is still alive, but her future seat is already there, a single altar ‘which glistened resplendently of gold and azure, with splinters [of rainbow] light intertwining in intricate patterns’.<sup>11</sup> After all, this was someone who had married into the imperial family. She was used to a life of luxury that she was not going to leave behind completely. Unsurprisingly, the ascent to the Pure Land was imagined in terms of someone’s present life.

### The Lotus Pond

The core image of the Pure Land in the wider understanding was the lotus pond. In this section I will use materials from the famous collection of anecdotes by Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202), the *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 [Record of the Listener] to flesh out the way in which people outside a specialized Buddhist framework imagined this place in the late twelfth century. Although Hong Mai is hardly an impartial observer, he was relatively open to different social, cultural and religious phenomena of his day. He will have reflected elite norms and values, but on the whole he was very much a transmitter of the anecdotes and gossip that he received. His informants generally were literate males, often of some social status, even when they might transmit stories featuring people lower on the social rung. Often enough, the main characters of these stories are elites themselves and it will not do to dismiss Hong Mai’s record as ‘popular’ in its frequent sense of non-elite. Of all social groups, the 80% (or more) of the population who worked the land feature the least in these materials.

Hong Mai’s own tenants once obtained a golden colored lotus in a frying pan (or cauldron, its size is unclear) with a monk standing on top of it, which stayed there from the Eighth to the Tenth Day of Fourth Month. Since the Eighth Day was the birthday of the Buddha, we can safely assume that this observation was inspired by the festivities of that time of year. The monk on the lotus disappeared again after the household cooked dog meat with the pan—an

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<sup>11</sup> Stevenson, ‘Death-Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful’.

infringement of the taboo on killing life or maybe even the life of an animal member of the household? People all over the region also had a lotus in their pans, though without a monk standing on top, and generally took it as an auspicious sign for a good harvest, rather than a sign to adopt a Buddhist lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> The association with Buddhist inspired culture is there, but it would go too far to call this a Buddhist miracle.<sup>13</sup>

In another example, a real-life pool is taken to make a further religious point. The account tells us of a man on his way to a new posting, who took time off to ascend a holy mountain known from Chan tradition. He reached the highest peak braving wind and rain. At a pavilion next to a White Lotus Pond (*bailianchi ting* 白蓮池亭), an old monk told him that here he would be without suffering now (i.e. despite the bad weather), to be bitterly punished for a past karmic transgression after reaching his new office.<sup>14</sup> This particular lotus pond evidently was connected to a Buddhist institution, but the religious point that is made is much more general, that one cannot escape one's karmic fate. No statement is made about further religious obligations, such as maintaining a vegetarian lifestyle or keeping other lay injunctions. If we consider Buddhism to be a particular way of living, then no such claims were made here. By this time the belief in karma was already so widespread that it no longer served to demarcate any specific religious tradition or approach.

One recurrent theme in Hong Mai's materials is that of sincere but simple Buddhist practice as opposed to more sophisticated practice, or in the terms of those days, the distinction between often partial and flawed recitation that is sincere and Chan practices that may have been seen as too contrived to be credible. The point of such stories is that such devout practice is in fact extremely difficult, putting the lie to the prejudice that devotionalist practice provided easy access to Buddhist inspired salvation. The following account about

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<sup>12</sup> *YJZ, jia*: 9: 74. Another example of lotuses as a good omen *YJZ, zhibui*: 1: 1224.

<sup>13</sup> Very explicitly in *YJZ, jia*: 8: 64.

<sup>14</sup> *YJZ, jia*: 2: 17.



a wet nurse from Shandong illustrates this perspective rather well. The wet nurse is a regular practitioner of the Buddhist style vegetarian lifestyle. She is described as ‘extremely dumb’ (*jīyū* 極愚). While the main wife practices the much more sophisticated ‘Chan studies’ (*chanxue* 禪學), the nurse sits next to her every morning and evening reciting the name of Amitābha with utmost sincerity. At the age of 72 in 1148 she becomes very ill, but despite a constant diarrhea she continues to recite even more earnestly. Suddenly she seemed to be without pain and recited a *gāthā* poem:

西方一路好修行	When you practice and walk the road to the Western Region well,
上無條嶺下無坑	There will be no mountain ridges above you and no canyons below.
去時不用著鞋襪	The moment you leave you do not need to put on shoes or socks,
腳踏蓮花步步生	Your feet will tread lotus flowers and step for step you are reborn [there].

She told the listeners that she had composed it herself and predicted the exact hour of her death. She was cremated ‘in the way of the monks’ and afterwards her tongue remained, shaped like a lotus flower.<sup>15</sup> The crux is the need for absolute sincerity, which is more powerful than the complicated Chan practice to which it is opposed—although the exact contents of the latter remain unclear here. Only the absolutely simple of mind would be able to produce this kind of sincerity.

