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## Practice and Understanding in Modern Chinese Pure Land Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The present paper aims to contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussion about the impact of Western concepts on the modern East Asian understanding of Buddhism. Previous studies on the intellectual and cultural history of Chinese Buddhism in China's Republican (1911–1949) period suggest that the newly imported distinctions between religion and philosophy, and reason and faith, were instrumental in creating a new secular discourse that favoured the doctrinally orientated Buddhist traditions (notably Consciousness-only/Yogācāra) and belittled the more practical and devotional Buddhist currents (especially Pure Land Buddhism). While those observations pertain to the views of secular elites, a much more complex picture emerges from the confessional literature of the Republican period, for example Buddhist journals. As the present paper demonstrates, while some followers of the movement of 'Consciousness-only studies' were indeed critical of Pure Land devotionalism, they did not necessarily problematise it by appealing to the newly introduced Western conceptual framework.

The first part of the present paper reexamines the devotional model of Pure Land practice associated with the influential Republican-era monk Yinguang. It argues that Yinguang's lukewarm attitude towards intellectual approach to Buddhism was itself based in his particular interpretation of traditional Buddhist thought – especially the scholastic distinction between 'principle' and 'phenomena', and the Sinitic Buddha-Nature thought, which prioritises practical and non-conceptual wisdom over discursive knowledge. In the second part the paper turns to the critique of popular Pure Land piety undertaken by the lay Consciousness-only scholar Tang Dayuan, who opted for including doctrinal study in the practice of Pure Land Buddhism. Whereas Tang's arguments for this case refer to the increasingly globalised and Westernised intellectual scene of Republican China, his reformist postulates mainly target the aforementioned exegetical and doctrinal assumptions that were shared by Yinguang and other Pure Land preachers. For example, Tang appears to sideline the dichotomy of principle (insight) and phenomena (practice) and opts instead for a unified standard of Pure Land practice grounded in doctrinal understanding. At the same time, he adduces Consciousness-only scholasticism to argue for a broader and more nuanced

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper contains revised fragments of my unpublished dissertation *Demythologizing Amitābha: A Consciousness-Only Hermeneutics of Pure Land Buddhism in Modern East Asia* (National Chengchi University, 2016).

understanding of Buddhist wisdom, which includes discursive and communicable knowledge. In these respects Tang's critique reveals a continuity between late imperial and modern Buddhist thought, both in terms of underlying concerns and the concepts that were used to articulate them.

**Keywords:** Yinguang, Tang Dayuan, Consciousness-only studies, Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, Ouyang Jingwu, Buddha-Nature thought, *genbenzhi*, *houdezhi*

## Introduction

What exactly defines 'modernity' in the intellectual history of East Asia is a notoriously tricky issue. However, most scholars would probably agree that one of the salient characteristics of 'modern' East Asian thought is its reliance on the framework of Western concepts that have continuously been introduced into Japanese and Chinese vocabularies since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One such conceptual innovation is the distinction between 'religion' (Jp. *shūkyō* /Ch. *Zongjiao* 宗教) and 'philosophy' (Jp. *tetsugaku* /Ch. *zhexue* 哲學), which is closely tied to the more general opposition between 'faith' and 'reason'.<sup>2</sup> Domesticating these concepts had particularly far-reaching consequences for East Asian Buddhists. Beginning with Meiji-period (1868–1912) Japan, modern apologists sought to raise the profile of Buddhism by representing it as a rational system of thought, devoid of the 'superstitious' practices and dogmatism associated with traditional religions; quite often, this entailed a new emphasis on the philosophical credentials of the Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these new standards of rationality were applied to the Buddhist tradition itself, creating a distinctively modern set of expectations and priorities. The idea of 'philosophical' reason as something superior to merely 'religious' belief defined new hierarchies between various currents and 'schools' of Buddhism and generated new dynamics between their doctrinal and practical aspects.

Previous studies on the intellectual and cultural history of Buddhism in Republican China (1911–1949) provide ample illustrations of this last point. Beginning with the likes of Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1868–1936) and Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), secular thinkers and academics tend to discuss Buddhism as a system of rational metaphysics and ethics. The previously marginalised scholastic tradition of Sinitic Yogācāra (the so-called 'Tradition of Characteris-

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<sup>2</sup> For detailed studies, see Hida (2002: 237–246), Godart (2008), Josephson (2012) and Suzuki (2015).

<sup>3</sup> See Toda (2014: 101–105). As pointed out by Sueki (2004: 274) in Japan this rationalistic trend was to some extent reversed by the late Meiji period, when leading Japanese Buddhist thinkers began to define Buddhism in terms of practical spirituality that *transcends* rational thought rather than conforms to it.

tics', *Faxiang zong* 法相宗) is now singled out for its intellectual sophistication and philosophical credentials; these are also underlined by the doctrinally orientated and theory-heavy Buddhist movement of 'Consciousness-only studies' (*weishixue* 唯識學).<sup>4</sup> Conversely, the more popular and practice-oriented currents, notably Pure Land Buddhism,<sup>5</sup> begin to come across as either irrelevant or problematic. In the discourse of modern Chinese elites, the Pure Land becomes demoted to the status of a 'religious' belief that needs verification in the light of 'philosophically' mature doctrines.<sup>6,7</sup> In academic studies it is mentioned, if at all, as an untypically 'religious' outlier among the 'philosophically' minded 'schools' of Chinese Buddhism<sup>8</sup> – an assessment that justifies the relatively scant attention given to its historical evolution or doctrinal details.

