Abstract

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Over the centuries, Pure Land tradition has evolved into a tradition that was at once diffused into all other schools of Chinese Buddhism and yet had the propensity to be singled out from the rest of this matrix of Mahāyana Buddhist practice as a comprehensive path, discrete onto itself. One point of distinction was its unique soteriology that relocates the remote, impossibly lofty ideal of achieving Buddhahood to the more proximate goal of achieving “rebirth” in the Pure Land of Amitābha through “deathbed salvation.” Received scholarship represents this “reformed soteriology” as a universal and effortless path where mere faith in Amitābha, aspiration to be reborn in his land, and the ritual action of calling on or recollecting his name become the sufficient conditions for deliverance into the Pure Land at the time of death.

Yet, such depictions of the Chinese Pure Land salvation are not without problems. For the most part, received scholarship has formulated this ideal based on centuries of Japanese normative Pure Land studies. Through a historical-critical analysis of two representative Chinese Pure Land tracts and other works such as rebirth hagiographies and Pure Land compendia, this study explicates the rich dimensions of deathbed salvation within the larger, complex Buddhist idiom of karma, various determinants for rebirth, the intermediate state by which the deceased is subjected to undergo, and the ritual practices that can mediate the subject before and after death.
An Introduction on Pure Land Thought and Practice

The term “Pure Land Buddhism” or “Pure Land teaching” (C, jingtujiao; J, jōdokyō) has been part of the analytic repertoire of scholars of East Asian religion since at least the end of the nineteenth century. In its most minimal sense, it can be defined as a devotional orientation to Amitābha Buddha, with the attendant aim of rebirth in the Realm of Highest Bliss to the West (Xīfang jíle shìjiè; Sk. Sukhāvatī), or simply, the Western Pure Land. Although recent scholarship suggests that Amitābha and Sukhāvatī or Pure Land played a more important role in Indian and Central Asian Mahāyāna than hitherto thought, it was not until the Amitābha and Sukhāvatī motif was introduced to China that it began to emerge as a discrete point of devotional and soteriological concern.

The term “Pure Land teaching” (jingtujiao) is itself a product of this historical transformation. First coined in China, the term was introduced to the Buddhist rhetorical field by devotees of Amitābha who were active in North China during the sixth and seventh centuries. Figures such as Tanluan (476-542), Daochuo (562-645), and Shandao (613-681) systematized a discrete theology, soteriology, and system of practices centered on Amitābha and Sukhāvatī, which was in turn differentiated from other forms of Mahāyāna in the name of a
“Pure Land teaching.”¹ Yet, while this development can be said to mark the rise of an identifiable, perhaps even autonomous, tradition of Pure Land practice, this tradition remained a largely diffused devotional movement in China. Only at intermittent points in its history did this culture of Pure Land practice approach the status of an independently organized institution or “school.”²

This situation, of course, contrasts markedly with the history of Pure Land teaching in Japan, where organized sectarian orders such as the Jōdo shū (Pure Land School) and Jōdo shinshū (True Pure Land School) were later established by Hōnen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262) on the basis of Shandao’s works.³ When historical developments of the Amitābha and Sukhāvatī motif are viewed through the lens of these sectarian developments in Japan, “Pure Land teaching” or “Pure Land Buddhism,” as an analytic category, can therefore

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¹ The emergence of a Pure Land path or tradition in Chinese writings also coincided with the so-called panjiao, or doctrinal classification, debate that ensued in late sixth-century China. The works of eminent Buddhist clerics of this era such as Zhiyi (538-597) and Fazang (643-712) are notable for bringing their interpretive and systematizing genius to bear upon sūtras and doctrines that we now associate with the so-called Pure Land tradition. See Mark L Blum, “Pure Land Buddhism as an Alternative Mārga” in The Eastern Buddhist, vol. 27, Spring. 1994: 30-77.