Stories about someone’s rebirth in the Pure Land are surprisingly few outside a strictly hagiographic context such as the preceding example. Instead, we find an abundance of stories of people being punished for their evil deeds, ending up in the underworld and/or having a good or bad reincarnation in human or animal form. Even in the following story from 1157, the belief in the Pure Land is closely con-

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<sup>15</sup> *YJZ*, *yi*: 9: 262. Compare similar stories in *YJZ*, *zhijing*: 7: 936–937 and *zhiding*: 1: 969.

nected to the fear of punishment in the underworld. The case took place in the household of Zhao Shizhou 趙士周, who was a member of the Song imperial clan. His main wife had died 22 years before as the result of a botched pregnancy. Zhao was on an official posting in the then capital of the Southern Song in Hangzhou, when his concubine Ms. Yang 楊氏 dreamed on the twelfth day of Fifth Month that monks from the Tianzhu 天竺 Hill were about to arrive. Eventually, three monks arrived successively, from the Upper Tianzhu, Middle Tianzhu and Lingyin 靈隱 Monasteries, all prominent monasteries located on the same hill on West Lake just outside of the city. They brought a written instruction that he should provide the monks of these monasteries with a vegetarian feast (*zhai* 齋) on the fifteenth day of Fifth Month, always a special day of the lunar month, but not a specifically Buddhist festival day.

Very reluctant about this sudden instruction, Zhao was only convinced when the maidservant of his son was possessed and started to speak in the voice of his late wife, very likely her former boss in the household. She (i.e., Zhao's late wife!) told them that she had sinned by using too much water for washing her head and feet, as well as wasting brocade for wrapping her feet. One suspects that using so much water was deemed wasteful, but using brocade or expensive silk was also a transgression of the taboo on killing life, more specifically millions of silkworms. Now she was being punished by having to drink five jars of dirty water, but this was taking forever despite the help of their former wet nurse. Here a general religious practice serves to support a Buddhist point of view, assuming that the primary issue is the use of silk and not the wastage of water.

Through the maidservant's mouth, Zhao's late wife also informed them that his late father, Prince Qiong 瓊, now presided over the Longrui Palace 龍瑞宮. This location was actually in Shaoxing, and the well-informed listener or reader would have known that it was a prime religious location, including a Daoist 'Grotto Heaven' and associated with a wealth of further stories.<sup>16</sup> She had gone to see him and he had provided her with assistance to put in her request to his

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<sup>16</sup> Compare a non-Daoist source such as *Jiatai Kuaijizhi*, *SKQS* vol. 486: 7.6a–b.

son and former husband in order to liberate her from her underworld punishment. She provided additional comments to those present that further proved her continued intimate knowledge of family affairs. Her reference to his father's high post-mortem position will have pleased Zhao Shizhou a great deal, but it involved beliefs that we would classify today as Daoist and certainly not as Buddhist in any of the many senses of the word. Clearly, the maidservant cum late main wife did not expect that communication through spirit possession or the identification of the late prince with a Daoist location would provide any hindrance in obtaining the final goal of Buddhist merit making on her behalf.

Zhao Shizhou now finally agreed to provide a vegetarian feast to the monks of the three monasteries, as well as to organize a Water and Land Ritual for his wife at yet another monastery. Two nights later she came back to report in a dream: 'I am now sitting in a basin with lotus flowers. I am gone and will not return'.<sup>17</sup> No explicit mention is made of the Pure Land itself, but the central imagery is there and the fact that she will never 'return' is the core message. It might mean that she would no longer bother Zhao Shizhou's household or more likely that she would no longer be reborn. As already noted, 'to return to Western Heaven' was an alternative way of referring to the ascent to the Pure Land.

Realistically, though, entering the Pure Land was first and foremost a hope and not an expectation. Most people did not live the kind of lives that might have guaranteed automatic rebirth in such a place, since their social as well as their ritual obligations included the frequent consumption of meat. Whoever was the cook usually was also the one who killed the animal, certainly in the case of fish, crustaceans and small fowl. The above accounts derive their rhetorical strength from the fact that some people unexpectedly did get reborn in the Pure Land after all thanks to their presumed utmost sincerity. In the following account, an abbot of a Chan monastery in Raozhou is about to die and takes leave of his attendants. They weep and say: 'You will return to Western Heaven, but our own

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<sup>17</sup> *YJZ, yi*: 3: 206–207.

karma is insufficient. We do not know when we will meet the teacher again'. He replies that they will meet again very soon, at the family of doctor Wang Tai 王太 outside the Chongfu Hall 崇福院 in the city. They cannot make sense of this prediction, and the abbot dies soon afterwards. Previously the wife of said Wang Tai had in fact dreamed that she visited the monastery with the wife of another doctor. They had seen the abbot sleep in a niche and asked him why he was not sleeping in the abbot's room. He had merely laughed. Thereupon she had heard crying next to her, which was her daughter in law who was suffering in labour. The next day a son was born. The monks of the monastery came to visit, and now the wife of the doctor and the monks could exchange their experiences, leading them to realize that the abbot had been reborn in the doctor's household.<sup>18</sup> The point here for us is not this kind of reunion in rebirth, which was a common enough occurrence. Instead, it is the way in which the monks wished that the abbot be reborn in the Pure Land, but also accepted that a rebirth in a prestigious household was still completely normal and okay as well, even for a leading Buddhist practitioner like the abbot.

Thus, in the kind of outsider experience discussed up to now there were various possibilities in which aspects of the Pure Land ideal could be incorporated in a larger social, economic and religious life. The lotus was often associated with Buddhist religious culture, without necessarily implying conversion of some sort. Walking the lotus flowers upon the moment of one's death was a sign of successful devotion, rather than doctrinal understanding. At the end of the day, the hope for rebirth in the Pure Land was as part of the panoply of possibilities that people faced upon death, ranging from some kind of good or bad rebirth, via underworld punishment which could be prevented or alleviated by rituals, to liberation in the Pure Land. As the following discussion will confirm again and again, the Pure Land virtually required the underworld and it required different ways of communicating about it, often in the form of what we would today call near-death experiences, such as visits to hell.

