

## **Innovation and Continuity in the Pure Lands: Pure Land Discourses and Practices at the Taiwanese Buddhist Order Dharma Drum Mountain\***

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### **Abstract**

Historically, pure land notions and practices have played an important role in Chinese Buddhism. Yet very little research has been done with regard to their contemporary role. This article tries to fill this gap by examining different concepts and practices of pure land at a contemporary Taiwanese Chan Buddhist group, Dharma Drum Mountain (DDM). It is based on extensive fieldwork, examination of DDM's publications, and the writings of the organization's founder, Ven. Shengyan.

Pure land is at the crossing point of three distinctive discourses at DDM: (1) Modernist notions of the pure land on earth developed in the twentieth Century, (2) Amitabha related pure land practices like *nianfo* which are very popular with the laity and provide assistance in dealing with the universal problem of death, and (3) mind-only understandings that mediate the tensions between the two on a doctrinal level.

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I aim to assess how these discourses are negotiated and integrated by a variety of human actors who act in a particular historical context. Hereby I hope to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the forces that are producing contemporary forms of Buddhist religiosity in Asia.

**Keywords:**

Pure Land, Contemporary Chinese Buddhism, Dharma Drum Mountain, *Renjian* Buddhism, Taiwanese Buddhism

## 淨土的承先與啟後 ——臺灣法鼓山的淨土主張與修行

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### 摘要

在中國佛教史上，淨土的信仰與修行扮演相當重要的角色。然而，卻少有研究探討其在當代佛教中的地位。為了填補這個空缺，本文以田野調查方式研究當代臺灣禪宗道場法鼓山的淨土思想與修行方法，以及分析其出版的文宣和創辦人聖嚴法師的著作。

法鼓山的淨土論述有三種：（一）二十世紀發展而成的「人間淨土」概念；（二）阿彌陀佛的「西方淨土」實踐，如居士中流行的念佛法門與臨終關懷；（三）在教義上調和前兩種概念的「唯心淨土」。

本文主要是評估在特定歷史背景下的人們，是如何結合這三種淨土思想的層面。據此，希望能夠更全面地理解在亞洲產生佛教信仰當代形式的因素。

### 關鍵詞：

淨土、當代漢傳佛教、法鼓山、人間佛教、臺灣佛教

There are about two hundred people in a room on the tenth floor of a modern office building in a business district of Taipei City. Most sit on the floor on meditation mats. A few people, mostly elderly, sit at the sides and in the back of the hall on simple chairs. The fragrance of Chinese incense, the dim light, and the Buddha statues in the front of the room create a solemn and peaceful atmosphere. Two nuns enter the room and bow to the statues. One takes a seat in the first row; the other goes to the front of the room. She welcomes the visitors, and then proceeds by giving a brief introduction to the ensuing practice. After she ends, the participants rise, bow to each other, and then face the Buddha statues for three prostrations. The sound of chanting arises. The participants start with a praise of the Buddha Amitābha, a short repentance, the three refuges, and a vow to be born in Amitābha's western Pure Land and to transfer the acquired merit. Next the assembly begins to recite monophonically praises to the Buddha Amitābha. Accompanied by the sound of a wooden fish and a bell, they begin to circumambulate in a serpentine fashion among the sitting mats.

The scene above describes the beginning of a group session for the practice of reciting the Buddha's name, or *nianfo* 念佛共修 (hereafter *nianfo* group practice). It is held on a weekly basis at most of Dharma Drum Mountain's 法鼓山 (hereafter DDM) temples and practice centers in Taiwan. DDM is one of the four largest Chinese Buddhist organizations on the island. The organization identifies primarily as a Chan Buddhist order. Its founder, Ven. Shengyan 聖嚴 (1931–2009),<sup>1</sup> has not just inherited the two surviving lineages of Chan, Caodong 曹洞 and Linji 臨濟, but even united them in 2006 under a new school, the Dharma Drum Lineage of Chan 中華禪法鼓宗.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Shengyan and his organization are also associated with the movement known as *renjian fojiao* 人間佛教, or “Humanistic Buddhism” (hereafter referred to as *renjian* Buddhism<sup>3</sup>), a modernist form of Buddhism, developed out of the endeavors of Buddhist reformers, such as Taixu 太虛

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<sup>1</sup> Shengyan was born on 22 January 1931. Due to the differences between the Gregorian calendar, the official Chinese calendar, and the Chinese lunar calendar, some sources state his birth year as 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Literally, the Chinese Chan Dharma Drum Lineage. For an in-depth examination of Shengyan's formation of the Dharma Drum Lineage, see Jimmy Yu, “Revisiting the Notion of *Zong*.”

<sup>3</sup> *Renjian fojiao* 人間佛教 is often translated by its adherents as “Humanistic Buddhism”; however, in English the term “humanistic” contains strong connotations of Renaissance humanism. In order to clarify the distinction between the two, I have adopted the romanized Chinese term.

(1890–1947) and Yinshun 印順 (1906–2005), which aimed to correct Chinese Buddhism’s perceived overemphasis on death and the otherworldly by presenting a version of the tradition that focuses more on the living.

Yet despite these evident links with Chan and *renjian* Buddhism, various concepts and practices centered on Amṭābha and his western Pure Land of Sukhāvātī also play a vivid role at DDM and in the writings of its founder. They are not only present with regard to Amṭābha-related practices centered on rebirth, as could be seen above, but also to be encountered in the organization’s maxim: “Uplifting the Character of Humanity and Building a Pure Land on Earth” 提升人的品質，建設人間淨土。<sup>4</sup>

This article aims to contribute to a better understanding of the role of Pure Land<sup>5</sup> in contemporary Chinese Buddhism by examining the presence of different understandings and practices of Pure Land at the Taiwanese/Chinese Buddhist organization Dharma Drum Mountain and in the thought of its founder Shengyan.<sup>6</sup> I intend to ascertain where at DDM Pure Land notions

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4 There is no consistent English translation for *jianshe* 建設 at DDM. “To create,” “to establish,” and “to build” are all used as translations in DDM publications.

5 In this article “Pure Land” written with a capital “P” and a capital “L” is used when referring to concepts and practices that relate to Amṭābha and his land of Sukhāvātī, while “pure land” (small “p” and “l”) is used when referring generically to the Mahāyāna pure lands.

6 This article is based on extensive fieldwork and an examination of a wide variety of textual material. To attain data on the ground, I conducted fieldwork at several branches of DDM in Taiwan. On March 17, 2012, I attended my first *nianfo* group practice at the main DDM monastery at Jinshan 金山. Since then I have attended *nianfo* practice at other DDM branches, including DDM Anhe Branch Cloister 安和分院 in Taipei on a weekly basis during the fall semester of 2013–2014. In spring of 2015, I attended a *nianfo* retreat 清明報恩佛七 at Nongchan Monastery 農禪寺 and audited a class on Pure Land taught by Ven. Guojing 釋果鏡 at the Dharma Drum Buddhist College 法鼓佛教學院 (DDBC). To obtain a broader picture of the organization I also participated in a wide range of other activities: I visited the organization’s temples, centers, and monasteries all over the country; participated in Chan meditation classes for foreigners as well as for Taiwanese; attended one-day, three-day and six-day Chan retreats and Outdoor Chan classes. I attended dharma assemblies and repentance ceremonies, as well as conferences and a camp that introduced monastic life to college students. In addition, I visited other Buddhist groups in Taiwan in order to have a frame of reference with which to compare DDM. Attending these activities has given me countless opportunities to participate in informal conversations with participants, volunteers, and monastics at DDM. I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with both the leading volunteer

and practices are mobilized doctrinally, in the form of concrete religious practice, and on the institutional level. What different understandings exist regarding concepts such as the western Pure Land of Amitābha as a place of rebirth after death, the modernist project of constructing a Pure Land on earth, and further possible Chan approaches to Amitābha-centered practices and concepts of Pure Land? How, if so, are these understandings and their respective practices mutually related and what does their function at DDM entail?

This article examines one particular approach to Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism by looking at the issue from different angles. It considers both the writings of Shengyan and additional publications of DDM, as well as interviews and ethnographic data collected on the ground. A religious organization as complex in size and form as DDM is shaped by a variety of disparate elements, including texts and rituals, religious and non-religious ideas and doctrines, religious and social practices, and traditions and modern innovations. These elements are negotiated and integrated by a variety of human actors within a particular political and historical context.

By choosing Pure Land as a point of entry to this complexity, I want to show how these diverse elements are intertwined and how their relationship plays out within the context of a rapidly changing contemporary society. Hereby I hope to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the forces that are producing contemporary forms of Buddhist religiosity in Asia.

This article is structured as follows: The first part provides a background by discussing the role of Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism. Special attention is paid to its relationship with Chan, lay Buddhism, and the transformations that occurred in the Chinese Buddhist world of the twentieth century. The next section first considers Shengyan in regards to these changes, and then turns to Pure Land in his writings. In the third section, the founding of DDM and its relationship to the concept of the Pure Land on earth are examined. In the final section, based on ethnographic data, the distribution of concepts and practices related to the western Pure Land ‘on the ground’ at DDM is examined.

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in charge of the End-of-Life Chanting Group, and with Ven. Guojing 釋果鏡, director of the Chan Culture Research Center 禪文化研修中心主任 at Dharma Drum Buddhist College and an expert on Shengyan’s Pure Land thought.

## Pure Land in Chinese Buddhism

The concept of a “pure land” and its related religious practices have a very long history in China, dating back to the beginnings of Chinese Buddhism.<sup>7</sup> Although there is not just one, but many pure lands mentioned in the Chinese Buddhist sūtras, the most popular one by far—the Pure Land, *par excellence*—came to be Buddha Amitābha’s western pure land of Sukhāvātī or “Highest Bliss” (Chinese, *jile jingtu* 極樂淨土). According to traditional Chinese Pure Land teaching, mentally recollecting Amitābha and/or calling his name (*nianfo*) ensures that the faithful escape the cycle of rebirth in the six realms of our world and are instead reborn in Sukhāvātī, the western pure land of Amitābha, where conditions for Buddhist practice and rapid progress to buddhahood are considered to be ideal. Amitābha-related Pure Land practices came to be linked closely to notions of an afterlife and Chinese death-related cultural practices.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Chan, Pure Land teaching and practice does not constitute an independent school, in the sense of—as Daniel Getz puts it, by developing Stanley Weinstein’s definition—possessing “a discrete self-contained doctrinal system, a continuous lineage, and/or some form of institutional autonomy.”<sup>9</sup> The Pure Land patriarchal lineage is a social construction, which is attributed retrospectively and does not emphasize a teacher-disciple lineage relationship.<sup>10</sup> Historically, Pure Land notions and practices were always a generic part of Buddhist practice in China. *Nianfo* practice, faith in Amitābha, and the so-called Pure Land sūtras are common features of all Chinese Buddhists schools.<sup>11</sup> Hence, practicing *nianfo* in a Chan monastery, as described in the beginning of this article, is not an invention of today.