³ The Jōdo shinshū tradition is arguably the best known Pure Land tradition in the West, and its influence reaches beyond its followers into the Buddhist academic field to the extent that scholarly writings on the Pure Land tradition often tend to assume that Jōdo shinshū interpretations of Pure Land history and doctrine are accepted by all devotees of Amitābha.
take on suggestions of institutional and historical autonomy that may not be appropriate to the
setting in China. In this thesis, we will adopt the more minimal definition of “Pure Land
teaching,” not only because it is less conceptually ramified (and, hence, more accommodating
of cultural and social nuances that might otherwise be overlooked), but because it also seems
better suited to the historical situation in China.

Problems and Paradigms: Pure Land Soteriology and the Discourse of “Rebirth through
Simple Recitation of the Buddha’s Name”

Attainment of Buddhahood (chengfo) and the liberation of all beings from the miseries of
cyclic rebirth (samsāra) have always been, at least rhetorically, the professed aim of Mahāyāna
aspirants.4 The majority of Mahāyāna sūtras introduced to China from India and Central Asia
chart this path as an elaborate series of stages and practices,5 completion of which requires a
seemingly limitless number of lifetimes. One of the hallmarks of the distinctive Pure Land
soteriology that took shape in sixth and seventh century China was the translation of this

4 See Schopen, “Sukhāvatī as a Generalized Religious Goal in Sanskrit Mahāyāna Sūtra Literature,” in
5 The perfections or pāramitā, virtues taken to the highest point, of the bodhisattva career are most commonly
listed as six, namely, 1) the perfection of giving or generosity; 2) the perfection of morality; 3) the perfection of
patience; 4) the perfection of diligence; 5) the perfection of mental concentration; 6) the perfection of wisdom. A
list of ten perfections also occurs in Mahāyāna literature, although it appears to have been unknown to the
compilers of the Pure Land sūtras. The ten are the aforementioned six, plus 7) the perfection of skillful means; 8)
the perfection of vows; 9) the perfection of power; 10) the perfection of omniscience.
remote ideal of Buddhahood into the more proximate goal of rebirth in the Pure Land. Quite simply, rebirth in the Pure Land was championed as promising a “speedy” or “instantaneous” (dun) deliverance from the afflictions of samsāra and attainment of what is called “non-regression” (C. butui; Sk. avaivarttika) on the path toward Buddhahood. In short, the full powers of an enlightened bodhisattva and guarantee of future Buddhahood are realized with the simple act of rebirth.

There are three “Pure Land sūtras” that, from at least the late-fifth and early sixth centuries, have served as the locus classicus for Chinese Buddhist discussions of Sukhāvatī and its attendant soteriology of rebirth: the Sūtra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life (C. Foshuo wuliang shou jing; Skt. Larger Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra); the Amitābha Sūtra (C. Foshuo Amituo jing; Skt. Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra); and the Sūtra on the Contemplation or Visualization of the Buddha of Measureless Life (C. Foshuo guan wuliangshoufo jing). Of these three sūtras, scholars generally agree that the Visualization Sūtra did not originate in India but rather evolved into form in either Central Asia or China and is the most recent of these three sūtras. Concerning the dating of the other two, scholarly opinion is divided over which is the oldest. In Japan, Mochitsuki Shinko and Mano Ryukai posit the Amitābha Sūtra as the oldest, while Shiio Benkyo posits the Sūtra of Immeasurable Life (Foshuo wuliang shou jing), T. 12: 269b, 270b, 272b.
Beginning with the likes of Daochuo (562-645) and Shandao (613-681), Chinese Pure Land devotees have routinely distinguished two basic approaches to Buddhahood: the so-called “difficult path of saintly practice” (*nanxing*, *shengxing*) that resorts to “self-effort” (*zili*), and the “easy path” (*yixing*) of rebirth in Sukhāvatī through reliance on the “other power” (*tali*) of Amitābha Buddha’s grace and vow of compassion. The path of “self-effort” was accordingly identified with the gradual scheme of the bodhisattva path received from Indian Mahāyāna treatises. The “easy path” of rebirth in Sukhāvatī (the “Pure Land” path) was synthesized on the basis of the three Pure Land sūtras. Metaphorically speaking, this is often referred to as a “horizontal transcendence” (*hengchao*), as opposed to the vertical path of self-effort, suggesting that one takes a short-cut to enlightenment or Buddhahood by “transcending” literally to the “West.”