While these views may be considered as representative of the secular elites of the Republican period, a somewhat more complex picture emerges when one considers contemporaneous confessional literature – for example, the content of Chinese Buddhist journals published in the 1920s and 1930s. Remarkably, these two decades witnessed a significant revival of Pure Land piety in its least philosophically sophisticated and the most religiously fervent form. This revival owed much of its impetus to the charismatic monk Yinguang (印光, 1861–1940), whose stance has been described by previous scholars as 'conservative' and explicitly anti-modernist.<sup>9</sup> As Yinguang distanced himself from

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<sup>4</sup> For details, see Makeham (2014). This is not to say that modern Chinese proponents of 'Consciousness-only' Buddhism were unanimous in regarding it as a form of positivist 'philosophy' – far from it. However, many of them discussed Yogācāra as an object of 'Buddhist study' (*foxue* 佛學) rather than belief, and emphasised the intellectual rigor and rationalist credentials of this tradition by juxtaposing it with contemporary science, logic or neo-Confucian thought (Makeham 2014: 13–38).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'Pure Land Buddhism' here refers to the tradition of Pure Land-orientated practices and doctrines that in contemporary Chinese-language scholarship is somewhat misleadingly labeled as 'Pure Land school' (*jingtu zong* 淨土宗). In fact, Pure Land practitioners in China never developed a clear-cut separate institutional or doctrinal identity, as was the case with the Pure Land 'schools' operating in Japan. For details, see Jones (2019).

<sup>6</sup> Miyagawa 1998: 53–64.

<sup>7</sup> Miyagawa (1998: 31) traces the beginnings of this tendency to Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837–1911), the lay propagator who is often regarded as the spiritual 'father' of Chinese Buddhist modernism. According to Miyagawa, Yang was the first to stress a qualitative distinction between his Pure Land 'belief' (*shinkō* 信仰) and the Buddhist 'doctrine' (*giri* 義理) based on the teachings Huayan 華嚴 school (in the Chinese sources, this distinction is rendered as one between 'practice' and 'teachings' – *xing* 行 and *jiao* 教, respectively). Whereas Yang was a committed Pure Land devotee, his more secular contemporaries endorsed a more radical distinction between the 'philosophical' and 'religious' (and therefore, potentially 'superstitious') aspects of Buddhism (ibid, 60–64).

<sup>8</sup> Zhang 2011: 354–355, 358–362.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Millican (1929: 126), Chan (1953: 67, n.23), Welch (1968: 119), Pittman (2001: 2) or Jones (2003: 128, 130). For modern scholarship on Yinguang, see Chen (2002), Zhang (2011) or Kiely (2017).

the intellectual aspirations of contemporaneous Yogācāra scholars, his influence provided a ground for tension between the Pure Land devotionalism and the doctrinal approach associated with ‘Consciousness-only studies’.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, the proponents of ‘Consciousness-only studies’ were not likely to respond to this challenge by appealing to the Westernised standards of rationality that were current among secular intellectuals. In fact, many of them shared Yinguang’s belief that Buddhism is, first and foremost, a form of practice, not an academic theory akin to Western philosophy, and that the truths that Buddhism teaches transcend the mundane reasonings on which philosophy is based. It was against such a background that Consciousness-only scholars had to negotiate the value of a theoretical understanding of the Buddhist doctrine and denounce the allegedly excessive anti-intellectualism of Yinguang and his followers. What use they made of modern Western notions of rationality in this context is far from obvious, and as such, merits careful investigation.

The present paper attempts to discuss this question by juxtaposing the arguments of both sides of the debate. In the first part it examines the doctrinal foundations that supported the devotional model of Pure Land practice associated with Yinguang’s name. In the second part it discusses the critique of popular Pure Land piety undertaken by the lay Consciousness-only scholar Tang Dayuan (唐大圓, 1890–1941 [or 1885–1941])<sup>11</sup> who opted for including doctrinal study in the practice of Pure Land Buddhism. As subsequently shown, Tang’s arguments for this case have a clear modernist ring, in the sense that they refer to the increasingly globalised and Westernised intellectual scene of Republican China. Yet, they make scant use of the aforementioned Westernised categories, such as rational philosophy and religious belief. On the contrary, Tang’s critique reveals a continuity between late imperial and modern Buddhist thought, both in terms of underlying concerns and the concepts that were used to articulate them. A closer look at his arguments may therefore provide a more nuanced perspective on the modernisation of Chinese discourse about Pure Land Buddhism in the early 20th century.

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<sup>10</sup> Chen 2002: 100–104.

<sup>11</sup> For standard biographical accounts, see Dongchu (1984: 682–687) or Yu (2004: 809–811). For the discussion of the dates of Tang’s birth and death, see Yin (2011).