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<sup>7</sup> Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China,” 320.

<sup>8</sup> Stevenson, “Death-Bed Testimonials of the Pure Land Faithful,” 592. Andrews, “Lay and Monastic Forms of Pure Land Devotionalism: Typology and History,” 19.

<sup>9</sup> Getz, “T’ien-t’ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate,” 477. For Weinstein’s definition, see: Weinstein, “Buddhism, Schools of: Chinese Buddhism,” 484.

<sup>10</sup> Yü Chün-fang, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Chu-hung and the Late Ming Synthesis*, 37. Chen Jianhuang, “Jindai queli lianzong shisan wei zushi de jingguo jiqi shiyi.”

<sup>11</sup> Sharf, “On Pure Land Buddhism,” 282–331.

On the contrary, the dual practice of Pure Land and Chan dates back at least to the tenth century. Traditionally, syncretic forms of Chan and Pure Land are traced back to Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽 (904–975), a Chan monk with strong leanings toward Huayan teaching.<sup>12</sup> Yongming Yanshou combined these different perspectives by developing the theory of “mind-only pure land” (*weixin jingtu* 唯心淨土).<sup>13</sup> Mind-only pure land deemphasizes the actual physical existence of the Pure Land by identifying Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land with the purified mind of intrinsic awakening. If one completely purifies one’s mind and apprehends its intrinsically enlightened nature through Buddhist practice, one attains the Pure Land.<sup>14</sup> This idea is based on a concept from the *Weimo jing* 維摩經 (*Vimalakīrti Sūtra*): When the mind is purified, the buddha lands will be purified.<sup>15</sup> Yet despite his gravitation to this more philosophical “mind-only” understanding of Pure Land, one that would become particularly popular in later Chan circles, Yongming Yanshou—just like Shengyan about one thousand years later—also promoted the more literal notions of Pure Land as a concrete destiny of future rebirth.<sup>16</sup>

From the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) on, Buddhist monastics teaching the dual practice of Chan and Pure Land became a common phenomenon.<sup>17</sup> The Ming in particular came to be an era renowned for synthesis and syncretism not only among Buddhist traditions, but also between Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Ming Dynasty Buddhist discourses and practices continue, in turn, to be very influential in contemporary Han Chinese Buddhism. However, not all Buddhists took the inclusive path. While some Chan monks criticized Pure Land as overly simplistic, other Buddhists, like Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610), Jixing Chewu 際醒徹悟 (1741–1810), and Yinguang 印光 (1862–1940), were highly critical of the non-literal Chan approach and stressed the actual existence of the Pure Land as a place to be reborn after death.<sup>18</sup> These Pure Land apologists, as Charles B. Jones calls them, insisted that literal belief in the Pure Land is not merely intended as a simplistic

12 Yü Chün-fang, *Renewal of Buddhism*, 48.

13 Shih Heng-ching, *The Syncretism of Ch’an and Pure Land Buddhism*, 153.

14 Shih Heng-ching, *Syncretism of Ch’an and Pure Land*, 146.

15 *Weimojiesuoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經, T 475, 14: 538c5.

16 Shih Heng-ching, *Syncretism of Ch’an and Pure Land*, 151.

17 Mochizuki, “Pure Land History in China: A Doctrinal History, Chapter 1,” 101.

18 Jones, “Apologetic Strategies in Late Imperial Chinese Pure Land Buddhism,” 69.

expedient means for the uneducated masses, but, on the contrary, a teaching that is in accord with the highest truths of Buddhist philosophy.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, Pure Land was mostly perceived to be less demanding than other forms of Buddhist religious practice, and therefore considered to be particularly suitable for lay Buddhists.<sup>20</sup> Lay Buddhist organizations, which existed in China from at least the time of the Tang Dynasty (618–907), developed a close link to Pure Land practices during the Song dynasty (960–1279).<sup>21</sup> The devotional characteristics of Pure Land practices were seen as particularly appropriate for the religious needs of the non- or semiliterate masses.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, the Pure Land societies founded by Zhili 知禮 (960–1028), for example, consisted of not only elite males, but also included people from all social strata and both genders.<sup>23</sup> During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), lay Buddhist societies continued to flourish,<sup>24</sup> while Pure Land teachings came to be followed by an even larger number of lay Buddhists.<sup>25</sup>

In the modern era, the famous monastic Yinguang—and later, in Taiwan, his influential lay disciple Li Bingnan 李炳南 (1891–1986)—advocated reciting the Buddha’s name as the most appropriate Buddhist practice for the current age. According to them, as to many of their predecessors before them, the Dharma-ending age (*mofa* 末法) was deemed to have arrived, and the only secure way to attain liberation was through a firm belief in the buddha Amitābha and the practice of reciting his name.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, it was just this highly literalist approach to Amitābha and rebirth in Sukhāvātī that came under critique by Buddhist reformers such as Taixu and Yinshun. Like many Chinese intellectuals of the time, Taixu, Yinshun, and others perceived Buddhism in China to be in a state of decline. As currently taught, Buddhism was seen as having deteriorated from its original state by becoming escapist and overly emphasizing the otherworldly. Such tendencies were thought to be a hindrance to the development of a new and modern China.

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19 Jones, “Apologetic Strategies,” 72.

20 Andrews, “Lay and Monastic Forms of Pure Land Devotionalism,” 19.

21 Yü Chün-fang, *Renewal of Buddhism*, 75.

22 Stevenson, “Pure Land Buddhist Worship and Meditation in China,” 360.

23 Getz, “T’ien-t’ai Pure Land Societies,” 496.

24 Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism*, 33.

25 Mochizuki, “Pure Land History in China,” 102.

26 Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 115–19. For a Chinese discussion of Yinguang’s life and thought, see: Chen Jianhuang, *Yuantong zhengdao: Yinguang de jingtu qihua*. See also Yu Lingbo, *Xiandai fojiao renwu cidian*, 1: 284c–288b.



Internally, within Buddhist circles the common practice of some monastics to perform rites for the dead in exchange for money was criticized.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the Buddhist reformers promoted *renjian* Buddhism—or “Humanistic Buddhism”—that diminishes otherworldly elements within received Chinese Buddhist tradition in favor of a modernist version of the religion. They called this Buddhism *renjian* Buddhism, thereby emphasizing that it was in the human realm, rather than the realm of gods and spirits, where the Buddha achieved his enlightenment and turned the wheel of Dharma. *Renjian* Buddhism, therefore, ought to be more affirmative of worldly matters and contribute to society.<sup>28</sup> One of the key concepts Taixu developed for *renjian* Buddhism was the notion of a Pure Land on earth.<sup>29</sup> This concept incorporated notions of a Maitreya’s abode and “pure land” in the Tuṣita Heaven, as well as many utopianist elements—including socialist, Marxist, and anarchist—that were popular at the time. Deemphasizing the understanding of the Pure Land as a place to be reborn after death, *renjian* Buddhists now taught that the actual world at hand ought to be transformed into a pure land.

Of course, one might expect that merging traditional Pure Land Buddhist understandings into the modernist concept of a “pure land on earth” would cause tensions with the proponents of the more literal and traditional understanding of the western Pure Land as a place of rebirth. This tension became especially apparent when the *New Treatise on the Pure Land* 淨土新論, a book based on Yinshun’s 1951 lectures in Hong Kong, and a critical examination of Chinese Pure Land devotion, was published.<sup>30</sup> Unlike Taixu, whose critique reflected the political and philosophical debates of the time but was doctrinally still rooted in traditional Chinese buddhology, Yinshun approached the topic from a Madhyamaka perspective, promoting a rational

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27 Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, 197–202.

28 Travagnin, “Yinshun’s Recovery of Shizu Piposha Lun,” 324. See also: Ritzinger, “Anarchy in the Pure Land,”

29 Shi Taixu, “Jianshi renjian jingtu lun,” 349–430.

30 Shi Yinshun, *Jingtu xinlun*, 1–76. For a Chinese study of the *Jingtu xinlun* see: Jiang Canteng, *Taiwan dangdai jingtu sixiang de xin dongxiang*. In addition, see Yang Huinan, *Dangdai fojiao sixiang zhanwang*, especially p. 21. For an English discussion, see: Jones, *Buddhism in Taiwan*, 124–133. For a German work on the issue, see: Bingenheimer, “Der Mönchsgelehrte Yinshun und seine Bedeutung für den Chinesisch-Taiwanesischen Buddhismus des 20. Jahrhunderts,” 102. For a thorough English examination of Yinshun’s Pure Land thought, see Travagnin, “Yinshun’s Recovery of Shizu Piposha Lun” and “Master Yinshun and the Pure Land Thought.”

understanding of the emptiness as the basis of the bodhisattva path. He argued that many Pure Land followers wrongly overemphasize Amitābha and fail to consider the many other pure lands described in the Buddhist sūtras.<sup>31</sup> In addition, he even suggested that the cult of Amitābha developed historically out of the Zoroastrian sun god Ahura Mazda. Li Bingnan and his followers were so outraged by Yinshun's book that the resulting controversy caused Yinshun, who had by then moved to Taiwan, to retire from his post at the Buddhist Association of the Republic of China (hereafter BAROC). The BAROC was the national Buddhist organization in China which had relocated from the mainland to Taiwan. It was the central link between the ruling Nationalist Party *guomindang* 國民黨 (KMT) and the Buddhist world of Taiwan. As a result of the incident, in which the BAROC came to be under the influence of the conservative faction of the Buddhist saṅgha, debate over the notion of a pure land on earth ceased for several decades. However, during the process of Taiwan's transition from military rule to an open society during the 1980's, a new generation of Buddhist reformers, including Foguangshan's 佛光山 founder, Ven. Xingyun 星雲, Ciji's 慈濟 founder, Ven. Zhengyan 證嚴, and, of course, Shengyan, strongly revived the discussion of modernist approaches to Buddhism in general, along with Pure Land. Today, although various Pure Land concepts and practices continue to exist, *renjian* Buddhism and the concept of the pure land on earth represent the mainstream of Taiwanese Buddhism.