Thus a basic division was established between the Pure Land path and the larger field of Mahāyāna thought and practice, with the Pure Land path promising an “effortless” (*yixing*) acquisition of all the merits of the latter through the simple act of rebirth in Sukhāvatī.

However, when joined with the corollary idea of the three periods of the historical decline of Dharma—especially the notion that the current age was itself the “Dharma-ending age” (*mofa*, the oldest. However, a third opinion by Fujita Kōtatsu says that the *Amitābha Sūtra* consists of two different sections. The first half is clearly the oldest, but the second half was added at an unknown time later. He says that the second half is actually a completely different sūtra known as the *Foming jing* or the *Sūtra of the Buddha’s Names*. See Fujita Kōtatsu, *Genshi Jōdo Shinsō no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1970): 206-221, 121-132.

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9 See *Encouragement to Cultivate the Indispensable [Causes of Rebirth in the] Pure Land* (*Quanxiu jingtu qieyao*), W. 109: 924a.
mappō)—rebirth in the Pure Land offered more than just a speedy path to Buddhahood. It offered the only viable path to Buddhahood, in so far as people of the third “Dharma-ending age” were deemed too afflicted and other Buddhist teachings deemed too corrupted to gain salvation by any means other than rebirth in Sukhāvati. Against the backdrop of this constellation of ideas, the question of how to gain rebirth emerges as one of the primary concerns of Pure Land thought.

All three of these so-called “Pure Land sūtras” make the rather striking claim that a person may obtain salvation on the deathbed through recollection of Amitābha’s form or recitation of his name, even after having committed a lifetime of the worst evils imaginable. In two of these scriptures, the Sūtra of Immeasurable Life and the Sūtra on the Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, rebirth is assured with a mere “recollecting or reciting of the Buddha’s name ten times” (shinian) at the moment of death. Thus in the eighteenth of the forty-eight vows recounted in the Sūtra of Immeasurable Life, Dharmākara states (as the aspiring bodhisattva who is destined to become Amitābha Buddha):

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10 According to Buddhist teaching, the continuance of Dharma is divided into three stages: 1) the age of true Dharma, 2) the age of semblance Dharma, 3) the age of demise of Dharma. The demise of Dharma or mofa in East Asia has become the focus of millenarian and hermeneutic views of Buddhist doctrine. The genesis of this idea in connection to the Pure Land tradition is unclear, however, this term does not appear in any one of the three Pure Land sūtras. According to Galen Amstutz, Daochu was the first cleric to link the idea of mofa with Pure Land teachings. See Galen Amstutz, “The Politics of Independent Pure Land in China,” in Journal of Chinese Religions, no. 26, 1998, p. 27.

“May I not take possession of perfect enlightenment… if any among the throng of sentient beings in the ten directions of the universe should whole-heartedly desire to be reborn in my land with joy, faith, and gladness, and if they should bring to mind this aspiration for even ten thought-moments and yet not gain rebirth there…”

The Sūtra on Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life similarly states:

“The sentient beings in the lowest level of the lowest grade of rebirth are those who commit such evil acts as the five heinous crimes and the ten transgressions, and are burdened with various kinds of evil.... When the life of such a wicked person is about to end, this person meets a virtuous and learned teacher who provides various kinds of comfort, expounds the exquisite Dharma, and urges mindfulness of the Buddha. If that person is too tormented by pain to be mindful of the Buddha, the virtuous friend says, ‘If you are unable to be mindful of the Buddha, you should recite the name of and take refuge in the Buddha of Immeasurable Life.’ And so, with a sincere mind and an uninterrupted voice, this person says, ‘Homage to Buddha Amitāyus’ even as few as ten times... the evil karma binding this person to birth-and-death for eight million eons is eliminated... When the lives of such people come to an end, a sun-like golden lotus flower appears in front of them. And in the interval of a single thought-moment, each person will immediately attain rebirth inside a lotus flower in the Realm of Ultimate Bliss.” (emphasis mine)