### Practice and Understanding in Traditional Chinese Pure Land Buddhism

The Chinese tradition of Pure Land Buddhism constitutes a ‘tradition of practice’<sup>12</sup> rather than a doctrinally and institutionally autonomous denomination in the manner of Japanese Pure Land ‘schools’. The practice that has become virtually synonymous with Pure Land Buddhism in China is the so-called *nianfo* 念佛, which involves ‘recollecting’, ‘remembering’ and, in the most widespread understanding, ‘reciting’ the name of Buddha Amitābha. In its most popular form *nianfo* is performed to secure rebirth in the paradise-like Western Pure Land, whose glorious adornments are described in canonical scriptures such as the *Smaller* or *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*.<sup>13</sup> According to the standard Buddhist interpretation, this Pure Land is beyond the cycle of births and deaths and has been established by Amitābha so that reborn devotees can swiftly attain liberating wisdom and realise Buddhahood. In contrast to theorists of the Japanese (Jōdo-Shin) variety of Pure Land Buddhism, where Pure Land rebirth is conditioned on the attitude of faith and the working of the so-called ‘Other-power’ of Amitābha, the Chinese proponents of *nianfo* typically advocated a ‘single-minded’ practice that amounted to at least some degree of mental self-cultivation.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, Pure Land devotion has long remained a controversial subject among the doctrinally educated Chinese Buddhists. Its detractors challenged the objectives of *nianfo* that is motivated by a literal belief in Amitābha’s Pure Land by pointing out that all perceived phenomena are empty and ‘nothing but Mind’ (*weixin* 唯心) and that the impersonal principle of Buddhahood is already present in everyone’s mind – hence there is no need to strive for rebirth in a particular place in the West and to seek help from an external savior-buddha.<sup>15</sup>

There is a tradition of describing these criticisms in terms of a doctrinal polemic between the two rival ‘schools’ – the school of Chan (*chanzong* 禪宗) and the Pure Land school (*jingtu zong* 淨土宗). As has been pointed out in some of the more recent studies, such a narrative is rather misleading, as it projects essentialised sectarian identities that were historically absent in China.<sup>16</sup> Doctrinal charges against Pure Land practice were indeed often raised by the authors

<sup>12</sup> Jones 2019.

<sup>13</sup> These Sanskrit titles refer to scriptures known in several Chinese translations, the most influential among them being the *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經 and the *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經.

<sup>14</sup> In the words of Charles B. Jones (2004: 278), ‘Pure Land practice in China is hard work’. Regarding the importance of practice and ethics in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, see e.g. Ogasawara (1963: 175–178, 208–216), Zhang (2011: 304–305) and Jones (2019: 61–105).

<sup>15</sup> For overviews of Pure Land-related controversies within Chinese Buddhism, see Chappell (1986), Huang (2004: 127–164) or Jones (2019: 106–126).

<sup>16</sup> Sharf 2002.

affiliated with Chan lineages and practitioners of Chan meditation. However, pre-modern Chinese scholiasts who quoted such Chan-inspired charges against the Pure Land often did so in order to *reconcile* these two perspectives rather than to take one side in a sectarian conflict. The influential commentaries on Pure Land sutras by the eminent scholiasts Yunqi Zhuhong 雲棲祿宏 (1535–1615) and Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655) evince a sense of doctrinal consensus that may be considered as characteristic of late-imperial Chinese Buddhism. On the one hand, their authors construe the scriptural depictions of the Pure Land and Amitābha as descriptions of the pure nature of one’s own mind, in keeping with the dictum ‘Mind-Only Pure Land, Self-Nature Amitābha’ (*weixin jingtu, zixing mituo* 唯心淨土 自性彌陀). On the other hand, they appear to vindicate a straightforward practice of *nianfo* undertaken by those who have not yet developed such a profound understanding. In doing so, they turn to one of the central tenets of Sinitic Buddhist thought – the dialectical relationship between the all-pervading and abstract principle (*li* 理), on the one hand, and the manifold and concrete phenomena (*shi* 事), on the other. Chinese scholiasts traditionally maintained that these two domains are ‘non-dual’, ‘mutually non-obstructing’ or even ‘mutually interpenetrating’. In the context of the Pure Land, this is taken to mean that sincere practice motivated by literal belief in Amitābha’s Western paradise will facilitate, rather than hinder, the direct realisation of one’s innate Buddhahood.<sup>17</sup>

A solution of this kind could not, however, settle all polemical issues. Some Chan monks continued to criticise the devotional form of Buddha-recollection as a last-resort expedient method, suitable for only the dullest of practitioners. Pure Land devotees retorted by accusing Chan monks of self-conceit and exhibiting a lack of respect for the compassionate intent that motivated the Buddha to preach about Amitābha and his land. Tensions of this kind were still running high at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and left their traces in Buddhist literature of the Republican period. They form the intellectual background of Yinguang’s Pure Land revivalism and his rise to fame as the most influential Pure Land apologist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For detailed discussions of Yunqi and Ouyi’s Pure Land thought, see e.g. Yü (1981), Araki (1985), Shengyan (2000: 169–174, 177–186) or Cun (2016: 384–414).

<sup>18</sup> See Yinguang’s apologetic *Treatise Resolving Doubts About the Pure Land* (*Jingtu jueyi lun* 淨土決疑論; English translation by Jones, 2012) or the debate raised by monk Shoupei’s (守培, 1884–1955) essay called *Yixin nianfo ji de wangsheng lun* 一心念佛即得往生論 (‘On Being Instantly Reborn in the Pure Land through Single-Minded Buddha-Recitation’), involving Yinguang and Wang Jingzhou (王鏡周, dates unknown). See MFQ 162: 139–146, 163: 29–41, 164: 417–422.