### Shengyan and the Buddhist Reformers

This is the background to be considered if we now turn to Shengyan's approach to Pure Land. Shengyan was exposed to the reformist ideas of Taixu almost from the very beginning of his monastic career. As early as 1947, he enrolled at Jing'an monastery's Buddhist Seminary 靜安寺佛學院, where his teachers were second-generation disciples of Taixu.<sup>32</sup> Taixu had advocated the establishment of Buddhist seminaries in order to enhance the education of

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<sup>31</sup> For the differences between Yinshun's and Yinguang's approaches to Pure Land, see Chen Jianhuang, "Yinshun daoshi yu Yinguang dashi de jingtu guandian bijiao: yi 'qili qiji' yu 'chengming nianfo' wei hexin."

<sup>32</sup> Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 63.

the saṅgha. The promotion of education played a crucial role in the development of a modern Chinese Buddhism.<sup>33</sup>

After he relocated to Taiwan, Shengyan also met with Yinshun, Taixu's influential disciple who, like many other monastics, left the mainland after 1949.<sup>34</sup> Inspired by the Buddhist reformers, Shengyan's early writings accordingly came to focus on Taixu, Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), and Yinshun, as well as their ideas about modernizing Buddhism.<sup>35</sup> Like them, Shengyan perceived Chinese Buddhism of his day to be in a state of decline,<sup>36</sup> with Buddhists lacking a basic understanding of Buddhist concepts, and Buddhist monastics focusing mainly on conducting rituals for money. At the same time, however, he was also convinced that Buddhist rituals, such as reciting sūtras and repentance ceremonies, constitute a vital part of the tradition. Shengyan proposed a Buddhism that aims to benefit society, is based on sound Buddhist doctrine, and also provides rituals as a method of practice and guidance.<sup>37</sup> Hence, despite having a strong inclination towards reformist interpretations of Chinese Buddhism,<sup>38</sup> Shengyan also led his first seven-day *nianfo* retreat 佛七 as early as 1960, which provides an early example of Shengyan's inclusive approach towards his religion.<sup>39</sup>

Differing from Yinshun, Shengyan had a more "ecumenical" approach towards traditional Chinese Pure Land teaching, simultaneously valuing faith in the Buddha and the historical study of Buddhist concepts.<sup>40</sup> The Taiwanese historian of Chinese Buddhism Jiang Canteng (Chiang Tsan-teng 江燦騰)

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33 For an in-depth study of the role of Buddhist seminaries in the modernization of Chinese Buddhism, see: Lai Rondao, "Praying for the Republic: Buddhist Education, Student-Monks, and Citizenship in Modern China (1911–1949)."

34 Shi Shengyan, *Journey of Learning and Insight*, 39.

35 Shi Shengyan, *Journey of Learning and Insight*, 43.

36 Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 128.

37 Shi Shengyan, *Journey of Learning and Insight*, 43–46.

38 Yu, "A Tentative Exploration into the Development of Master Sheng Yen's Teachings," 6.

39 Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 3, and *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 3. Both mention Shengyan leading a seven-day *nianfo* retreat at Dongshansi 東山寺 in Pingdong County. However, this is not mentioned in Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*; instead, Lin writes that Shengyan participated in a seven-day *nianfo* retreat at the Zhonghua fojiao wenhua guan 中華佛教文化館 in Beitou right before his second ordination. Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 117.

40 Shi Shengyan, *Journey of Learning and Insight*, 40.

suggests that Shengyan's perspective was of a more practical nature, taking into account the differences between an academically-minded audience and one consisting of pious believers.<sup>41</sup> Yet it was not traditional Pure Land but Chan that came to play a key role in Shengyan's life and teaching. After Shengyan moved to New York, although he participated at a seven-day *nianfo* retreat in January 1977, his time in the US was mainly characterized by a shift towards Chan.<sup>42</sup> A year before, in 1976, Shengyan received dharma transmission in the *caodong* Chan lineage from his teacher Dongchu 東初 (1907–1977), making him a 51<sup>st</sup> generation dharma heir in the Caodong line.<sup>43</sup> Only two years later he received dharma transmission in the Linji Chan tradition from Lingyuan 靈源 (1902–1988), thus becoming a dharma heir of both of the two extant Chan lineages.<sup>44</sup> Shengyan's transformation into a Chan master was additionally occasioned by his encounters with several young Americans who wished to learn meditation.<sup>45</sup> When he arrived in the United States, Japanese Zen was at the height of its popularity. So Shengyan, when asked, seized the opportunity and began to teach Chinese Chan. However, as Jimmy Yu states, for Shengyan, “Chan Buddhism was merely a gateway front for him to reconstruct a more effective form of Chinese Buddhism for the modern world.”<sup>46</sup>

Meanwhile, back in Taiwan, Shengyan still continued to conduct *nianfo* retreats. In 1982, the Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society 福慧念佛會—the organizational body for *nianfo* practice—was established at Nongchan Temple 農禪寺,<sup>47</sup> the predecessor of DDM. Around the same time, Shengyan began to lead annual seven-day *nianfo* retreats in Taipei.<sup>48</sup>

### Pure Land in Shengyan's writings

Shengyan was a prolific writer who left an impressive oeuvre. His writings, academic and non-academic, cover a variety of topics, including Buddhism, Christianity, and comparative religion, the vinaya, the *Āgamas*, and, most of

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41 Jiang Canteng, *Taiwan dangdai jingtu sixiang de xin dongxiang*, 43.

42 Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 291.

43 Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 297.

44 Lin Qixian, *Shengyan fashi qishi nianpu*, 325.

45 Yu, “Tentative Exploration,” 11.

46 Yu, “Tentative Exploration,” 11.

47 Hu Muin, *Sharing Dharma Drum Mountain*, 170.

48 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 3.

all, Chinese Buddhism. Regarding Chinese Buddhism, he occupied himself especially with the developments of the late Ming Dynasty and, of course, Chan. If we compare the number of books Shengyan wrote about Chan with those about Pure Land, we have to recognize that a strong emphasis is laid on the former. No fewer than twenty-four of Shengyan's 102 collected works concentrate on Chan, compared to only one book explicitly about Amitābha and the western Pure Land.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the Pure Land appears at many places in Shengyan's writings. Below we will first examine the texts in which the western Pure Land occupies a prominent place. Since it is impossible to cover all of Shengyan's writings on the topic, I will consider mainly those aspects that I perceive to be particularly important for this article: Chan and the western Pure Land, the role of faith for Pure Land Buddhism, and the relationship of the western Pure Land to the concept of building a pure land on earth.

Shengyan's early writings that touch upon traditional forms of Pure Land teaching and practice include his doctoral thesis, which is a study on the life and work of the Ming Dynasty master Ouyi Zhixu (1599–1655);<sup>50</sup> and a book-length general overview of late-Ming Buddhism.<sup>51</sup> In addition, there are two shorter pieces: an article published in 1983, “Jingtu sixiang zhi kaocha” 淨土思想之考察 (Examination of Pure Land thought); and a little booklet entitled *Nianfo yu zhunian* 念佛與助念 (*Nianfo* and deathbed *nianfo*). The former article discusses different Pure Land concepts in the Buddhist sūtras, while the latter is addressed to a more popular audience. The one book by Shengyan that focuses exclusively on Pure Land, published in 1997, is titled *Nianfo sheng jingtu* 念佛生淨土 (*Nianfo* in order to be born in, or to create, a Pure Land). It is mainly directed to practitioners, but also discusses the characteristics of different pure lands described in the sūtras. Another book, published posthumously in 2010 and not part of Shengyan's collected works—*Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen* 聖嚴法師教淨土法門 (Master Shengyan teaches the Pure Land approach to the Dharma)—is a compilation of talks Shengyan gave while leading nianfo retreats. Additionally, on display at most DDM centers in Taiwan is a little booklet aimed at visitors entitled *Amitufo yu jingtu famen* 阿彌陀佛與淨土法門 (Amitabha and the Pure Land approach to the Dharma), which mainly consists of excerpts from his

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49 Yu Junfang (Yü Chün-fang), “Shengyan fashi yu dangdai hanchuan fojiao,” 40.

50 Reprint of the Chinese translation: Shi Shengyan, *Mingmo zhongguo fojiao zhi yanjiu*.

51 Shi Shengyan, *Mingmo fojiao yanjiu*.

previously mentioned 1997 and 2010 works. Throughout his writings, Shengyan stresses the compatibility of Chan and Pure Land in Chinese Buddhist history.<sup>52</sup> According to him, Chan and Pure Land approaches are both part of orthodox Buddhism.<sup>53</sup> For him, they are not opposites, but just different approaches, or doorways to the Dharma, which lead to the same goal: liberation from suffering.<sup>54</sup> Yet there exists a hierarchy between them. Ven. Guojing 果鏡, director of the Chan Culture Research Center 禪文化研修中心主任 at Dharma Drum Buddhist College and an expert on Shengyan's Pure Land thought, writes that Shengyan "applies Chan practice as the core approach for delivering sentient beings, with recitation of Buddha's name as a supportive means."<sup>55</sup> Shengyan looks at Pure Land from the stance of Chan. He hence differentiates between a Chan and a Pure Land approach to nianfo practice. The main difference between the two is an emphasis or de-emphasis on objects outside of oneself. Applying the Pure Land approach, one requires a miraculous response from Amitābha in order that one may be reborn in his Pure Land. Therefore, one strives visually to see/imagine the appearance of Amitābha or to contemplate the concept of him. On the other hand, the Chan approach foreswears any active effort to seek a miraculous response from Amitābha as a power outside of oneself, but instead enjoins practitioners to concentrate single-mindedly on just reciting the Buddha's name. Even if one were to achieve a vision of any kind, one should not pay attention to it.<sup>56</sup> The two methods are superficially identical: the practitioner circumambulates the Chan hall in a serpentine fashion, steadily reciting Amitābha's name. After a while he or she sits down on the meditation mat and continues to recite even faster, until in the end, the sound is dropped, and recitation only continues in his or her mind. The key difference with the more overt Pure Land approach to nianfo appears to lay in the motive behind the practice. In one case, the practitioner directs his or her efforts to Amitābha in the hope to gain something: rebirth in the Pure Land, merit for a deceased family member, or a personal vision of Amitābha; in the other, the practitioner must abandon all expectations and just completely absorb him or herself in the method. Thus the Chan approach, though seemingly identical on the surface, in fact differs

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52 Shi Shengyan, *Zen Wisdom: Conversations on Buddhism*, 8.