Passages of this sort became important proof-texts for discussions of the requirements and efficient causes of salvation (i.e., rebirth) in Pure Land circles of China and Japan. Early figures such as Daochuo and Shandao seized on them as a basis for developing their distinctive

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13 The five heinous crimes are: killing one’s mother, one’s father or a saint, wounding the body of the Buddha, or destroying the harmony of the saṃgha —the community of monks and nuns. Ten transgressions are: killing, stealing, being licentious, speaking harshly, divisively or idly, greed, anger, and holding erroneous views.

claim of salvation for all, including the most benighted commoner, through reliance on the all-inclusive “other power” of Amitābha’s original vow and the calling of his name (nianfo). Later Jōdo and Jōdoshin interpretations of Shandao carried this line of thinking a good deal further, to the point where the sūtra passages on the “ten moments” become little more than token expressions of the notion that salvation is assured with a mere moment’s faith in and calling of Amitābha’s name. Viewed in this light, the element of deathbed salvation in the scriptural passages on the “ten moments” tends to be dismissed as largely figurative—a matter of evangelical flair rather than literal concern. Should we, moreover, define “Pure Land Buddhism” narrowly in these terms? Should we define the path of “other power” as a decisive rejection of all forms of practice apart from the simple act of faith in Amitābha and recitation of his name? If so, then any practical concern for passage to the Pure Land at the moment of death, by definition, becomes marginal to Pure Land tradition.

And yet, matters do not seem to have been so simple, even for Shandao himself. Huaigan, a disciple of Shandao, noted the existence of some fifteen different theories regarding the notion of rebirth through “ten moments of recitation or recollection” on the deathbed that

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were in circulation during Shandao’s day, indicating both the widespread importance, yet contested nature, of this concept.\textsuperscript{16} By the same token, Pure Land ritual tracts and hagiographical records from Shandao and his contemporaries show a concern for deathbed salvation and the “ten moments” that goes well beyond a mere figurative reading of these scriptural passages as a guarantee of unconditional salvation.

In his, \textit{Teaching on the Samādhi of Contemplation and Mindful Recollection of the Buddha}, Shandao himself describes a specific set of ritual protocols for helping the dying person to achieve successful deliverance from “evil destinies” and passage to the Pure Land.\textsuperscript{17} Jiacai’s \textit{Treatise on the Pure Land} contains twenty accounts of laymen and laywomen, monks and nuns, who are noted to have shown auspicious signs of successful rebirth at the moment of their death.\textsuperscript{18} On the surface, these accounts of deathbed passage would seem to be little more than colorful testimonies to the fact of universal and unconditional salvation. But on closer inspection, these representations of deathbed passage and salvation betray a complexity and sense of precariousness quite unexpected in the face of such a seemingly simple concept, not to mention evidence of dense ritual structuring.

\textsuperscript{16} For this passage in \textit{Explanations of Numerous Doubts Regarding the Pure Land (Shijingtu qunyi lun)}, see T. 47: 43c-44a.

\textsuperscript{17} The original tract appears in Shandao’s \textit{The Meritorious Dharma Gate of the Samadhi Involving Contemplation of the Ocean-like Marks of the Buddha Amitābha or Dharma-Gate of Contemplation (Guannian Amituofo xianghai sanmei gongde famen)}, T. 47: 24a-c. For an English translation of this text, see Stevenson, “Pure Land Buddhist Worship and Meditation in China,” pp. 377-379.

\textsuperscript{18} See section six in fascicle two of \textit{Jingtu lun}, T. 47: 97a-100a.
More importantly, hagiographical compendia and treatises of Chinese Pure Land devotees from later periods show that this anxiety over deathbed passage and concern for the protocols of deathbed ritual continued unabated, even possibly intensifying as a point of concern in Pure Land thought and practice. When we examine their representations of deathbed salvation, we also find that these anxieties and ritual protocols bearing on proper rebirth intersected deeply with a broader idiom of Buddhist and non-Buddhist beliefs and practices regarding death and the afterlife. Thus deathbed passage seems not only to have been a central concern of Chinese Pure Land devotees; it also was a site where Chinese Pure Land devotees actively and regularly constructed their self-identity in relation to other religious options.