<sup>18</sup> *YJZ, zbijia*: 10: 791.

## The Actual Geography

In the following case from 1131 we get a more detailed picture of the precise geography of this combined landscape of underworld and Pure Land. In this case a woman from the same Poyang County in Jiangxi as Hong Mai himself seemingly dies, but then comes back to life to report on what has happened to her. Such near-death experiences must have been a frequent topic of conversation and served to confirm and perhaps further elaborate people's views of the extended process of dying.

That day they invited a monk from the Lotus Flower Hall to recite *sūtras*. Then they inquired after what she had seen. The woman sat up and spoke: 'When I came to the riverside near the bridge to the underworld offices, I saw my late mother who said: 'Why are you here? This is the road to death and you cannot stay here for long'. Thereupon we bought paper and asked someone to write an official deposition. Together we crossed the [What Can We Do About It] Bridge (Naihe qiao 奈何橋). The weather felt dark as if it was deep winter and about to snow.

The Bridge of What Can We Do About It (Naihe qiao) traditionally stands synecdochically for the underworld. In funerary rituals today the bridge is one of the two main props that are used to represent the underworld, together with the government offices where the various rulers or magistrates of hell reside. These offices are often referred to as a city (*cheng* 城), in the same way as this term is used for the imperial palace complexes or Forbidden City (*zijin cheng* 紫禁城).<sup>19</sup>

We passed through big government offices, with abundant clerks and soldiers. In the two corridors were countless shackled criminals. An officer in purple robes was deciding cases at his desk, so we took the

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<sup>19</sup> On these passages through liminal spaces, see my general discussion in ter Haar, *Ritual & Mythology*, 90–101 and its application to Triad ritual in the following chapter.

deposition that we had written and submitted it. The man in purple robes adjudicated as follows: ‘The said person has served her parents-in-law filially and respectfully, and her lifespan is not yet complete. She should be sent back’. Then we crossed the bridge again. I felt unbearably hungry, so when we encountered someone selling sesame buns I wanted to buy some. My mother said: ‘How could you eat that?’

Adjudication by an official (often King Yama or a similar figure), checking the records on someone’s fate, and then rebirth or in the case of an untimely death someone’s return to life were almost standard occurrences in near-death narratives.

We rested a bit and we encountered scores of people crossing over [the bridge], but saw no one who went back [like us]. I asked my mother about the affairs of the underworld offices, and she replied: ‘Unfilial behavior counts the most, and the crime of killing living beings comes next’. Suddenly we saw a pavilion in the water, with red and white lotuses filling the entire pool. While we were admiring it at ease, it was as if I was pushed by someone behind me. I fell into the water and then came to again.<sup>20</sup>

In modern times the common view has become that the value of filial piety is a ‘Confucian’ value. This particular account does not use this label (obviously, since it is a nineteenth-century Western invention) or a possible equivalent such as ‘Classicist’ (*ru* 儒). Our protagonist, or whoever is reporting this story, does not use the label Buddhism either (again obviously, since this was a very late eighteenth-century invention), but refers to a ritual expert who clearly specialized in rituals to help people to be reborn in the Pure Land. While we might today label these as Buddhist concerns, that would distort the perspective of the above account that merely deals with death and the fear of post-mortem punishment.

As for the activities of the monk from the Lotus Flower Hall, it

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<sup>20</sup> *YJZ, zhiwu* 支戊: 4: 1082

seems to me that possibly, to me that, possibly, the real sequence of events got a bit muddled up in the transmission of this story. Normally, the monk would have done the good work of creating merit through *sūtra* recitation before the woman returned to life, possibly even as part of funerary rituals on her behalf. Below we will see a few examples of the performance of such rituals for rebirth in the Pure Land. Much later ethnographic evidence indicates that such proceedings might even very concretely enact the journey through hell as well as the safe arrival of the deceased in the Pure Land.

Finally, the belief that you are reborn or returned to life by means of a passage through water is very basic to Chinese religious culture. More generally, water was a liminal point between different realms of being. We only need to think of the ancient communications from Heaven in the form of the Writ from the Luo (*luoshu* 洛書) and the Yellow River Chart (*hetu* 河圖), which had appeared from Heaven through the water and contained meaningful cosmological patterns. The role of the lotus flower as a symbol of the watery world of the Heavenly Well in pre-Buddhist lore fits in here too, and indeed the well is a recurrent point of contact between the world of the living and other realms in anecdotal evidence.<sup>21</sup> Interpreted within the traditional Chinese worldview, a pool filled with lotuses was therefore always a connecting point between two worlds. Residing on a lotus leaf in preparation for Buddhahood placed someone in a liminal state in which she or he was neither alive nor dead, because one resided between these worlds and was no longer affected by them.