53 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 187.

54 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 188.

55 Shi Guojing, "Shengyan fashi jingtu sixiang zhi yanjiu," 110.

56 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 196.

in its intention. The methods are the same, but the goals to which one aspires differ.<sup>57</sup>

Shengyan links the Chan approach to *nianfo* to the figure of Huineng 慧能 (638–713), the sixth patriarch of Chan. For Shengyan, Huineng’s famous quote about *nianfo* in the *Platform Sūtra* which he loosely paraphrases as, “People from the East recite the Buddha’s name to be born in the West, but people from the West recite the Buddha’s name to go where?” does not necessarily mark the patriarch as a critic of Pure Land practice, but illustrates his more advanced (Chan) understanding of that very practice. Thus, according to Shengyan, people are endowed with different karmic roots or capacities, and those with lower karmic roots as well as those with more developed karmic roots can all practice the Pure Land method; they just differ in their attitude and approach to it. For most people, the Chan approach is more difficult, because it does not involve strong faith in the literal existence of a western Pure Land, therefore making it easy to give up one’s practice. Hence for beginners, Shengyan recommends practicing the recitation of the Buddha’s name with a Pure Land approach, maintaining a strong faith in Amitābha’s vows and in the literal existence of the western Pure Land.<sup>58</sup>

The importance of faith is emphasized in the so-called Pure Land sūtras. The three main sūtras traditionally connected with Pure Land are the *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經 (*Amitābha Sūtra*), the *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 (*Measureless Life Sūtra*), and the *Guan wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽佛經 (*Sūtra on the Visualization or Contemplation of the Buddha of Measureless Life*). According to Shengyan, Chinese Buddhists, especially since the early modern period, have tended to give preference to the *Amitābha Sūtra*, which stresses that single-mindedly reciting the buddha’s name 一心不亂 is a requirement for obtaining rebirth in the western Pure Land.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the *Measureless Life Sūtra*, which is the most popular of the three sūtras among Japanese Pure Land schools of Buddhism, emphasizes faith in Amitābha’s other power and his vows. Interestingly, Shengyan prefers the Japanese approach. He argues that if a practitioner does put all of her or his focus on verbally reciting the Buddha’s name to ensure her or his rebirth in the western Pure Land, she or he is in danger of completely neglecting all worldly affairs.<sup>60</sup> Thus, Shengyan differs here with the Chinese tradition. While he

57 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi jiao jingtu famen*, 197.

58 Shi Shengyan, *Fojiao rumen*, 253.

59 *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經 T 366, 12: 347b12–13.

60 Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 17.

advocates absorbing oneself in the practice of *nianfo* during retreats, he doesn't recommend doing so in general, thereby combining religious concerns with modern worldly ones. In order to contribute to society, one has to avoid an escapist attitude. This view, in addition to a perception of faith as modern, or suitable for the modern age, might have been influenced by nineteenth and twentieth century criticisms of Buddhism. As mentioned above, Chinese intellectuals blamed Buddhism for being responsible for China's backwardness and perceived the saṅgha as only being involved in rituals conducted for personal financial gain. Protestant missionaries, supported by Western forces, proselytized aggressively during this era. Together with reformist Chinese intellectuals, they criticized Buddhism as being superstitious and escapist.<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, (Protestant) Christianity was presented as world-affirming, modern, and concerned with charity. *Renjian* Buddhism can be understood as a response to these criticisms. I suggest that stressing faith as an element, which prevents escapism and reconciles religious practice with the requirement to contribute to society, may very well be a reflection of Shengyan's historical experience.

Accordingly, the modernist notion of a Pure Land on earth, with its focus on contributing to society, plays a much more central role in Shengyan's writing than the western Pure Land. When Shengyan founded DDM in 1989, he proposed the maxim: "Uplifting the Character of Humanity and Building a Pure Land on Earth." The idea of building a pure land on earth was not first conceived by Shengyan, but is also central to other *renjian* Buddhist groups, and in fact, as discussed above, can be traced back to Taixu and Yinshun.<sup>62</sup> Shengyan began to promote the concept of a pure land on earth relatively late in life—he was almost sixty when he founded DDM—yet he had been influenced by Taixu and Yinshun when he was much younger.<sup>63</sup> As early as the 1950s, he began to advocate a more this-worldly Buddhism that contributes to society. He writes in an article in *Humanity* in 1957:

To leave the world is the aim of studying the Buddha dharma, but to enhance the world is a measure towards this end. [...] To beautify the life of humanity is the foundation of the Buddhist pure lands, the

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61 Fisher, "Buddhism in China and Taiwan," 70.

62 Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang de shijian yu hongyang," 158.

63 Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 160.



Buddhist pure lands [at the same time] are the manifestation of the beautification of the life of humanity.<sup>64</sup>

For Shengyan, the enhancement of the world is the first step towards the ultimate goal of liberation. In another article a month later, he expresses himself in even more specific terms. He recommends Buddhist practice, and particularly upholding Buddhist precepts, as a means to construct a pure land on earth, which again he regards as a step towards achieving the ultimate goal: liberation from the three realms.<sup>65</sup> Thus, by the late 1950s, Shengyan had already linked traditional and modernist notions of Buddhism. But it would take Shengyan until 1982 to elaborate on the concept in detail in an article called *Jingtu sixiang zhi kaocha* 淨土思想之考察 (Examination of Pure Land Thought).<sup>66</sup> From that time on, the concept would appear regularly in his writings.<sup>67</sup>

If one compares Shengyan's earlier publications with those published since the 1990s, one can see that most of his views are unchanged. However, there exist some important differences: In *Jingtu sixiang zhi kaocha*, Shengyan describes a threefold model of Buddhist pure lands, which he develops into a fourfold model in later works. The following section mainly focuses on the model in his his previously mentioned 1997 and 2010 works. This fourfold model also links the concept of a pure land on earth to the western Pure Land. According to that system, Shengyan describes four different understandings of the term "pure land": (1) The pure land on earth—literally, the human realm pure land 人間淨土, (2) the heavenly pure land 天國淨土, (3) the buddha-realm pure land 佛國淨土, and (4) the inner pure land of one's own mind 自心淨土.<sup>68</sup> (1) The pure land on earth is present right here in our world, or, to use a Buddhist term, in our Sahā World 娑婆世界. Even though the main characteristic of the Sahā World entails the existence of suffering and cyclic birth-and-death, as long as one person practices the Dharma, one is able to see the pure land. If one's mind is still because of one's practice, one experiences the pure land on earth.<sup>69</sup> Here

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64 Quoted from: Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 163.  
離開這個世界是學佛的目的，建設這個世界才是學佛的手段。……美化人生是佛國淨土的基礎，佛國淨土是美化人生的表現。

65 Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 163–64.

66 Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 165.

67 Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 165–68.

68 Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 25–36.

69 Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 25–26.

Shengyan clearly demonstrates that he understands the pure land on earth in mind-only terms.

(2) The heavenly pure land refers to the Chinese threefold division of the world into the hells (or earth prisons), earth, and heavens. Humans attain admission to the heavens by dint of their good karma. But their residence is only temporary. After a certain time, when one's good karma is exhausted, one eventually sinks back into the lower realms. An explicitly Buddhist kind of heavenly pure land is the palace 内院 of the future Buddha of our world Maitreya 彌勒佛 in Tuṣita Heaven 兜率天.<sup>70</sup> (3) The third kind of pure land corresponds to the buddha-realm pure lands mentioned in the Mahāyāna sutras. Although, as mentioned above, there are unlimited pure lands throughout the ten directions, as described in scriptures such as the *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (Avatamsaka Sūtra), the pure land most karmically linked to our world system is the western Pure Land of Amitabha, Sukhāvātī.<sup>71</sup> Sukhāvātī is the actual pure land spoken of in the Pure Land sūtras. Rebirth in this specific pure land of Sukhāvātī is the main goal of traditional Chinese Pure Land practice. (4) Lastly, there is the inner pure land of one's own mind. Since we all possess buddha nature, the mind of every being, every person, (in its pure/purified state) is identical with the buddha's mind 佛心即是自心. If one actualizes his or her buddha nature, one sees our Saḥā World as itself identical with the pure land.

Similar to the first notion, the fourth notion is based on the concept of mind-only pure land, which, as we have seen above, is commonly traced back to Yongming Yanshou. If one completely purifies one's mind through Buddhist practice, one attains the Pure Land.<sup>72</sup> This idea in turn is based, as we have noted, on a concept from the *Weimo jing* 維摩經 (*Vimalakīrti Sūtra*): "When the mind is purified, the buddha lands will be purified."<sup>73</sup> Hence, just like Yongming Yanshou before him, Shengyan, despite possessing a more philosophical and figurative understanding of the Pure Land, nevertheless also promoted literal notions of the Pure Land as a place of rebirth gained through devotion to Amitābha.<sup>74</sup> In order to harmonize literal and mind-only conceptions, he applies his fourfold pure land rubric. The pure land on earth constitutes the starting point for the other three. It is to be realized in our

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<sup>70</sup> Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 28–29.

<sup>71</sup> Shi Shengyan, *Nianfo sheng jingtu*, 29–31.

<sup>72</sup> Shih Heng-ching, *Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land*, 146.

<sup>73</sup> T475, 14: 538c.

<sup>74</sup> Shih Heng-ching, *Syncretism of Ch'an and Pure Land*, 151.

world at hand, the Sahā World-realm. This is achieved through the extended range of Buddhist practice, which includes faith in Amitābha and *nianfo*. The highest goal is the inner pure land of one's own mind. However, once reached by the practitioner, she or he will realize that, in fact, the inner pure land and the pure land on earth are actually one and the same. In other words, the pure land on earth simultaneously serves as an *upāya* or "expedient means," and as the ultimate goal to which that *upāya* aspires.