To date, the issue of deathbed salvation as a practical concern of Pure Land devotees in China has largely been overlooked in modern scholarship. The reasons for this oversight are doubtlessly complex. In part, it may reflect a long-standing tendency to map Chinese Pure Land culture in terms of later Jōdo shū and Jōdo shinshū appropriations of Shandao and his thought, a strategy that is not altogether commensurate with the Chinese landscape. At the

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same time, it may also reflect a more generalized tendency to downplay the role of ritual in the
construction and transmission of religious values in favor of an emphasis on canonical texts
and doctrinal systems. Whatever the reason, the conspicuous emphasis on deathbed lore and
protocol among Pure Land practitioners in China, coupled with its equally conspicuous neglect
by modern scholars, commends Pure Land deathbed culture as potentially revealing topic of
study.

Pursuant to these thoughts, this study aims to fulfill two basic objectives: one is to
examine the nuances of thought and practice that shaped the discourse of death, afterlife, and
salvation within which Pure Land notions of deathbed salvation operated; the other, to use this
focus as a point of departure for a critical reevaluation of received notions about Pure Land
culture in China, as well as a basis for broader reflections on the construction of Pure Land
values in the diverse world of Chinese religiosity.

In this thesis I will show that, for the majority of Pure Land devotees in China, the
simple act of faith in Amitābha and calling of his name did not alone guarantee rebirth in the
Pure Land. Pure Land discourses and practices of deathbed salvation operated in resonance
with a range of diverse and, at times, conflicting idioms of death and afterlife, Buddhist as well
as non-Buddhist. As such, the dynamics of deathbed deliverance were not as simple as certain
proof-text passages from the so-called Pure Land sūtras and later representations of received
scholarship on this subject would allow. Using materials that were current to Qing-period
China, I will explore complexities of Pure Land deathbed lore and ritual practice in later imperial China and strive to develop a more historically nuanced understanding of Pure Land soteriology.

A number of questions need to be asked here: Placing Pure Land concerns and deathbed practices within the larger context of Buddhist death and intermediate state lore, and the competing idioms of death, afterlife, and mourning customs from non-Buddhist traditions, what exactly happens to the deceased after death? What are the obstacles, if any, at the moment of death and during the intermediary period, that could hinder rebirth? What are the ritual procedures that assure safe journey to the Pure Land? In this study, I will pay special attention to deathbed dynamics, or relation of Pure Land notions of deathbed salvation, within the larger, complex Buddhist idiom of death and the intermediate state between death and rebirth, the core variables of which include: a) the complex problem of the subjectivity of karmic influences—the karmic subject; b) the “last thought at the moment of death” (lingzhong yinian) as a determining factor for rebirth; c) the Buddhist process of death and the intermediary state to which the deceased is subject; d) and finally, the ritual practices that can mediate both death and rebirth.

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20 Later in this paper I will introduce two idioms of the intermediary state: the psychologistic discourse represented in scholastic Buddhist treatises and the mythic discourse represented by the popular lore of a bureaucratic purgatory. For an excellent study of the historical contingencies for the emergence and developments of the purgatorial realm, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: university of Hawaii Press, 1994; also, see Teiser, “The Growth of
An understanding of Pure Land deathbed salvation as embedded in its larger Chinese cultural milieu, with all of its historical contingencies, ritual protocols, and doctrinal incongruities, requires us to bring a variety of sources beyond Pure Land scriptures (including non-Buddhist works) into our discussion of the cultic and liminal dimensions of death, afterlife, and rebirth in Pure Land thought. I will not only rely on so-called Pure Land sūtras and Pure Land compendia, but also draw extensively from texts current to Buddhist circles in later imperial China that bear on the subject of discussion. These compendia are chosen because they themselves were widely reproduced as authoritative sources by later generations of Pure Land devotees. Further, they contain a discrete set of tracts on the subject of deathbed lore, which demonstrate the ongoing importance of this concern for deathbed salvation among Pure Land devotees and, as authoritative sanctioned statements on that subject, they also provide an important key to unpacking the complex religious concerns and idioms that bear on Pure Land views of death and its negotiation.