### The Hope for the Pure Land

All in all, in our evidence the wish for rebirth in the Pure Land functions either as a plot twist or as something to strive or hope for, rather than as something that people expected to happen in real life. This does not mean that the wish for such a rebirth was unimportant. When we look at the colophons for different Buddhist canonical

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<sup>21</sup> Ter Haar, *Ritual & Mythology*, 96–98.

printing projects of the Song and Yuan period, we find frequent reference to the hope of rebirth in the Pure Land in addition to more conventional wishes for good health, long life and such. Such wishes are almost always expressed for deceased family members, Buddhist teachers and others. In the case of the wish for the Pure Land, this is even more true. In a more elaborate version, someone wished that the deceased would have ‘discarded the polluted world of suffering and ascended the pure nation of utmost bliss’ (*she suopo huitu, deng jile jingbang* 捨娑婆穢土，登極樂淨邦).<sup>22</sup> Or more concisely in another example, may they ‘nest high up in the land of bliss’ (*gaoqi letu* 高栖樂土), ‘ascend the realm of lotuses’ (*deng lianjie* 登蓮界) and ‘be reborn directly in the pure regions’ (*jingsheng jingyu* 徑生淨域).<sup>23</sup> This and similar expressions are common, but contrary to what one might expect they do not form the majority. Here there is an interesting difference between colophons for the non-denominational Qisha canon 磧砂藏 and those for the Puning canon 普寧藏 associated closely with the White Cloud tradition. In the first case, far more colophons express a wish for good health and good fortune, which probably reflects the broader socio-religious background of the contributors. In the second case, colophons mentioning Pure Land ideals are much more common, which I take to reflect the activist Buddhist context of its contributors. The White Cloud movement after all is well attested as a major lay Buddhist movement of the Southern Song and Yuan periods, disliked by the state for its ability to dodge land taxes. This kind of socio-economic behavior is in itself also a good indication that at least some of them were prosperous and well-connected enough to make avoiding taxes possible.<sup>24</sup>

Such colophons were hardly an exception. In one inscription from the well-known Southern Grove Repaying the Nation Monastery (Nanlin Baoguo si 南林報國寺) in Wucheng County 烏程

<sup>22</sup> Tekiya, ‘Eiin Sō Sekisha zōkyō bibatsu shū’, 52 nr 9.

<sup>23</sup> Tekiya, ‘Eiin Sō Sekisha zōkyō bibatsu shū’, 54 nr 27.

<sup>24</sup> Ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings*, 32–43 and my subsequent unpublished research in progress on these two canonical projects. On the White Cloud movement, see also Hua, ‘The White Cloud Movement’.



縣 in Huzhou Prefecture 湖州 below Lake Tai 太湖, the connection between death rituals and death donations on the one hand, and the hope for the Pure Land is made very clear. In 1237, a particularly rich local man, who had been a patron of the monastery for many years, made a stupendous donation of thousands of strings of cash as well as a donation of twenty *mu* 畝 with yearly rents in order to pay for ritual objects, pavements, a *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* in 600 scrolls, a range of buildings, statues and wall paintings. In exchange he wishes that they perform a ‘Magnificent Gathering for reciting [the name of the Buddha] of the Lotus Society of Resources for the West’ (*xizi lianshe nianfo shenghui* 西資蓮社念佛勝會) on the death day of his late wife, as well as setting up permanent sacrifices for her spirit tablet in order to let her soul be ‘reborn in the Pure Land’ (*wangsheng jingtu* 往生淨土).<sup>25</sup> Sadly we do not know how common such rituals were, although the above case of a monk from the Lotus Flower Hall performing rituals at someone’s death bed or funeral suggests a similar practice. The fact that such rituals were instituted on a long-term basis implies the deceased was not yet in the Pure Land, but that post-mortem rituals could help people to cross over. We saw a similar approach in several of Hong Mai’s reports of twelfth-century cases in which merit-making rituals served to rescue people from their underworld fates. The Pure Land had clearly long become part of merit-making practices, whether funerary ritual or devout donations. Personal devotions such as recitation or meditation did not play a role here.

Even in lay Buddhist movements that were specifically directed at attaining rebirth in the Pure Land, the fear of the underworld was still very much at the back of people’s minds. Since they wrote more about their religious aims and hopes, it is not easy to construct the full picture of their fears and beliefs. During the Southern Song to Yuan period the most widespread expression of the hope for the Pure Land or Western Paradise was the White Lotus movement, which we can find from the Lower Yangzi region to Jiangxi and northern

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<sup>25</sup> *Liangzhe jinshizhi*, 11: 35b–38a on the monastery itself; *op.cit.*, 11: 38a–39b on the donation discussed here.

Fujian, to as far as Sichuan, Hunan and probably further north as well. They expressed their hope by adopting titles referring to the image of the white lotus flower, but also by naming their religious halls after the Pure Land ideal.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the normative and encyclopedic writings of the White Lotus apologist Pudu 普度 (1255–1330), which go far beyond his own religious movement, we also have a collection of poems put together by a monk called Guoman 果滿.<sup>27</sup> It was entitled ‘A Collection from the Uḍumbara Flower of the Orthodox Tradition of the White Lotus at Mount Lu’ (*Lushan bailian zhengzong tanhua ji* 廬山白蓮正宗曇華集), using the formal name given to the movement during the early fourteenth century. The flowering of the Uḍumbara is taken as an auspicious symbol, but it would carry too far to elaborate all of its symbolic meanings.<sup>28</sup> The booklet collected poems about the Pure Land by some well-known authors as well as a range of anonymous poems. I take the latter to be the product of Guoman himself or other members of the movement.<sup>29</sup>

The poems are much more elaborate than the usual reference to the lotus flower as a seat for those successful in reaching the Pure Land. They betray a certain knowledge of the relevant scriptures and take meditation as the main entry point, rather than recitation of some sort. Thus they reveal some of the more theological discourse with which activist lay believers would have come into contact. The poems are neither original, nor doctrinally sophisticated, but rehash descriptions from the Pure Land *sūtras*.