By the same token, the pure land on earth also provides the frame of reference for DDM's activities in their entirety. Shengyan aims to establish a pure land on earth by uplifting the character of humanity through the promotion of Buddhist values and practices, such as Chan meditation, *nianfo*, the Buddhist precepts, etc.<sup>75</sup> Though many of these practices, especially Chan meditation, had been historically reserved for monastics, Shengyan began to popularize them as a means to improve society.<sup>76</sup> Above we could see that in his early writings of the 1950s, Shengyan mainly stressed the Buddhist precepts as a way in which the laity could contribute to the betterment of society. In a later phase, Shengyan recommends the whole range of Buddhist practices, including *nianfo* but with a special emphasis on Chan meditation, as the means for lay individuals to build a pure land on earth.

## The Establishment of Dharma Drum Mountain

In 1989, the foundation for Shengyan's late work was laid with the founding of Dharma Drum Mountain. Shengyan explicitly stated that he established Dharma Drum Mountain as a means to establish a pure land on earth.<sup>77</sup> To realize such an ambitious goal, Shengyan had to reach a wider audience than he did with his activities as a Chan teacher. Thus, from the late 1980s on, Shengyan's focus shifted from Chan to the field of education.<sup>78</sup>

Yet Shengyan understood education in a very broad sense; it includes academic forms of education, as well religious education through formal Buddhist practice and education of the general public through public outreach

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<sup>75</sup> Shi Guojing, "Shengyan fashi jingtu sixiang zhi yanjiu," 79.

<sup>76</sup> Jiang Canteng, *Zhanhou Taiwan hanchuan fojiao shi*, 116. For Shengyan's role in the popularization of Chan, see: Li Yuzhen, "Chanxiu chuantong de fuxing yu dongxi jiaoliu," 7–34, especially 29.

<sup>77</sup> Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi xuesi licheng*, 46.  
我自己在台灣創立「法鼓山」，目的是在「建設人間淨土」。

<sup>78</sup> Yu, "Tentative Exploration," 29.

campaigns. These campaigns, like the “Four Kinds of Environmentalism 四種環保,” the “Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign 心五四,” and the “Six Ethics of the Mind 心六倫 Campaign” are aimed at a non-Buddhist general public.<sup>79</sup> Dharma Drum quotes Shengyan on one of their English web sites:

The intention of building a pure land on Earth is not to move the pure lands of the Buddhas in other parts of the universe to Earth, nor does it set out to manifest on Earth of today the scenery of pure lands as described in the Amitabha Sutra, the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Akshobhya Buddha’s Land Sutra, and the Sutra of Maitreya’s Descending to Our World. Instead, it applies the concepts of the Buddha dharma to purify people’s minds, and applies the exemplary lifestyle of Buddhists to purify our societies. By means of purifying our thoughts, life, and minds and by putting in step-by-step, persistent endeavor, we work to achieve the purification of the social and natural environment.<sup>80</sup>

As we can see here, Shengyan does not aim to transform the world into a replica of Sukhāvātī, the Pure Land of Amitābha, but his vision is to improve the world through the notion of purification. It is based on the assumption that the human mind is polluted and by purifying the mind one can purify society.<sup>81</sup> DDM strives to achieve this vision through the promotion of Buddhist values and practices directed towards both Buddhist and non-Buddhist audiences.<sup>82</sup> At the core of DDM’s campaigns are the Threefold Education 三大教育<sup>83</sup> program and the concepts of Spiritual Environmentalism 心靈環保.<sup>84</sup> By looking at the Threefold Education program, we can get an idea of the full range of activities provided by DDM to practically create a Pure Land on earth.

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79 Lin Qixian, “Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang,” 177.

80 “Thought and Ideas,” Shengyan official website, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://old.shengyan.org/e\\_content/content/about/about\\_02\\_1\\_1.aspx](http://old.shengyan.org/e_content/content/about/about_02_1_1.aspx).

81 Shi Shengyan, *Shengyan fashi xinling huanbao*, 24–25.

82 *1089–2001 Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 10. Hereafter, *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*.

83 *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 52–55.

84 *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 14.

The Threefold Education program was defined by Shengyan in 1994.<sup>85</sup> It consists of (1) academic education 大學院教育; (2) public Buddhist education 大普化教育; (3) and social care education 大關懷教育. The first aspect (1) refers to the establishment of secular and Buddhist universities, and to the fostering of scholarly researchers on Buddhism and leaders in various other fields rooted in the value system of DDM. In comparison to other large renjian Buddhist organizations in Taiwan, such as Ciji and Foguangshan, Dharma Drum developed relatively late. To ensure its access to the religious market in Taiwan, Shengyan singled out the field of education as DDM's unique characteristic. Shengyan employed the reputation he earned by receiving his PhD from an overseas university to promote the establishment of Dharma Drum College of Humanities and Social Science. If Chinese Buddhism was to prosper, it had to improve the education of the laity and the saṅgha. Thus, Shengyan successfully linked the future destiny of Buddhism with the development of his own organization.

This strategy turned out to be immensely effective, especially from 1989 to 1992. Unfortunately, when the Ministry of Education granted four Buddhist institutions the right to establish colleges in 1992, DDM was not one of them.<sup>86</sup> It took another six years, in 1998, for the Ministry of Education to approve the application to establish the Dharma Drum College of Humanities and Social Science.<sup>87</sup> In 2007 DDM also established Dharma Drum Buddhist College, a Buddhist university program providing undergraduate, graduate, and PhD education in the field of Buddhist studies. On July 28, 2014, the Ministry of Education agreed to the merging of the Dharma Drum College of Humanities and Social Sciences and the Dharma Drum Buddhist College into the newly-formed Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, which started its classes in the fall term of 2015.<sup>88</sup> Additionally, in 2001, the Buddhist Seminary of Dharma Drum Saṅgha University was founded.<sup>89</sup> It provides a systematic education for DDM's growing monastic community.

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85 "Thought and Ideas," Shengyan official website, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://old.shengyan.org/e\\_content/content/about/about\\_02\\_1\\_2.aspx](http://old.shengyan.org/e_content/content/about/about_02_1_2.aspx).

86 Jiang Canteng, *Renshi Taiwan bentu fojiao*, 110.

87 Hu Muin, *Sharing Dharma Drum Mountain*, 181.

88 For a Master's thesis about the Dharma Drum Buddhist College, see Tuzzeo, "Education, Invention of Orthodoxy, and the Construction of Modern Buddhism on Dharma Drum Mountain."

89 *1089–2001 Fagu shan nianjian: dashiji*, 267.

The second (2) aspect, public Buddhist education, refers to formal Buddhist practice for the laity. It consists of Chan meditation classes, Chan retreats, seven-day nianfo retreats, nianfo group practice, repentance ceremonies, and Dharma assemblies. Furthermore, it includes cultural activities such as publishing, media production, and the organization of exhibitions.<sup>90</sup>

Finally, (3) extensive social care education refers to social services, disaster relief work, and service for the terminally ill. To this end, the DDM Social Welfare and Charity Foundation was established in 2001.<sup>91</sup> Of the second and third forms of education, seven-day *nianfo* retreats, *nianfo* group practice, dharma assemblies, and service for the terminally ill all bear connections to Pure Land teachings and practices centered on Amitābha and Sukhāvātī, and will be discussed in more detail in the last part of this article.

All the activities described above are based on Shengyan's concept of Spiritual Environmentalism (*xinling huanbao* 心靈環保). In 1992, DDM launched the Spiritual Environmentalism campaign.<sup>92</sup> This campaign constitutes the main conceptual foundation of DDM, a foundation that remains in place to this day. Shengyan chose to use non-Buddhist language in his articulation of this concept in order to reach a broader Taiwanese public. The English term "environmentalism," as well as the Chinese expression "*huanbao* 環保," are both reminiscent more of the contemporary discourse of eco-protection than of Buddhism. Seth Clippard, whose doctoral dissertation focuses on the Buddhist use of this rhetoric,<sup>93</sup> describes Shengyan's interpretation of the term Spiritual Environmentalism as simply "the practice of Buddhist meditation and ethics."<sup>94</sup>

Clippard suggests a bifurcation in Shengyan's usage of the term: a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist contemporary interpretation. Starting in the 1980s, and due to Taiwan's rapid development, environmental pollution became a pressing issue in contemporary Taiwan. As a result,

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<sup>90</sup> *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 54.

<sup>91</sup> "Origin," DDM Social Welfare and Charity Foundation, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://charity.ddm.org.tw/main/page\\_view.aspx?mnuid=1327&modid=228](http://charity.ddm.org.tw/main/page_view.aspx?mnuid=1327&modid=228).

<sup>92</sup> Lin Qixian, "Shengyan fashi renjian jingtu sixiang," 177.

<sup>93</sup> Clippard, "Protecting the Spiritual Environment: Rhetoric and Chinese Buddhist Environmentalism."

<sup>94</sup> Clippard, "Protecting the Spiritual Environment," 312.

environmentalism became a popular concept in the public discourse.<sup>95</sup> Shengyan took advantage of the popularity of the term to promote Buddhist concepts. He aimed to use contemporary language to represent sound Buddhist doctrine in order to make it applicable and reach a wider, not exclusively Buddhist, audience.<sup>96</sup> Thus, depending on the target audience, Shengyan phrased his concepts very differently. When talking about environmental protection, for instance, he recommends that Buddhists start with purifying one's mind through Buddhist practice and then go further to purify one's environment; for non-Buddhists, he advocates for starting with protecting the material environment and then eventually going to the spiritual level.<sup>97</sup>

However, I would submit that Shengyan used non-Buddhist language not only to reach a non-Buddhist audience, but that he also applied the notion of a pure land on earth in order to promote the modernist project of *renjian* Buddhism to a more traditional Taiwanese Buddhist audience. Unlike Yinshun, he talked about the Pure Land on earth not as a corrective for a supposedly degenerated traditional Pure Land practice, but in an inclusive fashion which allowed both approaches to coexist.