In this study I will draw in particular on two tracts for my analysis, namely, *Correct Mindfulness for Rebirth at the Moment of Death* and *Essential Words as Oars for the Deathbed Journey*. While they are by no means representative of the full range of these doctrinal and liminal issues through which the Pure Land tradition is understood and practiced in late imperial China, they circulated widely among Qing-period devotees and demonstrate the

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complexities of deathbed salvation and rebirth in several significant ways. In short, these tracts undermine the simplicity of received scholarly representations of Pure Land soteriology.

First, these works are of interest to this thesis because they reflect the primacy of rebirth in the Pure Land, both in terms of its soteriology and of the actual ritual concerns of everyday Chinese Buddhists. Second, these works are of historical importance for the role they played in the formation and transmission of the complexity of Pure Land rebirth ideology. These two tracts not only represent a sustained concern for correct management of deathbed ritual in Pure Land literature of all varieties, but also constitute the emergence of a fairly succinct set of distinct texts that was continually being reproduced in late Pure Land works. Third, and most important, they illustrate complex issues at play in the dying process, contrary to received scholarship’s simplistic ideas of merely having faith in the power of Amitābha Buddha and reciting his name as sufficient causes of rebirth.

The first tract, purportedly produced during the Tang but probably dating from the end of Tang era or the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960), is called *Correct Mindfulness for Rebirth at the Moment of Death (Lingzhong zhengnian wangshen wen)*.\(^{21}\) It is taken from *Mirror of Reciting the Buddha’s Name (Nianfo jing)*,\(^ {22}\) a work attributed to Daojing and Shandao. Although this work was not produced in late imperial times, its relevance lies in the

\(^{21}\) For *Correct Mindfulness for Rebirth at the Moment of Death (Lingzhong zhengnian wangshen wen)*, see T. 47:133a-b.

\(^{22}\) *Mirror of Reciting the Buddha’s Name (Nianfo jing)*, see T. 47: 120a-133c.
fact that it was reproduced repeatedly in subsequent Pure Land compendia right up late imperial China.

The second tract is a Qing dynasty (1644-1912) work called *Essential Words as Oars for the Deathbed [Journey] (Lingzhong zhouji yaoyu)*.\(^{23}\) This tract is attached as an addendum to a larger mid-nineteenth century compendium entitled *Encouragement to Cultivate the Indispensable [Causes of Rebirth in the] Pure Land (Quanxiu jingt u qieyao)*,\(^{24}\) attributed to Zhenyi Yuan, about whom nothing seems to be known except his name connected with this text. Translations of these two tracts are appended at the end of this study.

The chapters of this study altogether comprise six sections, excluding the introduction and the translation of the two Pure Land tracts. Each of the six sections will deal with specific topics extrapolated from the two translated tracts. The introduction highlights the problems of received scholarship’s representation of the Pure Land tradition and stipulates my approach to this study. The first section will introduce the textual history and reproduction of the two tracts and summarize the main points therein, raising issues that provide a framework for discussion in subsequent sections. The chapters from section II onward take up various topics that bear on analysis of the content of the two deathbed tracts. They include such issues as Buddhist images of death and reincarnation, conflicting idioms of the afterlife as expressed

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\(^{23}\) For *Essential Words as Oars for the Deathbed [Journey] (Lingzhong zhouji yaoyu)*, see W. 109: 928a-929b.

\(^{24}\) For *Encouragement to Cultivate the Indispensable [Causes of Rebirth in the] Pure Land (Quanxiu jingt u qieyao)*, see W. 109: 911a-929b.
through the “bureaucratic purgatory” and the “psychologistic model” of the intermediary state, the prognostication of various “signs” pertaining to death and rebirth, and the ritual practices of death in late imperial China. Finally, section VII contains a translation of Essential Words as Oars for the Deathbed [Journey] and Correct Mindfulness for Rebirth at the Moment of Death.