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<sup>26</sup> Ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings*, 64–113 and ter Haar, ‘Whose Norm, Whose Heresy’. Please note that I take a strict interpretation of the movement, rather than the traditional and now hopefully out of date approach which takes any form of religious divergence as an expression of a single White Lotus Teachings.

<sup>27</sup> Apart from the work mentioned in the preceding note, I look at some of his statements in ter Haar, ‘The White Lotus Movement and the Use of Chan’.

<sup>28</sup> Compare also Yang, *Yuandai Bailianjiao ziliao huibian*, 194, 195, 192, 222, 224. Nothing biographical is known on this author.

<sup>29</sup> Yang, *Yuandai Bailianjiao ziliao huibian*, 204.

靜想西方地現成 Think within yourself of the Western Region, and  
the place will manifest itself.  
金街金道坦然平 Golden streets and roads, flat and even.  
黃金世界黃金布 A golden world, covered in gold,  
步步金光耀眼明 Step after step gold shines, radiating brilliantly in  
your eyes.

Or its description of the lotus pool:

七寶池中功德水 Merit water in the Pool of Seven Precious Stones,  
珊瑚岸上玉闌干 Jade balustrades around the coral shore  
金沙布底珍珠砌 Gold dust covers the bottom, heaps of precious  
pearls.  
四色蓮花任意觀 Lotus flowers in four colors can be seen wherever  
you watch.<sup>30</sup>

No mention is made in the poems of the underworld and the promise of a wonderful future that awaits the devout follower is central.

Of course, at the end of the day the belief in rebirth on a lotus flower was still connected very much to one's fate after death, even if the threat of the underworld was not mentioned. Possibly inspired by this interest, the lay believer Zhou Juexian 周覺先 was put in charge of a grave cloister in Shaowu (northern Fujian) which was specifically established to take care of services for two deceased relatives of the Zhang 張 family. It had received extensive landed properties to provide for the 'maintenance of the Buddha of the Hall to Repay Virtue of the Lotus Society' (*Yanglian she Baode tang fozhe* 養蓮社報德堂佛者) (some time before 1289, when the author of our source died).<sup>31</sup> Zhou Juexian may have been more affluent than an initiated Buddhist monk, although it is also possible that within the local context adherents of the White Lotus movement of that time were seen as more devout and therefore more suitable for merit-making rituals.

<sup>30</sup> The two poems are in Yang, *Yuandai Bailianjiao ziliao huibian*, 206.

<sup>31</sup> Yang, *Yuandai Bailianjiao ziliao huibian*, 250; ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings*, 81 discusses Zhou Juexian as a White Lotus movement adherent.

We do know that members of the movement might engage in more elaborate ritual practices that were normally the privilege of formally initiated Buddhist monks, for example in a group in the Huaixi Circuit where people unsuccessfully performed ‘expulsion and gratitude rituals’ (*rangxie* 禳謝) to prevent two members from receiving karmic punishment.<sup>32</sup>

### Performing the Pure Land

Anecdotal and other historical sources almost never allow a complete view on the religious life of individual people. We can only piece it together in terms of a repertoire of possibilities, and suggest ways in which the Pure Land was often incorporated in a much broader religious world. Here I want to take a huge jump in time to offer a more ethnographic perspective of the way in which the Pure Land was enacted in rituals for the dead, based on fieldwork in the recent and slightly more distant past. Obviously we have no way of knowing whether similar rituals were also performed in the period investigated above using more conventional historical sources, but the ethnographic evidence further confirms that the Pure Land could be imagined as a very concrete place.

Using a broad ethnographic record from the nineteenth and twentieth century, Myron Cohen already pointed out the importance of aiding the deceased’s passage through the underworld. Even though one hoped to send the deceased directly to Amitābha’s Pure Land or Western Paradise, the dominant expectation was that the deceased would nevertheless end up in the courts of the ten kings of purgatory.<sup>33</sup> In that respect, the Song and Yuan evidence

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<sup>32</sup> *Hubei xinwen yijian xuzhi, houji* 2: 188; full translation in ter Haar, ‘Whose Norm, Whose Heresy’, 70. Other examples in ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*, 76 (services to congratulate the emperor), 86 (a member heads a Water and Land Ritual, although it is unclear whether he also carried it out), 88 (penance rituals on a daily basis).

<sup>33</sup> Cohen, ‘Souls and Salvation’.

discussed above merely confirms the ethnographic picture and extends it further back in time. No doubt there have been historical changes and refinements, such as the rise of the lotus pond as a place of setting free life, but the basic structure of the world in which life, death, punishment and rebirth took place, or could be avoided by entering the Pure Land, did not change.

The anecdotal record in which this structure is narrated is extremely rich. Above I have merely touched the surface with some materials from the southern Song and Yuan period. Here I want to discuss just how concretely and dramatically funerary rituals might enact this world, using my own limited fieldwork experience and the much richer experience of my fellow countryman J. J. M. de Groot. In the 1131 account from Poyang County recorded by Hong Mai we already saw how people thought about travelling through this post-mortem world, which invariably included a journey across the What Can We Do About It Bridge, a passage into government offices referred to with the term 'city', and a passage back to life through some kind of watery surface. The Pure Land only made sense to people within this larger non-denominational landscape, symbolized by the lotus pond where those who had been saved resided. Together the city, the bridge (and other kinds of crossings), and the water marked spaces and transitions in the world of life and death, which could be inhabited by demonic (neither alive, nor properly dead) creatures and which were dangerous but could be crossed with the support of a variety of ritual practices.<sup>34</sup>

The most exhaustive description of funerary rituals from the imperial period stems from the late nineteenth century Dutch ethnographer and sinologist J. J. M. de Groot, based on five years of fieldwork that he carried out mainly in the coastal area around Amoy/Xiamen, although he also ventured furthered away. It is contained in a little-known English language conference paper from

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<sup>34</sup> Ter Haar, *Ritual & Mythology*, *passim* analyzes Triad initiation ritual as a journey of death from one's present status towards rebirth as a member of the Hong family of the Triads, using widespread ritual practices and symbolism around birth and death.