Although not many Buddhists in Taiwan explicitly identify with Pure Land as a discrete teaching or school, lay people and monastics who practice *nianfo* can be found everywhere.<sup>98</sup> Thus, by urging Buddhists in Taiwan to construct a pure land on earth, without devaluing traditional mainstream Buddhist Pure Land practices associated with Amitābha, those very practices are linked to the modernist project of *renjian* Buddhism and its goal of correcting an overly escapist Buddhism by contributing to society. Shengyan achieves this link doctrinally through the recourse to mind-only notions. As long as one practices Buddhism, through meditation, *nianfo*, or any other orthodox practice, one is able to experience the Pure Land. By purifying one's self, one purifies one's environment.<sup>99</sup> Buddhist practice itself is here seen as a means to contribute to society, which includes, along with it, purification of the environment. In DDM's vision, there are three aspects of a pure land in the human realm: material, political, and spiritual. The first two relate to the

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<sup>95</sup> About pollution in Taiwan and the development of environmentalist awareness in the 1980's, see: Williams, "Environmentalism in Taiwan."

<sup>96</sup> *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 12–13.

<sup>97</sup> "Environmental Protection," Shengyan, DDM NY Chan Center, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.chancenter.org/chancntr/newscap/b083100a.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Kan Zhongzong, *Taiwan fojiao yibai nian*, 227.

<sup>99</sup> *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 19.

fields of law, politics, and science, while the third is of major importance from a Buddhist perspective. Here a pure land can be realized through promotion of Buddhist concepts and practice.<sup>100</sup> DDM's analysis is based on a rather vague conservatism.<sup>101</sup> Contemporary society is in turmoil, but through the Buddhist practice of purification an ideal society (pure land) can be achieved.<sup>102</sup>

In 1994, DDM's core concept of Spiritual Environmentalism was further elaborated into the Four Kinds of Environmentalism. Spiritual Environmentalism is the first, while the other three are Social 禮儀, Living 生活, and Natural 自然 Environmentalisms.<sup>103</sup> Spiritual Environmentalism refers to the assumption that in order to reduce the pollution of the outer environment, one has to purify one's mind first. Social Environmentalism 禮儀環保 is concerned with the individual's behavior toward others, and stresses the importance of etiquette and rules in the way people interact. By maintaining a respectful attitude in speech, action, and mind, a harmonious society can be achieved. This concept, as well as the Chinese term 禮儀 (social etiquette), both have strong Confucian connotations. Yet Shengyan sees them grounded in Buddhist culture as well.

As for the protection of the social environment, Buddhism places great emphasis on etiquette, including following the vinaya, maintaining deportment, and keeping precepts. It can even be said that observing rules and etiquette is the basic foundation of Buddhism.<sup>104</sup>

The third concept, Living Environmentalism 生活環保, stresses the practical realization of Shengyan's ideas. It is an appeal to live a simple life and to practice Buddhism in one's daily life. Finally, Natural Environmentalism 自然環保 focuses on more secular forms of environmentalism, such as protecting the wildlife and using natural resources sparingly, although, once again, Shengyan provides a more elemental Buddhist definition:

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<sup>100</sup> *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Laliberte, "The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan, 1089–1997," 309.

<sup>102</sup> *Fagu shan nianjian: zonglun*, 24–25.

<sup>103</sup> "Dharma Drum Consensus," DDM Global official website, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://www.ddm.org.tw/page\\_view.aspx?siteid=&ver=&usid=&mode=&mnuid=1112&modid=63&cid=68&noframe](http://www.ddm.org.tw/page_view.aspx?siteid=&ver=&usid=&mode=&mnuid=1112&modid=63&cid=68&noframe).

<sup>104</sup> "Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign," DDM English website, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.dharmadrum.org/content/about/about.aspx?sn=112>.



Turning to protection of the natural environment, we find that, according to Buddhism, a person's body and mind are direct karmic retribution and the environment she lives in is circumstantial retribution. Direct and circumstantial retribution form one's place of practice. Every person uses her direct retribution to practice within her circumstantial retribution. Thus one must care for the environment just as one would for her own body.<sup>105</sup>

As we can see, Shengyan's concepts still allow for a Buddhist interpretation, which is meaningful to members of DDM and Chinese Buddhists in general, but the defining characteristic of the Spiritual Environmentalism campaign is its intended social openness and inclusivity. By using contemporary secular language, it aims to promote Buddhist concepts to a wider non-Buddhist audience. In a concluding step, this wider audience is then enjoined to purify themselves and thereby society. Taiwanese sociologist of religion Ting Jen-Chieh 丁仁傑 sees the transformation of laypeople as the main focus of DDM. Instead of the classical "division of labor" in Buddhism, where the laity mainly accumulates merit and only monastics discipline themselves in the quest for enlightenment, DDM includes the laity in that quest for religious transformation.<sup>106</sup> Shengyan and his followers aim to purify society through the transformation of ordinary people's lives, making regular use of public outreach campaigns to reach the Taiwanese public. Jimmy Yu describes how after the establishment of DDM, Shengyan's "teachings began to take the form of socially engaged moral education."<sup>107</sup> He understands this discourse of moral education as deeply rooted in Confucian traditions. Yu writes:

In the Confucian system of values, education has always meant much more than purely intellectual training and the development of skills. True Confucian education cannot be separated from the moral improvement of the individual as a social being. [...] Education had a comprehensive ideal of moral training and an ideological-pedagogical aim for the masses. In this sense, traditional Confucian "education" meant education for all levels of the population.<sup>108</sup>

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105 "Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign," Shengyen, DDM English website, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://www.dharmadrum.org/content/about/about.aspx?sn=112>.

106 Ting Jen-chien, "Renjian Buddhism and Its Successors," 254–55.

107 Yu, "Tentative Exploration," 27.

108 Yu, "Tentative Exploration," 27.

This is the context for understanding Shengyan's public outreach campaigns. In addition to its promotion of Buddhist practices—such as meditation, dharma assemblies, or *nianfo* practice—DDM aims to establish a pure land on earth through the promotion of Buddhist values embedded in a traditional Confucian discourse, thereby aiming to reach a wider audience which includes non-Buddhists.<sup>109</sup> Scott Pacey writes in an article about Taiwanese Buddhism:

Chinese Buddhism has traditionally incorporated Chinese Confucian elements and in this sense, Cheng Yen, Hsing Yun, and Sheng Yen do not differ from previous Chinese Buddhist figures. However, in the views of these three leaders, Confucian elements are made salient as a part of a return to tradition in face of a changing society. Like Buddhism itself, these Confucian elements are redirected and gain new agency through their application to the establishment of a *renjian jingtu* [Pure Land on Earth].<sup>110</sup>

This is not just true for Spiritual Environmentalism but of course equally the case with the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign (1999) and the Six Ethics of the Mind Campaign (2007). While the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance Campaign still mainly focuses on the mind, and therefore allows for a more Buddhist interpretation, the latter, however—consisting of family ethics, living ethics, school ethics, environmental ethics, workplace ethics, and ethics for the behavior between different ethnic groups—already has a very distinct Confucian flavor. It discusses, for example, the relationship between husband and wife, parents and children, and siblings. Through an appropriate adjustment to their respective roles—for instance, filial piety of the children towards the parents—harmony in the family, understood to be the basic constituent of society, is achieved. Propagated through social outreach campaigns as a form of moral education for the whole of society, these values are relatable and become relevant not just for a Buddhist audience, but also for the general Taiwanese public: the necessary condition for the establishment of a pure land on earth.

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<sup>109</sup> Yang Huinan argues that Taixu's and even Yinshun's reformist endeavors were already strongly influenced by the neo-Confucianism of Liang Shuming. Yang Huinan. "‘Renjian fojiao’ de jingdian quanshi: shi ‘yuanru rufo’ huoshi huigui yindu?" See especially 489–94.

<sup>110</sup> Pacey, "A Buddhism for the Human World: Interpretations of Renjian Fojiao in Contemporary Taiwan," 455.

Thus, modernist notions of a pure land on earth are merged with mind-only understandings and Confucian forms of moral education for the masses to provide the cohesive frame for DDM's various activities. These activities, which are promoted actively to the Taiwanese Buddhist and non-Buddhist public, mainly consist of traditional Chinese Buddhist forms of religious cultivation such as seated meditation, *nianfo*, repentance rituals, dharma assemblies, and so forth. They are not perceived as mutually exclusive, but as complementing each other.

### Pure Land “on the ground”

Besides the modernist notion of a pure land on earth, which provides a frame of reference for all of DDM's activities, Amitabha-related Pure Land practices appear in various contexts and occupy a very vivid role at DDM. First and foremost, as in Chinese Buddhism in general, Pure Land motifs are probably most ubiquitously visible in everyday language, where the name of Amitābha Buddha is used as a substitute for most expressions of social encounter. When Buddhists at DDM, as Chinese Buddhists in general, greet each other, express gratitude, take a leave, etc., they join their palms in front of their chests and say, “Amitufo,” the Chinese pronunciation of Amitābha.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, Amitābha-related Pure Land practices are also encountered in the morning and evening service 早晚課. The morning and evening service structures the daily schedule in every Buddhist temple or monastery in Taiwan. Participation in the service constitutes one of the basic duties of every monastic, and the texts recited at the morning and evening services, which draw heavily from the scriptural canon of Chinese Buddhism, include recitation of the *Amitābha Sūtra*.<sup>112</sup> Although the morning and evening services are not unilaterally standardized in Taiwan, there exists a basic consistency regarding the recited texts. Most Taiwanese temples base their services either on the *Fomen bibei kesong ben* 佛門必備課誦本 (Buddhist essential recitation manual) or, as in the case of DDM, the *Fojiao chao mu kesong ben* 佛教朝暮課誦本 (Buddhist morning and evening recitation manual).<sup>113</sup> Traditionally, on odd-

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<sup>111</sup> This practice is not just common for DDM, but characteristic for Chinese Buddhism in general. For an example, at Xilian temple 西蓮淨苑 in Taiwan, see: Jones, “Stages in the Religious Life of Lay Buddhists in Taiwan,” 122 and 124.

<sup>112</sup> Günzel, *Die Morgen- und Abendliturgie der Chinesischen Buddhisten*, 9.