Before we proceed to a discussion of topics, it is important to consider some methodological issues.

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Deathbed salvation in the Pure Land tradition is more complex than the received scholarly representations of the subject allow. It is important first to note that Chinese beliefs and practices about death and afterlife are in general multi-vocal, and difficult to delineate. Seen properly, as embedded in the larger Chinese cultural discourses and practices, Pure Land deathbed salvation is even harder to discern with absolute clarity. In studying any cultural forms, it is a mistake to ascribe categories such as “popular” beliefs and practices versus “orthodox” ones, or to delineate where the beliefs and practices of one religious tradition begin and those of another end. Binary categories such as elite/folk, text/ritual, and popular tradition/orthodox tradition are too simplistic. For example, recent scholarship on various dimensions of Chinese culture has shown that elements of Buddhist and other belief systems infuse and interactively emerge from one another, and that various accepted cultural practices
cannot be uniquely ascribed to one particular tradition or social class. Such socially complex practices as those concerning death and afterlife in the so-called “three teachings” (sanjiao) of “Confucianism,” “Daoism,” and “Buddhism,” not to mention the diffused practices of local Chinese religion, cannot be treated as unilaterally distinct from one another or equal in cognitive presence and valence.

To objectify Chinese beliefs and practices about death and afterlife as corresponding indexically to unchanging cultural entities such as “Buddhism”, “Daoism”, and “Confucianism”—much less to equate them as one and the same— is to exclude from serious consideration the complexities that attended the complex cultural performances of death and afterlife (the political, ethical, economic, and ritual dimensions) as constructed in people’s actual lives. While some persons might have high cognitive investments in Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucian idioms, for others, such categories held little significance. Thus one could say that, for many, the failure of these assorted beliefs and practices regarding “death and afterlife” to strike any clear connection with a discrete religious tradition was possibly the defining feature of death and afterlife culture in China.

Second, while there was always polemical rhetoric between “right” and “wrong” beliefs and practices about death within different traditions, it is to be expected that the general

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populace would have in mind a picture of what happens after death that is less ramified and
totalized than those of systematized representations of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian
professionals. It is difficult to evince the extent to which the textually derived (especially in
high Buddhist and Daoist works), socially practiced, and politically sanctioned images of death
and afterlife actually play themselves out in the imagination of the people in late China. For
example, some scholars have argued, based on interdisciplinary approaches, that performances
of death rituals are central to definitions of a collective Chinese “cultural identity.” They
usually emphasize the underlying “uniformities” and ritual variations in late imperial (Qing)
and modern eras. The possible shortcoming of drawing conclusions on the basis of
anthropological and sociological models is the failure to take into the account historical
contingencies and local variants in Chinese culture. In the case of Buddhism, although its
discourse on death and afterlife has always encompassed divergent understandings of practices
associated with the broader non-Buddhist idioms of death and afterlife, it nevertheless contains
major incongruities that are reflective of the presence of different doctrinal and symbolic
motifs within this larger field of discourse on death. We will return to this point later.

Third, it is also difficult to construct a neat understanding of this subject by singling out
certain “texts” in history, an approach which essentializes aspects of practice in a given
historical community and period by lifting certain literary “masterworks” out of context of

26 See James L Watson *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China.*
their production. Texts always function within a ritualized “discourse” or discourses.\footnote{Discourse here refers to the (contending political and institutional) fields in and through which texts are produced. As a concept, it is wider than specific “texts,” it operates at the level of the enablement of texts. As noted by literary scholars, discourses are never easily observable but only approachable through their effects just as, in a similar way, grammar can be said to be “at work” in particular sentences, governing their construction but never fully present “in” them. See Francis Baker and Peter Hulme’s “Nymphs and Reapers Heavily Vanish: The Discursive Con-texts of The Tempest,” in New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A Reader, ed Kiernan Ryan (London, New York, Sydney, Auckland: St. Martin’s Press Inc., 1996): 125-137.} Further, all texts emerge as both products and shapers of some human situation. In connection to the Pure Land discourse of death, afterlife, and rebirth, a religious text’s authority or sacrality is not based on inherent characteristics, such as its status as a “sūtra,” but is realized historically in the life of religious communities and people who respond to it as something authoritative and sacred. Furthermore, these communities are constantly involved in a seamless interaction with the larger mainstream community. It is through these points of view that we can get a glimpse of the sorts of questions that are—and are not yet—being raised in modern scholarship on the Pure Land tradition.