### Practice and Understanding According to Yinguang

One of the most interesting assessments of Yinguang's doctrinal stance has been proposed by the famous Japanese scholar Daisetz T. Suzuki, who touched upon his persona and teachings in his *Impressions of Chinese Buddhism* (1935). Suzuki interpreted the rhetorical clash between Chan and Pure Land as a conflict between two psychological types: 'intellectual or philosophical', on the one hand, and 'affectional and devotional', on the other. The former type, embodied by the spirit of Chan (Japanese Zen), tends to approach reality as an object of inquiry, something that can be 'made clear' (*ming* 明), 'seen into' (*jian* 見), 'illuminated' (*zhao* 照), 'awoken to' or 'understood' (*wu* 悟) or 'discerned' or 'penetrated' (*che* 徹). The latter type gravitates towards introspection and self-reflection, culminating in an acute consciousness of one's own 'karmic hindrances' – shortcomings and weaknesses.<sup>19</sup> On Suzuki's account, Yinguang fully identified himself with the latter camp, not because he rejected the goal of insight into reality as such, but because he did not believe that such a lofty goal can be accomplished by the human beings he personally knew or even read about. According to Suzuki's paraphrase of Yinguang's words,

What the Zen masters express themselves in words sound fine and enhancing and alluring too. But really, they are no more than statements of metaphysical understanding, and the masters' inner life which they are actually living betrays all forms of karma-hindrances both intellectual and affectional. And because of this, they are still in the clutches of birth-and-death.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, through their self-cultivation, adepts of Chan strive for the experience of 'seeing' the truth about reality, but 'seeing' alone does not actually liberate them from their karmic hindrances. Their 'understanding' of reality is not enough to transform their human existence into the enlightened existence of buddhas. Such transformation can be brought about only by attaining the 'supreme enlightenment' which, however, is 'extremely hard to attain for most of us of these days'.<sup>21</sup> The path of the Pure Land, as advocated by Yinguang and as understood by Suzuki, is designed for those who have already realised that they will not be able to attain supreme enlightenment in the circumstances of their present life. For this reason, they choose to take advantage of Amitābha's support and seek rebirth in his Pure Land where that lofty goal can be accomplished swiftly. What it means in practical terms, here and now, is that Pure Land practitioners should set their priorities differently than do the adepts of

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<sup>19</sup> Suzuki 1935: 365–366.

<sup>20</sup> Suzuki 1935: 364.

<sup>21</sup> Suzuki 1935: 363.

Chan: they should abandon the search for understanding the principle of reality and aim instead at securing their future rebirth in the Pure Land. As indicated by the doctrinal commentaries to the sutras, the conditions for a Pure Land rebirth are essentially threefold: the unswerving belief in the existence of the Pure Land and the possibility of being reborn there; the sincere aspiration to achieve this goal and, last but not least, the assiduous practice of *nianfo* (backed by ethical self-cultivation according to basic Buddhist precepts).<sup>22</sup>

As can be seen from Suzuki's account, Yinguang promoted a fairly straightforward interpretation of the Pure Land doctrine that may have appeared as stripped of all intellectual overtones. He generally advocated Buddha-recollection in its most basic form – as a single-minded recitation of Amitābha's name.<sup>23</sup> He urged everyone who asked for his advice to give up a more profound doctrinal insight into the Pure Land dogma and focus on this simple practice, even if it had to be supported with unexamined faith. Conversely, he was known for emotional diatribes against Chan-inspired interpretations of Pure Land scriptures that explicated Amitābha and his realm as allegories of the intrinsically enlightened mind. Such people, claimed Yinguang, were not truly practicing the Pure Land path, as they failed to establish a meaningful connection with Amitābha and relied too much on their own powers of insight.<sup>24</sup> While Yinguang devoted much of his polemical zeal to criticising the elitist approach of Chan, his refutations extended to other forms of Buddhism that tended to garner interest of educated elites – the so-called Esoteric Buddhism (*mijiao* 密教), with its ambitious ideal of becoming a buddha in the present body, and the newly fashionable Consciousness-only studies.<sup>25</sup> Yinguang perceived these two currents as potentially aligned with Chan against the humble Pure Land piety. Just as practitioners of Chan, the adepts of Esoteric Buddhism and Consciousness-only optimistically appealed to the 'self-power' (*zili* 自力) of individuals and failed to account for human limitations and weaknesses. In his popular letters to lay Buddhists, Yinguang decried the contemporary hubris of self-avowed 'scholars' who prioritised the study of complex doctrines over basic essentials of Buddhism, such as belief in the law of karma and practice of *nianfo*. Referring specifically to the scholars of Consciousness-only studies, Yinguang remarked:

Those who espouse the Tradition of Characteristics make the same kind of mistake. What they advocate has nothing to do with ending [the cycle of] births and deaths. It is only about how to understand rational principles and how to talk

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<sup>22</sup> The triad of 'belief' (*xin* 信), 'aspiration' (*yuan* 願) and 'practice' (*xing* 行). In Suzuki's parlance these are called 'faith', 'will' and 'work' (1935: 364). See Ogasawara (1963: 200–203).

<sup>23</sup> Chen 2002: 177–185.

<sup>24</sup> For a summary of Yinguang's ideas about Chan, see Chen (2002: 104–108, 152–165).

<sup>25</sup> Yinguang's attitudes towards these two traditions are also discussed by Chen (2002: 94–104).



about them. If only they had known how difficult it is to end the cycle of births and deaths by the means of their self-power, they would have never dared to occupy themselves only with things such as those. They would not have dared to ignore the Pure Land, or even slander it as inferior. Those people are all of the same type – they like what they consider lofty and apply themselves to what they consider superior. Yet, they do not know why these things are lofty and superior. Had they known, never in their life would they have dared to discard the method of the Pure Land and shun Pure Land practice. Study of the Way truly is a formidable task.<sup>26</sup>