<sup>113</sup> See: *Fomen bibei kesong ben* and *Fojiao chao mu kesong ben*.

numbered calendar days the evening service begins with the recitation of the Amitābha sūtra,<sup>114</sup> while the recitation of Amitābha's name is a part of the morning and the evening service.<sup>115</sup> Accordingly, the sūtra is also chanted at DDM and is included in the organization's hymnbook.<sup>116</sup>

As mentioned above, all DDM branches in Taiwan hold *nianfo* group practice on a weekly basis. Before the foundation of DDM, two main practice societies existed at Nongchan temple: The Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society 福慧念佛會 and the Prajna Meditation Society 般若禪坐會. While the Prajna Meditation Society was (and still is today) in charge of Chan meditation at DDM, the Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society is responsible for the organization of *nianfo* practice. Today, every DDM practice center has its own Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society, and over the years several other societies were founded at DDM.

The information in the following section is not backed up by quantitative data, since I do not have access to DDM statistics regarding participation. Instead it is based on my own observations during my ethnographic fieldwork. I have subsequently discussed my observations with other DDM participants in order to confirm their validity. Based on my fieldwork observations at the DDM Anhe branch in Taipei city, the attendance at the *nianfo* group practice is slightly higher than at the meditation class held at the same branch. As is the case with the DDM meditation classes, more female than male participants are involved in recitation. However, the average age at *nianfo* group practice appears to be considerably higher than that of the meditation group practice. This might be explained by the association of *nianfo* with death-related cultural practices. Most of the participants, often elderly, participate with the aim of ensuring their salvation by attaining rebirth in the western Pure Land. The remainder, who are generally younger and don't attend the practice regularly, tend to have recently lost a family member. Their participation in the practice is perceived as beneficial for the deceased, and thus constitutes an act of kinship or filial duty by producing merit for their deceased family member.

Most of the participants I interviewed in informal conversations after the practice confirmed that they believed in the effectiveness of *nianfo* to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. However, one middle aged women also said she just participated in it as a religious practice because she preferred chanting over

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114 Günzel, *Die Morgen- und Abendliturgie*, 113.

115 Günzel, *Die Morgen- und Abendliturgie*, 94 and 159.

116 *Fojiao chao mu kesong ben*, 53.

sitting in silent meditation. Although she did not invoke any such formal distinction or related vocabulary, one could say that she used a Chan approach to *nianfo* practice.

No one mentioned other motives for their practice to me, but on their homepage DDM promotes ancillary advantages of regular *nianfo* practice which include such benefits as the eradication of bad karma, long life, and good health.<sup>117</sup> In addition, the homepage provides an article that recommends engaging in *nianfo* practice in order to cure insomnia, maybe not coincidentally an ailment not uncommon with the elderly.<sup>118</sup> Thus we can see that *nianfo* practice is very closely linked to death-related cultural practices in two ways: as an act of kinship or filial duty by producing merit for one's deceased family member, and as a practice that ensures one's own salvation. Additionally, it is seen by some as simply a form of Buddhist practice comparable to meditation, while it is also promoted by DDM as a practice suited to serve more worldly matters.

In addition to the *nianfo* group practice sponsored weekly at each DDM practice center, DDM usually offers *nianfo* retreats about twice a year. One of those retreats, the Amitābha seven-day *nianfo* retreat 彌陀佛七, is held on the Buddha Amitābha's birthday.<sup>119</sup> The other, the Pure Brightness seven-day *nianfo* retreat 清明佛七, is held on the Pure Brightness Festival 清明節, the annual day when the Chinese go to the family grave and visit their ancestors. The retreats take place at Nung Chan temple in Beitou. I attended the Pure Brightness seven-day *nianfo* retreat in 2015, which began on Saturday, March 28th and ended at Saturday, March 4th. The seven-day *nianfo* retreat is

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<sup>117</sup> "Saplings of Wisdom," Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society official website, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://web.ddm.org.tw/main/news\\_in.aspx?mnuid=1560&modid=433&chapid=87&nid=3084](http://web.ddm.org.tw/main/news_in.aspx?mnuid=1560&modid=433&chapid=87&nid=3084).

<sup>118</sup> "Saplings of Wisdom," Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society official website, accessed April 6, 2017, [http://web.ddm.org.tw/main/news\\_in.aspx?mnuid=1560&modid=433&chapid=87&nid=3083](http://web.ddm.org.tw/main/news_in.aspx?mnuid=1560&modid=433&chapid=87&nid=3083).

<sup>119</sup> According to Chinese custom, Amitābha's birthday is celebrated on the 17th day of the 11th month of the lunar calendar. Welch mentions Amitābha's birthday in: Welch, *Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, 109. Yü Chün-fang shows, in discussing the birthday of Guanyin, that as Buddhist deities were indigenized into Chinese culture they were often provided with a "human character," including a birthday. Yü Chün-fang, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 295. Derk Bodde calls this transformation from mythical figures into historical ones "euphemerization." Bodde, "Myths of Ancient China," 372.

somewhat different from Chan retreats, in that participation in the complete retreat is not obligatory. One can either apply beforehand and stay at the temple for the whole week, or just drop in on any day and stay for a limited time. During that week, access to the main hall is restricted to those who attend the complete retreat and stay at the temple. Of those who show up sporadically, most do so on the first Sunday of the retreat. According to my observations and statements of DDM volunteers at the venue, four to five hundred people attended the retreat for the whole week, while another four to five hundred people just participated on this particular Sunday.

These numbers correspond with the numbers I received from Ven. Guojing 果鏡, Director of the Chan Culture Research Center at Dharma Drum Buddhist College. Guojing states that the number of participants at *nianfo* retreats can range from 1000 to 2000, while at Chan retreats attendance ranges from 100 to 200. While numbers of participants at seven-day *nianfo* retreats are ten times higher, it has to be considered that seven-day *nianfo* retreats take place only twice a year and at just one venue, compared to the numerous DDM meditation retreats held at different DDM venues. In addition, participation at seven-day *nianfo* retreats is less demanding, since full participation over the whole week is not obligatory. According to my observations, as with the weekly *nianfo* group practice, the average age of those attending seven-day *nianfo* retreats is considerably higher than at DDM meditation retreats.

In addition to these traditional Pure Land retreats, DDM organizes *nianfochan* 念佛禪 retreats, where *nianfo* is practiced as a Chan method. On the surface they look almost identical to the regular *nianfo* retreat. Participants intone the Buddha's name, "*Amitufo* 阿彌陀佛," while sitting meditative posture and circumambulating in the Chan hall. However, the orientations and motive for the participants of the two retreats, in theory, are very different. Participants of the Pure Land *nianfo* retreat wish to ensure rebirth in the Pure Land. Some come to generate and transfer merit to their deceased kin or because they hope to receive merit for themselves. The *nianfochan* retreat functions differently: Participants use *nianfo* as a meditation method directed to Chan awakening. Instead of requesting something in response for their practice, they just single-mindedly recite the Buddha's name. However, *nianfochan* retreats do not take place regularly and attendance is lower.<sup>120</sup> According to my conversations with with former

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<sup>120</sup> Looking at the calendar of events of DDM Taiwan for the five-year period from 01/01/2012 to 12/31/2016, we can determine that there have been 27 *nianfochan* one-day retreats, two *nianfochan* two-day retreats, two *nianfochan* nine-day

participants, it is also common for some *nianfochan* participants to attend the retreat for traditional Pure Land motives, namely in order to dispatch merit to the deceased or generate merit for themselves.

The DDM End-of-Life Chanting Group 助念團<sup>121</sup> offers services that demonstrate that DDM maintains an even closer link between Pure Land and death-related cultural practices. The group developed out of the Merit and Wisdom Chanting Society. It was originally founded to provide deathbed chanting for DDM members, but in 1993 it expanded its service to the general public. It sees to the needs of the dying and their family members, provides end of life care, assists with chanting for the deceased at the moment of death in order to ensure his or her rebirth in the western Pure Land, and encourages Buddhist-style funeral services. When faced with the passing of a family member, volunteers of the group will quickly go to the deceased's house to instruct and assist the family members in reciting the Buddha's name. They aim, thereby, to create merit for the deceased and actively assist his or her to rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land.

Besides deathbed chanting, the End-of-Life Chanting Group also provides consolation and counseling for the family members of the deceased. In my interview with the leading volunteer in charge of the End-of-Life Chanting Group, she showed herself to be very experienced and knowledgeable in terms of appropriate psychological care for relatives. However, Buddhist considerations were still at the core of the counseling, e.g. from a Chinese Buddhist perspective it is not advisable to express excessive grief in front of the newly deceased in order to ease their transition to a new rebirth. Thus the volunteers have to negotiate the tension between the family member's psychological need to express grief and Buddhist notions of how properly to enable a favorable rebirth. DDM is only one of many organizations, including professional funeral parlors, providing deathbed chanting services of this sort. Yet in contrast to other organizations, especially the more commercially-

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retreats, four *nianfochan* ten-day retreats, and 64 *nianfochan* group practice activities. This compares to ten *nianfo* retreats and 3678 *nianfo* group practice activities. I do not have access to official numbers of participants from DDM, yet all my informants have stated that participation at regular *nianfo* activities is considerably higher. However, the number of Chan activities is still higher. In the same time period 5015 group practice activities were held, in addition to numerous Chan retreats.

<sup>121</sup> A more literal translation of the term 助念團 would be “assist to chant group.” For readability I prefer the more descriptive translation, “end-of-life chanting group.”

oriented associations, members of the DDM End-of-Life Chanting Group do not perform the ritual on behalf of the family members of the deceased, but instruct and chant with them. The service is free of charge and takes eight hours. In case of large scale human disasters, the group also organizes Dharma assemblies for the deceased victims. Today, every region in Taiwan has its own group of volunteers to provide quick help in case of death.<sup>122</sup>

Although its services are free of charge, DDM does, in a way, also benefit reciprocally from this service. In my conversations with DDM monastics and lay members, it was often mentioned that people who face the death of a family member are touched when they experience the caring support of DDM End-of-Life Chanting Group volunteers. Under such circumstances they are open to learning more about Buddhism.<sup>123</sup> Volunteers will teach the family members not only how to perform *nianfo*, but also how to continue with their Buddhist practice, e.g. to conduct a morning or evening service by reciting respectively the *Heart Sūtra* and *Amitābha Sūtra*. Hence, the End-of-Life Chanting Group provides free Buddhist counseling and care in times of crisis, but also presents an occasion to promote DDM-style Buddhism.