Since the sources I am working with are mostly textual, I will employ a historical-critical analysis for my study. Attempts will be made to present the beliefs, practices, events, communities, and individuals in relation to both their time and their place synchronically in a socio-historical climate in relation to the subject of this study. Occasionally, when relevant anthropological and ethnographic sources that bear on the subject are available, they will be incorporated into my analysis.
I. The Range of Issues in Pure Land Literature

Writings with a dedicated focus on Amitābha and rebirth in the Pure Land began to appear as early as sixth century. By the time of the end of the Song Dynasty (1279), we find a fairly stable and conventionalized set of genres that continued to typify literary production of Pure Land devotees throughout the later imperial period. Those genres include commentaries on the Pure Land sūtras, compendia of hagiographies and deathbed accounts of Pure Land devotees (otherwise known as “rebirth tales”), ritual manuals for Pure Land practice and worship, and a type of general compendium or anthology that included expository tracts on a range of points bearing on Pure Land belief and practice, usually arranged by sub-topic.

The concern for protocols of deathbed ritual and signs of successful rebirth at the time of death is, in many respects, central to all these genres. However, it becomes a discrete point of exposition especially in the topical anthologies. Beginning with Wang Rixiu’s Expanded Pure Land Tracts from Longshu and Zongxiao’s Tracts on the Land of Ease and Succor, Topically Arranged, we find a steady stream of Pure Land anthologies of this sort produced through later periods, all of which assorted tracts on deathbed practice, oftentimes grouped into a specific section of that title. Buddhist clerics and lay practitioners produced such compendia

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28 For Expanded Pure Land Tracts from Longshu (Longshu zengguang jingtu wen) see T. 47:251a-289c.
both to firm up their own perceived orthodox traditions and respond to various historically specific religious and social issues bearing on Pure Land practice. However, as a rule, these authors did not compose the entries for these anthologies on their own. They typically modeled their compendia on organization of existing works, and drew their contents from tracts of earlier authors, at times reproducing them wholesale from other anthologies. Thus, in many respects, works such as Wang Rixiu’s *Expanded Pure Land Tracts from Longshu* and Zongxiao’s *Topically Arranged Tracts on the Land of Ease and Succor* had a paradigmatic impact on the development and continuing production of this anthology genre, including its emphasis on the sub-topic of deathbed practice. With this continuing attention to deathbed lore and continuing reproduction of a select body of tracts bearing on deathbed protocols, these anthologies were both the product and purveyors of a discrete discourse of Pure Land deathbed practice in later China.

I have chosen eight representative Pure Land compendia from the Song (960-1279), Yuan (1279-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911) periods to use as a basis for my discussion of Pure Land deathbed discourse (Table 1). The table below is designed to demonstrate the continuity of textual reproduction over time, giving particular attention to the role it played in the officialization of a select group of tracts as authoritative statements on

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deathbed practice. The top row of the Table shows the names of the eight compendia and the years published. The left column contains an inventory of the deathbed-related tracts contained in each anthology. The numbers (e.g., 1, 2, 3) in the boxes in the middle section of the Table show the order in which the particular tract in the left column appears in the compendium but do not reflect the exact sequence of their appearance in the respective compendia—some of the compendia do not have a special section on the theme of deathbed lore, and the works that do reflect such concerns are interspersed along with other unrelated tracts. For this reason, the numbers only pertain to those tracts that actually reflect deathbed concerns. Under each number is an entry indicating the exact location in either the Taishō or Wanzi xuzangjing canons.