The above quote is a representative sample of the rhetoric that Yinguang employed to discourage his contemporaries from studying Consciousness-only thought. In other cases, he accused Consciousness-only scholiasts of ‘talking about food and counting treasures’ (*shuo shi shu bao* 說食數寶) – a byword for fruitless theoretical speculations – or he portrayed them as ineffectual scholastics busy with memorising and analysing ‘names and appearances’ (*mingxiang* 名相) instead of combating attachments to self and external reality.<sup>27</sup> Whereas Yinguang expressed respect for those who wanted to broaden their knowledge of the doctrine, he found himself incapable of joining their ranks. Moreover, he implored others to follow his example and be wary of their own limitations.<sup>28</sup>

It is, however, important to note that Yinguang’s practice-based and theory-averse approach did not merely reflect a psychological introspection of his own shortcomings. In fact, his rhetorically impressive writings are replete with numerous erudite references to Buddhist canonical literature and present a fairly coherent and sophisticated doctrinal stance. For example, commenting on the quasi-mythical narrative about the Pure Land contained in the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha*, Yinguang opined that the doctrinal teaching (*jiaoyi* 教義) expounded in this scripture is essentially the same as teachings contained in the *Avatamsaka sūtra* (*Huayan jing*). However, since the *Avatamsaka* preaches the truth directly, it can be fully comprehended and appreciated only by those whose insight is comparable with that of a buddha. In the Pure Land sūtra, the same lofty principles are intimated in figurative ways, accessible to those who have not yet attained Buddhahood. Without such proclamation, weak and ignorant people

<sup>26</sup> 「今之崇相宗者，其弊亦復如是。彼提倡者，實不為了生死。只為通理性，能講說耳。使彼知自力了生死之難，斷不肯唯此是務，置淨土於不問或有誹薄之者。此其人皆屬好高務勝而不知其所以高勝也。使真知之，殺了亦不肯棄置淨土法門而不力修也。甚矣，學道之難也。」 From ‘The Seventh Letter in Response to the Layman Zhou Qunzheng’ (復周群錚居士書七, YFW 2: 409–10).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. ‘Response to the Layman Yao Weiyi’ (復姚維一居士書, YFW 8:102) or ‘Response to the Layman Min Zongjing’ (復閔宗經居士書, YFW 8: 105).

<sup>28</sup> See e.g. ‘The Ninth Response to a Layman from Yongjia’ (復永嘉某居士書九, YFW 2: 248–9).

living in the age of ‘Declining Dharma’ could find no means to escape the cycle of births and deaths. To wit, while both *Avatamsaka* and *Sukhāvātīvyūha* teach the same truth, only the latter scripture shows how to relate this truth to the existential condition of a ‘commoner’ (*fanfu* 凡夫) living in a degenerate age.<sup>29</sup>

By pointing to the *Huayan jing* as the standard of interpretation of the Pure Land myth, Yinguang followed in the path well trodden by the previous generations of Chinese Pure Land exegetes. Consequently, he subscribed to the tradition of interpreting the Pure Land in terms of ‘Mind-only’ and ‘Buddha-Nature’ thought. After all, the Chinese text of the *Avatamsaka* explicates the experienced world as a construct of the Mind that is ‘not different’ from both sentient beings and buddhas.<sup>30</sup> In this world human beings are endowed with ‘the Wisdom of Tathāgata’, which is hidden by ignorance, but can be spontaneously recovered as soon as ‘false mentations’ are discarded.<sup>31</sup> Conversely, buddhas attain their perfect enlightenment within minds of sentient beings.<sup>32</sup> They can be encountered at any time and in any place, and they are not different from the perceiving mind, as images reflected in the water.<sup>33</sup>

In Yinguang’s writings the motif of inherent universal Buddhahood, derived from not only his reading of the *Huayan jing* but also other canonical sources – notably the apocryphal *Shoulengyan jing* 首楞嚴經 (the Śūraṅgama Sūtra) – is unequivocally affirmed. In fact, it provides a theoretical background behind his simple practical injunctions.<sup>34</sup> In some of his letters, Yinguang reminds lay practitioners that ‘the Mind is One’ and that the difference between ‘Holy Ones’ and commoners is only due to the latter’s confusion.<sup>35</sup> He explains human suffering as a result of detachment from one’s own original endowment of Buddha-Wisdom (*benju fozhi* 本具佛智), which forms the ‘substance’ or ‘essence’ (*ti* 體) of cognition; the mistaken views and emotions entertained by the unenlightened people (their ‘false knowledge’ [*wangzhi* 妄知]) are merely secondary manifestations that arise on the basis of this essence. Consequently, Yinguang explicates the method of Buddha-recollection in terms of ‘gathering one’s mind’ in order

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Yinguang’s preface to *Wuliangshou jing* (無量壽經頌序, YFW 11: 721–22).

<sup>30</sup> T 9.278: 465c28–29.

<sup>31</sup> T 10.279: 272c4–7.

<sup>32</sup> T 10.279: 275b23–29.

<sup>33</sup> T 10.279: 339c21–340a2.

<sup>34</sup> On Yinguang’s interpretation of the *Shoulengyan jing*, see Chen, 2009: 179–208.