The final context in which Amitābha-related Pure Land thought and practice plays an important role at DDM is the large-scale “dharma assembly” (*fahui* 法會). Dharma assemblies are ritual events led by monastics and attended by the laity, with the belief that merit will be generated for the event’s sponsors and participants, which can then be directed towards the benefit of others.<sup>124</sup> Large-scale ritual assemblies of this sort constitute an important part of the Chinese Buddhist monastic economy, and take place throughout the year at almost every DDM venue. Although many dharma assemblies have no connection with Pure Land, DDM’s largest ceremony—the *shuilu* or “water and land” dharma assembly (*shuilu fahui* 水陸法會)—does have such a connection. The *shuilu* dharma assembly is a food bestowal (*shishi* 施食) ritual which is derived from the *Sūtra on the Dhāraṇī for the Deliverance of the Flaming Mouth Hungry Ghost* 佛說救拔焰口餓鬼陀羅尼

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<sup>122</sup> All information here is obtained from my interview with with the leading volunteer in charge of the End-of-Life Chanting Group and from the group’s website: End-of-Life Chanting Group official website, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://elc.ddm.org.tw/>.

<sup>123</sup> See also, End-of-Life Chanting Group official website, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://elc.ddm.org.tw/>.

<sup>124</sup> Gildow, “The Chinese Buddhist Ritual Field: Common Public Rituals in PRC Monasteries Today,” 66.



經.<sup>125</sup> The *shuilu* itself has a very long history in Chinese Buddhism, during the course of which it has mainly been held for the purpose of delivering the dead. The notion of *shui* (water) and *lu* (land) refers to our world in its entirety and thus marks the *Shuilu* Dharma assembly as a ritual complex for universal salvation. Thus, it constitutes a means to send the dead *en masse* to the western Pure Land.<sup>126</sup> However, in its history it has also served other goals, including the protection of the nation or the securing of timely rain.<sup>127</sup>

The ritual, which is the biggest dharma assembly in Chinese Buddhism, requires an enormous amount of resources and an impressive number of personnel. It lasts for seven nights and eight days. In 2007, DDM performed the *Shuilu* dharma assembly for the first time. Compared to traditional *shuilu* dharma assemblies, the ritual has been subjected to several changes. The biggest change was that DDM abolished the traditional incineration of the memorial tablets and other objects on the last day of the ritual. Instead, the transfer of the deceased from our world to the western Pure Land is depicted by digital animation on a huge screen. The alteration was not only legitimized by claiming that incineration of paper artifacts and memorial placards was a practice of non-Buddhist origin, but also in order to make Buddhism appropriate for our contemporary age by considering environmental issues. The ritual itself was held at DDM's main center in Jinshan 金山 in northern Taiwan. It consisted of as many as eleven different altar stations, which included a Pure Land altar. At each of these altars, scriptures were chanted during the time of the assembly. Besides being represented in form of a discrete altar, the Pure Land motif also played a leading role on the last and most important day of the main ritual procedure: Accompanied by the chanting of Amitābha's name by as many as 10,000 participants, the deceased were ritually sent off to rebirth in the western Pure Land.<sup>128</sup>

Thus we can see that Amitābha-related Pure Land practices are equally as present at DDM as modernist notions of a pure land on earth. Especially in terms of religious practice, they enjoy great popularity with DDM's adherents. This popularity is also reflected in Shengyan's biography. Although personally inclined towards Chan, Shengyan led and participated in Pure Land retreats throughout his monastic career.

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<sup>125</sup> Stevenson, "Text, Image, and Transformation in the History of the *Shuilufahui*," 31.

<sup>126</sup> Stevenson, "Text, Image, and Transformation," 31.

<sup>127</sup> Stevenson, "Text, Image, and Transformation," 32.

<sup>128</sup> *2007 Fagu shan nianjian*, 210–11.

## Conclusion

Pure Land teachings centered on Amitābha and his land of Sukhāvātī (Highest Bliss) stand at the intersection of three distinctive discourses at DDM: (1) Modernist notions of a pure land on earth that developed among twentieth-century Buddhist reformers, (2) Amitabha-related Pure Land practices, such as *nianfo*, which are very popular with the laity and provide assistance in dealing with the universal problem of death, and (3) mind-only understandings that negotiate the tensions between those two soteriological orientations on a doctrinal level.

The modernist notion of a pure land on earth reflects the discourse of *renjian* or “humanistic” Buddhism promoted by Taixu, his student Yinshun, and others. They absorbed the popular concept of the western Pure Land of Sukhāvātī into the notion of the pure land on earth, a concept that diminishes otherworldly elements of traditional Buddhism in favor of a modernist version of the religion that is more affirmative of worldly matters. Buddhist groups like DDM, but also Foguangshan and Tzu Chi, all adopted this modern concept and seek to implement it in today’s Taiwan.

The notion of a pure land on earth is also reflected in DDM’s motto, “Uplifting the Character of Humanity and Building a Pure Land on Earth.” This motto, and public outreach campaigns like Spiritual Environmentalism, provide the conceptual frame for all of DDM’s activities. They are based on mind-only ideas that do not stress, yet neither oppose, traditional views of the western Pure Land as a physical place, but relate them to the state of purification of the mind. If one’s mind is purified, then the world will be purified too. This idea is based on a concept from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, where it is stated, “When the mind is purified, the Buddha lands will be purified.”<sup>129</sup> These twin orientations are in turn merged with Confucian concepts of moral education of the masses, with the claim that by applying Buddhist morals and practices to purify the minds of people at large, society is thereby purified, resulting in a pure land on earth. What is new, or avowedly “modern,” in this scenario is that Shengyan relates this idea of mental purification not just to the individual (mostly monastic) person’s practice but also to society as a whole. DDM promotes this idea by enlisting contemporary language (using terms like environmentalism, etc.) to attract a large number of people, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, to Buddhist concepts and practices.

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<sup>129</sup> *Weimojiesuoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經, T 475, 14: 538c5.

Conversely, I suggest that the popularity of the notion of building a pure land on earth—a notion that is common not just to DDM but also to other *renjian* “humanistic” Buddhist groups as well, and stands as probably the most successful neologism coined by Taixu besides the term *renjian* Buddhism itself—lies in the appropriation of the Buddhist mainstream concept of the western Pure Land. Amitabha-related Pure Land practices like *nianfo* constituted one of the most popular lay Buddhist practices in the second half of the twentieth century, and they continue to do so today. By absorbing the familiar notion of the western Pure Land into that of a pure land on earth, Buddhist reformers have been able to satisfy the need to recreate Buddhism as a modern, this-worldly religion without affronting the average Buddhist believer invested in the hope of rebirth in Amitābha’s pure land of Sukhāvātī. This integral balance was achieved by Shengyan through recourse to mind-only doctrine, which allowed modernist and literal understandings to coexist at DDM.

DDM is principally a Chan Buddhist order. Chan meditation is featured as the leading practice at the organization. Yet literal understandings of the western Pure Land appear in many routines and places at DDM. This persistent presence of Amitabha-related Pure Land practices at DDM despite the organization’s rhetorical emphasis on Chan and *renjian* Buddhism indicates the wide distribution of Pure Land in Taiwanese/Chinese Buddhism in general. For most Taiwanese Buddhists, Pure Land notions and practices do not represent an independent school but constitute a general, bedrock feature of Buddhist practice.

The presence of Pure Land motifs also reflects the demographic composition of the organization. A religious organization of DDM’s size contains a diverse membership that includes all age groups. Pure Land has a very close relation to death-related cultural practices and is thus particularly popular with the elderly. During my research I often encountered the rationale that the popularity of Pure Land with the older generation can be explained by the lack of education of previous generations in Taiwan. During decades when higher education was more the exception than the norm, the promotion of ethics and notions of a western Pure Land as a place to strive for rebirth after death, and *nianfo* as the means to realize this goal, were more easily communicable than Chan meditation and or highly intellectual mind-only ideas. Since the level of education in Taiwan did indeed increase significantly, and subsequently Taiwanese Buddhists possess a high level of intellectual sophistication, one would assume there to have been a considerable increase of interest in Chan meditation at the expense of Pure Land. This view is also

supported by some monks in the DDM saṅgha: When I participated at an activity held to promote a mass Chan activity 萬人禪 at the Wenshan district practice center in Taipei city, the leading monk stressed the atheist character of Buddhism and predicted, that in 20 years Pure Land might be increasingly replaced by Chan meditation, insofar as the former is popular with the elderly while the latter is popular with the young.

I do agree that Chan meditation has indeed become a mainstream Buddhist lay practice and will most probably continue to gain popularity, especially at DDM where Chan meditation constitutes the central religious practice. Yet, Amitabha-related Pure Land practices fulfill a religious need other Buddhist practices, including Chan meditation, address less adequately: Pure Land practices deal with the universal problem of death. Most places where Amitabha-related Pure Land practices appear at DDM are more or less connected to death-related cultural practices: *Nianfo* group practice is perceived by many participants as a practice that ensures one's own salvation, or as an act of kinship or filial duty by which the living produce merit for a deceased family member. The Pure Brightness seven-day *nianfo* retreat is not coincidentally held on the Pure Brightness festival. Linked even more conspicuously to death-related cultural practices is the DDM End-of-Life Chanting Group, which offers Buddhist end of life care and assists in chanting for the deceased to ensure his or her rebirth in the western Pure Land. Finally, the *shuilu* dharma assembly, the biggest event in DDM's annual calendar, is a ritual complex for universal salvation which, on its last day, depicts the transport of the dead from our world to the western Pure Land by a digital animation on a huge screen.

The average age of participants in most of these events is, indeed, higher than at Chan meditation-related activities, and Chan meditation is more popular with the young. But the question remains: What happens when the young Buddhists of today age themselves? Confronted with their own mortality, they might continue to find benefit in Pure Land practices such as *nianfo*, and the western Pure Land as a place of future rebirth.

By taking Pure Land thought and practice as a point of entry for examining a modern Buddhist order in contemporary Taiwan, we can see how a religious organization is not just shaped by the vision of one outstanding figure, however important, but by a variety of forces including the religious needs of the average Taiwanese Buddhist practitioner.

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