1885.<sup>35</sup> By the late nineteenth century at least, one tradition of funerary ritual in the Fujian region was directed at transferring the deceased into the Pure Land or Western Paradise of Amitābha. De Groot describes them as Buddhist masses for the dead and the ritual performers seem to have been Buddhist priests.<sup>36</sup>

De Groot sees the delivery of the soul (his term) as the core of the funerary proceedings, divided into three acts or farces as he calls them. The first is called Beating Hell (*pu diyu* 撲地獄) or Beating the Fortress (*pucheng* 撲城), followed by the Passage over the Bridge (*guoqiao* 過橋) and the Transfer to the Western Region (*zhuan xifang* 轉西方). De Groot describes how these first two acts were carried out accompanied by ritual music and involved extensive theatricals. For the passage to the Pure Land,

[the priests] wind their way in procession between the benches, chairs, and tables in the hall, followed by the children, grand-children, and other mourning kinsmen. At every syllable pronounced, one of the priests strikes with a small stick on a wooden skull (BtH: translating a local term for the wooden instrument better known as *muyu* 木魚 or wooden fish), and another one on a metal urn (BtH: no doubt the common standing bell), in order to enable the praying colleague to keep exact time. Nothing is heard save an uninterrupted repetition of *o-bi-tô, o-bi-tô*, which is the corrupt pronunciation of the name Amita (BtH= Amitābha) in the language of Amoy.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> De Groot, 'Buddhist Masses'. For convenience sake I have transcribed his transcriptions of the local vernacular into the present standard pronunciation.

<sup>36</sup> De Groot, 'Buddhist Masses', 74–75. Important, but unpublished, early fieldwork on the theatrical aspects of funerary practice was carried out by Piet van der Loon (a pupil of de Groot's student J.J.L. Duyvendak) in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Chinese communities all over southeast Asia. His material (photographs, sound recordings, fieldwork diaries in Dutch etc.) is now preserved in the Bodleian Library of Oxford University.

<sup>37</sup> De Groot, 'Buddhist Masses', 94–108 describes the three acts in much more detail than I could summarize here. His transcriptions suggest that they were reciting in the local version of the pronunciation Emituo (see above).

In addition, he mentions that further theatricals were performed on behalf of richer customers, such as the story of Mulian 目連 or Maudgalyāyana.<sup>38</sup>

By and large the ritual structures described by de Groot were still intact one century later.<sup>39</sup> During my own field visits in 1992 and 1993 in Xinzhu 新竹 (Taiwan), the Quanzhou 泉州 region (Fujian), and Hong Kong, I was able to observe the recurring performance of three ritual segments within the much larger funerary proceedings which closely resembled little plays, including melodic musical accompaniment. These segments were visibly popular with their audiences, who emphatically invited me to come and watch. The performers also laughed when performing these particular segments. They were the crossing of the Fire Mountain by ‘the Tang monk’ (*Tangseng* 唐僧) (i.e., Xuanzang), assisted most prominently by his main disciple the Monkey King Sun Wukong 孫悟空; the destruction of the Fortress of Hell; and the journey of the reborn soul of the deceased through the Western Paradise. As Benjamin Brose has shown, the story of the crossing of the Fire Mountain fits into a long tradition of the ritual enacting of the famous ‘Journey to the West’ (*xiyou* 西遊) narrative. This practice both preceded and continued after the completion of the vernacular novel *Journey to the West*.<sup>40</sup>

The enactment of the destruction of the Fortress of Hell (*dacheng* 打城) is a lengthy and highly dramatic performance, that will be well-known to anybody who has studied local ritual traditions in southern China and its overseas communities. Most likely it was not confined to southern China, although the much better ethnographic documentation for those regions might create that impression. During a brief visit to Shanghai in 2013 I was able to observe an enactment of the Destruction of the Fortress of Hell

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<sup>38</sup> De Groot, ‘Buddhist Masses’, 74–75. These performances were still practiced in the late twentieth century, see Dean, ‘Funerals in Fujian’, especially 54.

<sup>39</sup> It was important to do my own field visits, however brief, since most ethnographic descriptions of local ritual leave out the theatrical performances that actually are a crucial part of these events.

<sup>40</sup> Brose, ‘Taming the Monkey’.

in a Daoist ritual to commemorate someone's first annual death day in a Daoist temple in Pudong 浦東, Shanghai. The fortress was represented by small oil lamps. Since this was a short visit between academic obligations, I could not stay long enough to see the entire ritual. In the southern versions that I have seen more completely, the enactment involves the construction of a more or less elaborate fortress of hell with four walls made out of bamboo and paper. Its four gates carry official names, and there is an altar inside. Although the Chinese term is 'city' (*cheng*), this notion can refer to any extended complex of buildings, from palaces and underworld offices to a city in the usual sense of the word. In this particular context it does look more like our Western notion of fortress, and I have left the customary translation of the Chinese term as it is. At the very end it will be burned, which gives the ritual segment its name. The performance includes a long trek through the underworld by a ritual specialist followed by someone carrying the soul flag of the deceased. After a number of rounds around the fortress, the company will encounter a guardian and a humorous dialogue ensues.