<sup>35</sup> ‘The Eighth Letter in Reply to a Layman from Yongjia’ (復永嘉某居士書八, YFW 2: 245). See also Yinguang’s collected pronouncements on ‘Mind and Nature’ (*xinxing* 心性) in his ‘Explanation of Common Doubts’ (*Shi putong yihuo* 釋普通疑惑; Yinguang 1989: 118–122). As noted by Zhang (2011: 346–352), this particular motif in Yinguang’s thinking might have also been influenced by Neo-Confucian ideas.

to purify one's mental activity and return to its true origin or root (*ben* 本) – the innate Buddha-Wisdom.<sup>36</sup>

In his more scholastic writings Yinguang often reflects on the old theme of Sinitic Pure Land exegetes – namely, that the ‘principle’ cannot stand by itself but is revealed through and within ‘phenomena’.<sup>37</sup> The concepts of ‘principle’ and ‘phenomena’ originated from the philosophy of the so-called Huayan 華嚴 school, associated with Chinese exegetes of the *Avatamsaka*. They are usually invoked to describe the dynamics between the unifying all-pervasive principle of reality and its particular manifold manifestations. In Yinguang's usage, however, the ‘principle’ often refers to the unity (non-duality) between sentient beings and Amitābha, while ‘phenomena’ refers to the actual practice (*shixiu* 事修, *shigong* 事功) through which this principle is intuitively realised:

When we study Buddhism, we need to establish the principle right through the phenomena and establish the phenomena right through the principle. [...] If one claims that one is already a buddha right away, then one clings to the principle and forsakes the phenomena – this is already a grave error. We must put effort into actual practice and recollect the Buddha single-mindedly; beginning with the phenomena, we make the principle manifest and after the principle is manifest we still pay attention to the phenomena. Only in this way can we attain real benefit.<sup>38</sup>

What this means from the perspective of ordinary people is that they cannot fathom the principle in any other way than by practice. Penetrating the universal Buddhahood directly, through some extraordinary insight into the true nature of reality, is neither a feasible nor a desirable goal. The most pragmatic method of recovering the original pure nature of one's own mind is to ‘stimulate’ (*gan* 感) the ‘response’ (*ying* 應) of Amitābha, who appears within the mind of a pious practitioner just as the reflection of the Moon appears in clarified water.<sup>39</sup> Attaining such ‘clarity’ of mind does not require intellectual effort; it can be achieved through simple faith, ethical conduct and the single-minded recitation of the name:

In case of ordinary people, it is not necessary to recommend them to extensively study profound sūtras or treatises. It is enough to instruct them to avoid doing evil and to uphold good deeds, and to single-mindedly recollect Buddha,

<sup>36</sup> ‘Reply to the layman Yuan Wenchun’ 「復袁聞純居士書」 (YFW 2: 359).

<sup>37</sup> See the section on ‘principle’ and ‘phenomena’ in the ‘Explanation of Common Doubts’ (Yinguang 1989: 112–117).

<sup>38</sup> 「吾人學佛，必須即事而成理，即理而成事[...] 若自謂我即是佛，執理廢事，差之遠矣。故當用力修持，一心念佛，從事而顯理，顯理而仍注于事，方有實益」 ‘A Sermon for the Dharma Congregation for the Protection of the Country and for the Quelling of Calamities held in Shanghai’ (上海護國息災法會法語, YFW 20: 1610).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. ‘The Guide for those Beginning Pure Land Practice’ (初機淨業指南, YFW 5: 916).

seeking rebirth in the West [...] ‘It is by modestly recollecting the Buddha that ignorant men and women can secretly penetrate Buddha-Wisdom and attune themselves to the marvels of the Way’.<sup>40</sup> By doing so, they achieve much greater benefit than those experts who spend all their days fiddling with their knowledge, immersed in conceptual discrimination. For this reason, for ignorant men and women it is easy to gain benefit. So it is for the experts, as long as they are able to fully divert themselves. If they are only occupied with their theories, they will reap no benefit at all. On the contrary, they may even harm themselves.<sup>41</sup>

As can be seen, Yinguang’s by and large anti-intellectual stance cannot be attributed solely to his sternly pessimistic assessment of human condition. Whereas this motif is undoubtedly present in his writings, it is qualified by his far-reaching endorsement of Sinitic ‘Buddha-Nature’ thought, in particular his belief in the inherent wisdom possessed even by ‘the ignorant men and women’. This assumption is central to Yinguang’s claim that faith in the Pure Land represents a path to enlightenment that is parallel to the path of (doctrinal and meditative) ‘understanding’ – and, all things considered, the more efficient of the two. The underpinnings of Buddha-Nature thought also justify Yinguang’s generalised distrust of discursive knowledge, which he deemed as relatively useless in comparison with the ineffable ‘internal’ wisdom activated by ethical habits and *nianfo* practice. As shown below, these doctrinal (as opposed to merely psychological) elements of Yinguang’s stance are singled out for criticism in the reformist manifestos of Tang Dayuan.

### Practice and Understanding According to Tang Dayuan

Tang Dayuan, best known as a lay associate of the much more famous monk Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947), was one of the most prolific authors of the Republican period’s ‘Consciousness-only’ revival. Tang’s involvement in Buddhist affairs can be dated to the early 1910s when he took refuge (*guiyi* 皈依) under Yinguang.<sup>42</sup> In the next decade Tang continued to identify himself with the Pure Land ‘tradition of practice’, even though his views on *nianfo* consequently veered away from those advocated by Yinguang. In the first half of the 1920s, Tang moved towards an explicitly modernist doctrinal position, readily visible

<sup>40</sup> A quote from Ouyi Zhixu’s commentary to the *Amituo jing* (X61.1164: 655c1–2).

<sup>41</sup> 「若普通人，則亦不必令其遍研深經奧論，但令諸惡莫作，眾善奉行，一心念佛求生西方即已[...] 良以愚夫愚婦顛蒙念佛，即能潛通佛智，暗合道妙。校比大通家之卜度思量，終日在分別中弄識神者，為益多多也。以故愚夫愚婦念佛易得益。大通家能通身放下，亦易得益。若唯以義理是卜度者，則不得益，或反得病」 ‘Letter in Response to the Layman Xie Chengming from Sichuan’ (復四川謝誠明居士書, YFW 3:475–6).