Once the deceased has passed through the underworld, it is time for the next ritual segment consisting of his or her triumphant entrance into the Pure Land or Western Paradise. The ascent to the Western Paradise is enacted by a joyous dance by the entire team of ritual specialists carrying pink lotus flowers folded out of paper with small oil lamps inside. After the deceased has been ritually transferred to the Pure Land, the various objects and servants made of paper and other materials that will accompany the deceased to the world of the dead are burned, accompanied by sacrifice, further ritual recitation, and of course musical accompaniment. The journey through the underworld and the ensuing destruction of the Fortress of Hell are always important parts of the overall ritual taking up a considerable amount of time.

Much more could and should be said, especially about the elaborate proceedings around the destruction of hell, but the central point for us here is this: underworld and Pure Land are closely associated with each other in funerary ritual. Of course, many accounts of people can be found who merely obtained a good or bad rebirth, but the two extremes or 'worlds' between which people could arrange the



fates of their next of kin were the world of sentencing and often violent punishment on the one hand, and that of ultimate salvation on the other. Both were very concrete places that could be enacted ritually or described in elaborate narratives. Narratives about someone's successful rebirth in the Pure Land can only become meaningful against the background of this other realm of existence in which the large majority of people ended up or passed through.

### New Ideas about Amitābha

Against this background of centuries of devotional practices around the Pure Land of Amitābha, it is fitting to end this survey with an alternative discourse in which he has been made into a choice of the past, to be succeeded by new saviours. We find this discourse in the scriptures of new religious groups from the late Ming onwards. At the same time, these scriptures provide a fairly detailed and lively view of the Pure Land as their authors and audiences imagined it at the time, in addition to new worlds of their own creation. Without widespread knowledge about this Pure Land ideal this discourse with its mildly ironic tone as we will see, would not have been possible.

Modern scholarship often starts its analysis of the new religious groups and networks of the late imperial and modern period with the figure of Luo Qing 羅清 (fl. early sixteenth century) and his *Wubu sijuan* 五部四卷 [Five Books in Six Volumes].<sup>41</sup> As far as the belief in Amitābha and the Pure Land are concerned, this is not appropriate. Although Luo Qing states in his religious autobiography that eight years of reciting the name of Amitābha did not bring him the insight that he was looking for,<sup>42</sup> he still devotes a whole chapter of one of his five books to rebirth in the Pure Land. In it he lists a number of

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<sup>41</sup> It underlies the structure of both Seiwert, *Popular Religious Movements and Heterodox Sects* and Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*. For an alternative view see ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture* and especially ter Haar, 'Giving Believers Back Their Voice'.

<sup>42</sup> Ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture*, 16–17.

famous figures who ‘went home’, as he referred to it.<sup>43</sup> In this chapter he essentially summarizes the famous *Longshu jingtu wen* 龍舒淨土文 [Longshu’s Treatise on the Pure Land] by the Song lay Buddhist Wang Rixiu 王日休 (d. 1173; alternative name Wang Longshu 王龍舒). It was first published in 1160 and reprinted for instance in 1481, close to Luo Qing’s lifetime. Several of the exemplars referred to by Luo Qing were directly inspired to perform Pure Land devotion by a fear of punishment in hell for their killing of animal life. For Luo too, hell and Pure Land were intimately connected in a single worldview, except that he expected more than mere devotionalist recitation of the Buddha’s name.<sup>44</sup> The main religious movement which would subsequently follow Luo’s writings was that of the Non-Action Teachings. They were widespread over southern China and put their ritual practices entirely in support of the Pure Land ideal rather than any new-fangled messianic ideas.<sup>45</sup>

The metaphor of the Pure Land as a return home to one’s original nature would be taken up by other new religious groups and networks in a very different way. They did so in great detail in a new type of narrative writing that we can trace back with some confidence to the fifteenth century, known as Precious Scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷). One of them was an early sixteenth-century text with the rather cumbersome and hard to translate title *Huangji jindan jiulian zhengxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan* 皇極金丹九蓮正信皈真還鄉寶卷 [Precious Scroll of the August Extreme Golden Pill and Nine-petalled Lotus about True Faith in Taking Refuge in the True and Returning to the Home-region].<sup>46</sup> It would become one of the core scriptures of the Wang family network of religious teachers that started in the early seventeenth century and was only fully eradicated somewhere in the early nineteenth century.<sup>47</sup> The

<sup>43</sup> *Zhengxin chuyi wuxiu zizai juan*. 291–301.

<sup>44</sup> Wang Rixiu 王日休, *Longshu jingtu wen* 龍舒淨土文 (T no. 1970, vol. 47).

<sup>45</sup> Ter Haar, *Practicing Scripture*, esp. 56, 61, 64–65, 120, 123–124, 130–134, 140–145, 171, 225.

<sup>46</sup> A detailed summary can be found in Overmyer, *Precious Volumes*, 136–177.

<sup>47</sup> Ma and Han, *Zhongguo minjian zongjiaoshi*, 549–652 and 888–907 treat

first chapters of this text are devoted to the curious figure of an Amitābha unwilling to leave his perfect residence to start rescuing people.<sup>48</sup>

That time the World-honoured One again told Amitābha that he should not make excuses. See how the flowers in the trees on Shadowless [Mountain] (*wuying [shan]* 無影山) are in full bloom and the flowers in the Nine-petalled Lotus Pond 九蓮池 have opened. It is your turn to be reborn in the world (*chushi* 出世). Amitābha wailed: ‘Your pupil is all alone like an orphan. Who is going to help me? I am unable to make them cross over’.

Somewhat desperate the World-honoured One, who is in fact identified as the Old Mother rather than the more conventional historical Buddha Shakyamuni, follows up with a lengthy speech. He makes Amitābha watch how various saintly figures have planted the seeds of insight in the four gardens, with the theologically inspired names ‘Garden of Welcoming Spring and Sowing Lotuses’, ‘Garden of the Pure Land and Jade Lotus’, ‘Garden of the True Fire and Refining Gold’ and the ‘Garden of Being Reborn Successively and Becoming a Saint’. In these gardens a variety of flowers and trees is cultivated, but the Nine-Petalled Lotus has been neglected. After an intercession by Guanyin, Amitābha’s assistant as well as a powerful Bodhisattva in his/her own right, the World-Honoured One (again referred to as Old Mother at this point) stresses the need to tend this special lotus as well. In the following chapter the reluctant Amitābha gets further help to achieve his evangelical work, and then he leaves this perfect world.

We cannot trace this story in all of its details, since it also connects to developments in messianic thinking that would take us too far

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this network as a separate tradition going back to the *Dragon Flower Sūtra* (*Longhua jing* 龍華經), but actually the *Nine-Petaled Lotus Sūtra* (*Jiulian jing* 九蓮經) and/or *August Extreme Sūtra* (*Huangji jing* 皇極經) are much more relevant. On the network, see Naquin, ‘Connections between Rebellions’ and ‘Two Descent Groups in Northern China’.

<sup>48</sup> *Huangji jindan jiulian zhengxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan*, 878–882.

into another set of worlds, an equally fascinating topic, but I conclude here with part of the speech in which Amitābha expresses his regrets that he now has to leave his wonderful residence.

The Numinous Mountain outside Heaven is my official residence. The immortals and Buddhas play around and make jokes; they have excursions to the gardens of Penglai 蓬萊. Suddenly I heard a Jade Letter arrive to tell me to come to the Jasper Pool Palace in the Purple Offices of the Great August One, ordering me to go down to Jambudvīpa (Nan Zhanbu zhou 南瞻部洲, i.e. the world of the ordinary mortals), making us collect [people with the] dharma. Who would dare to listen sloppily, so after this was said I was silent for much of the day with my eyes filled with painful tears for hours on end. I merely wept until my heart was sour. The heavenly palaces and saintly regions are so tough to take leave from. With my Instructions I left the Numinous Mountain. I took off my heavenly clothes and sash, changing [clothes] from top to bottom. I handed over each item at the Cloud Bowl.

Next follows a long list of the things he has to leave behind, which is yet another description of the wonders of the world of the immortals and Buddhas where he is living.<sup>49</sup> The Numinous Mountain is Gṛdhrakūṭa or Vulture Peak, where the Buddha is said to have revealed a number of important *sūtras*. Cloud Bowl is a further location on that mountain.

In this passage, what we usually label as Daoist and Buddhist elements are completely fused. Amitābha is sent instructions by the Jade Emperor himself (hence the Jade Letter) and he wears heavenly clothes and a sash, evidently not the usual garb of a Buddhist monk. They have outings to the lands of the immortals at Penglai, and so forth. Amitābha is an all-too-human figure here who does not relish the idea that he has to leave all of this behind to enter the world of dust as an ordinary human and preach the dharma. For the readers

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<sup>49</sup> *Huangji jindan jiuilian zhengxin guizhen huanxiang baojuan*, 880 (translated passage).

and listeners of such a text, of course, such a description only underscores just how wonderful this world is where the devout worshipper can go to. That Amitābha shows here a singular degree of attachment in contravention of our expectations of Buddha's or Bodhisattva's hardly needs commenting.

### Concluding Comments

Unavoidably much writing around the Pure Land in Chinese religious tradition has been excluded from this brief contribution. At no point do I wish to deny that this place could also be internalized, but my simple claim is that for most people most of the time, the Pure Land was narrated and ritually enacted as a concrete location. This did not reflect a popular as opposed to an elite view, but was shared on all social and educational levels. Moreover, it was not part of an exclusive Buddhist tradition, but accessed and interpreted within the larger religious culture of traditional China. To understand this place, we need to take this larger culture into account and avoid being distracted by essentializing concepts such as Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism or popular religion. Instead we should turn our eyes and ears (whenever possible) to narrative and ritual practices in which the Pure Land, or rather its lotus pond, was given its own place next to other places in the afterlife, such as the What Can We Do About It Bridge and the Fortress of Hell. Without the underworld the idea of a Pure Land simply made and makes no sense. Against the background of this widespread idea of possible, but also quite unlikely salvation, a new idea came into being as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century or even before, which was that Amitābha had had his best time and that other divine beings would now take over from him. Rather than seeing this as a sign of the decline of Buddhism or the intrusion of those mythical beasts 'popular religion' and 'syncretism', I see this as a sign of ongoing religious creativity, interpreting and changing existing beliefs, stories and practices to create new religious worlds.

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### Abbreviations

- SKQS*     *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu* 景印文淵閣四庫全書. See Secondary Sources, Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan youxian gufen gongsi, comp.
- T*         *Taishō shinsbū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. See Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.
- YJZ*       *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志. See Primary Sources.

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