<sup>42</sup> Yu 2004: 809.

in his passionate manifestos published in the more ‘progressive’ Buddhist journals of the time. Initially, he sought a textual basis for his reformist preaching in the *Huayan jing*, the scripture that was also highly regarded by Yinguang. Tang’s reading of this sūtra differed widely from that adopted by the old master: while fully embracing the *Huayan jing*’s broadly idealist Mind-only standpoint, Tang turned to this text for its model depiction of a bodhisattva as someone who remains engaged in the affairs of this world and actively searches for various kinds of knowledge, including knowledge of secular subjects.<sup>43</sup> It needs to be emphasised that in Tang’s modernist writings this secularised ideal of a bodhisattva represents a universal model that is applicable to all Buddhist practitioners. This includes less educated or less endowed believers who aspire for rebirth in the Pure Land. Already in 1924, Tang raised the prospect of building a ‘New Pure Land’ in this very world, thus suggesting a modern-sounding alternative to both traditional models of Pure Land practice – the popular ideal of rebirth in the Western paradise on the one hand, and the elitist goal of realising innate ‘Mind-only Pure Land’ on the other.<sup>44</sup>

Around the same time Tang began to discuss his new ideals from the perspective of a scholar of ‘Consciousness-only studies’. In this way he joined a broader intellectual current represented by his new mentor Taixu but also his acquaintance and occasional polemical opponent Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 (1871–1943).<sup>45</sup> What sets Tang apart from this larger trend was his insistence on identifying oneself as simultaneously a devout Pure Land practitioner and a Consciousness-only scholar. In some of his essays, Tang explains this double identity in terms of the rapprochement between ‘understanding’ (*jie* 解) and ‘practice’ (*xing* 行). Moreover, he appears to generalise this approach as a viable program for other contemporary Chinese Buddhists, as in the following quote from an essay titled ‘The General Guiding Principles of Today’s Study of Buddhism’ (*Jinri xuefo zhi da fangzhen* 今日學佛之大方針):

Therefore, in terms of my requisite for responding marvellously to [present] times and people’s capacities, and for benefitting oneself and others alike, I have the two following things to say: For understanding, there is Consciousness-only, while practice should be directed to the Pure Land. Since Consciousness-only is the skilful means for understanding the teachings, it guarantees that wisdom will be fully gained. Since it is the Pure Land to which all practice is directed, it guarantees that compassion will be wholly perfect.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. ‘The Criteria of New Buddhification’ 新佛化之標準 (*Haichaoyin* 5/6: 13; MFQ 159: 257).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Constructing a New Pure Land’ 建設新淨土 (*Haichaoyin* 5/5: 7, MFQ 159: 131).

<sup>45</sup> See Aviv (2020).

<sup>46</sup> 「如是大圓當為妙應時機，作自利利他之資糧者，有二語曰：解在唯識、行歸淨土。蓋以唯識為通教之方便則智無不備。以淨為實行之歸趣，則悲無不圓」 (*Haichaoyin*, 6/3: 22,

Tang's postulate that Pure Land practice should be balanced with an 'understanding of the teachings' has a palpable polemical intent. One target of these polemics was popular Pure Land preachers, who – in Tang's view – condoned the attitude of proud ignorance and scorn for scriptural erudition. His campaign against the anti-intellectualism of the old-fashioned Pure Land devotees reached a broader audience in the latter half of the 1920s thanks to the two essays that appeared in the famous *Haichaoyin* 海潮音 journal: 'Advice to Contemporary Practitioners of Buddha-recollection: On the Necessity of Being Attentive to Scriptures and Treatises' (*Quan jinri nianfozhe xu jian chi jinglun wen* 勸今日念佛者須兼持經論文) published in December 1928<sup>47</sup> and 'Establishing the Pure Land School Anew' (*Jingtu zong zhi xin jianli* 淨土宗之新建立) from March 1929.<sup>48</sup> The first of these two texts is written in the form of a manifesto followed by a *gatha*, or a summary in verse. The second contains a mock dialogue between the author and an anonymous representative of the traditional 'Pure Land school' (Tang uses the relatively new term *jingtu zong* 淨土宗). Whereas neither of these essays mentions Yinguang by name, it is apparent that at least some of the opinions that Tang singles out for criticism could well be supported with Yinguang's authority.

The major claim of both aforementioned essays is that Chinese Buddhism is undergoing a grave crisis that may threaten its very survival in the modern age. In 'Establishing the Pure Land School Anew' Tang blames this crisis on the widespread ignorant attitudes of traditional Buddhist preachers, naming both Chan and Pure Land persuasion as targets of his rebuke. He notes that in spite of their sometimes tenuous relationship, both of these traditions appear aligned with each other in their arrogant disdain for scriptural and doctrinal studies. Chan masters cultivate the ideal of 'detachment from words and realising the Truth' (*li wenzi zheng shixiang* 離文字證實相), which is to say that they advocate abandoning conceptual discrimination as an obstacle in seeing the true nature of reality. Pure Land preachers, on the other hand, reduce the whole gamut of Buddha's teachings to the sole 'one phrase' (*yi ju* 一句) of Amitābha's name, recited by devout yet ignorant believers. Moreover, they are in the habit of denigrating the study of sūtras and treatises as 'talking about food and counting [other people's] treasures' – the label that had been attached to Tang himself.<sup>49</sup>

Tang argues that these anti-intellectual overtones of Chan and Pure Land teachings reflect a grave misunderstanding of their original intent. The Buddha predicted that some people would become excessively attached to the body of

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MFQ 161: 414).

<sup>47</sup> *Haichaoyin* 9/12: 16-17 (MFQ 171: 460-2).

<sup>48</sup> *Haichaoyin* 10/2: 26-30 (MFQ 172: 144-148).

<sup>49</sup> MFQ 172: 144.

doctrine written down in the voluminous Buddhist canon. This would result in developing what Consciousness-only scholiasts call ‘attachment to phenomena’ (*fazhi* 法執), which is the major obstruction that needs to be removed by someone aspiring to final enlightenment. For such people ‘detachment from words’ or reciting ‘one phrase’ may serve as a kind of remedy, likened to a kind of laxative commonly used in Chinese medicine. This therapeutic intent has completely escaped contemporary Chan masters and Pure Land preachers, who behave like someone who is overdosing on old medicine long after their original ailment has been cured.<sup>50</sup>

According to Tang, this misunderstanding had grave consequences for the Republican period sangha. It obscured the true meaning of Buddha-recollection, making it unappealing to outsiders and ineffective as a path of insiders’ self-cultivation. The lack of a sound doctrinal background had led to widespread confusion regarding Pure Land tenets, such as ‘Other-power’ (*ta li* 他力), which had been erroneously taken to mean that *nianfo* does not need to be accompanied by good works or the study of the doctrine. Such vulgarised and naïve approaches to Pure Land practice made its adepts particularly vulnerable to the condemnation and ridicule of the non-Buddhists and other forces that Tang labels rather as ‘external demons’ (*waimo* 外魔). Pure Land devotees who pin their hopes on the simple practice of reciting Buddha’s name are routinely accused of promoting ‘seeking death’, ‘superstition’ and ‘passivity’. Confronted with such attitudes, many of them lose confidence in the path that they had first chosen to follow:

Not to mention these recent times, when Western influence has spread in the East. Heretical theories are thriving everywhere, various ways of thinking mingle with one another, tangled and incomprehensible. If we insist on containing all methods of Pure Land tradition within this [one practice of] keeping the Name, then those who are misguided will not be willing to awaken faith. Even those who are pious, no matter how strong their beliefs, need to base them firmly in the teachings. Otherwise, they are bound to be swayed by the opinions of others. Eventually, they may even be converted by the demonic ways.<sup>51</sup>

Tang maintains that the impending demise of traditional Chinese Buddhism can only be averted by the joint effort of the new generation of practitioners who will prove to be more doctrinally aware than their predecessors. He argues that every adept of Buddha-recollection should be encouraged to study scriptures to the extent that her or his abilities allow. Those of most inferior capacities – old, illiterate or infirm – can be allowed to continue with their simple Pure Land

<sup>50</sup> MFQ 172: 144–145.

<sup>51</sup> 「況爾來西化東漸，邪說繁興，思想雜糅，千條萬緒。若專以持名攝淨土宗一切法，不獨狂者不肯起信，既捐者雖強信而不以經教固其基，則將來見異思遷，亦終為魔道所轉」 (MFQ 171: 460).

faith, although they should still be instructed about the basic meaning of reciting Amitābha's name. Those of middling capacities ought at least to digest the basic canon of Pure Land scriptures (ideally, the Three Sūtras and the *Pure Land Treatise* by Vasubandhu)<sup>52</sup> so as to understand the basic rationale behind their practice. Everyone else should strive to realise the deeper meaning of *nianfo*, described by Tang as the Marvelous Import of Mahāyāna (*Dasheng miaoyi* 大乘妙義).<sup>53</sup>

Tang's emphasis on scriptural study and theoretical understanding, rather than simple belief, clearly contradicts the model of Pure Land practice suited for 'ignorant men and women' envisaged by Yinguang. The basic difference between these two approaches is captured in the following exchange from 'Establishing the Pure Land School Anew':

Question: What is wondrous about Buddha-recollection is that it allows one to be reborn in the Pure Land. Would it be necessary to argue who is wise and who is stupid?

Answer: The Buddha is the one who knows everything. Hence, we who study Buddhist teachings are also seeking wisdom. Once there is wisdom, the wholesome recompense will follow. You should realize that the various glorious adornments of the Western Pure Land are all there because of Amitābha's omniscient wisdom. Now, if you recollect Amitābha but do not strive for wisdom, you will not be in accord with Amitābha's omniscient wisdom. How could you then attain the rebirth in [his Pure Land]?<sup>54</sup>

Tang clarifies that a 'single-minded' recitation of Amitābha's name alone will not produce wisdom but only a state of meditative concentration (*ding* 定) or a complete mental focus on the object of one's practice. In this state one can hope for a vision of the recollected Buddha that appears merely as an image transformed by consciousness (*weishi suobian* 唯識所變). Yet, one cannot directly progress to actual understanding of the reality behind such appearances. A pious but ignorant person risks rebirth in peripheral areas of the Pure Land, whose conditions are not essentially different from the present world. In such condi-

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<sup>52</sup> The concept of 'Three Sūtras and One Treatise' appears to be borrowed from the Japanese Pure Land tradition. Interestingly, in spite of his self-proclaimed double identity as a follower of Consciousness-only and Pure Land, Tang did not write much about the so-called *Pure Land Treatise* (*Jingtu lun* 淨土論) attributed to Vasubandhu.

<sup>53</sup> See MFQ (172: 145). In the 'Advice...' Tang uses the phrase 'the Ultimate Way of the Wisdom of Pure Land Tradition' 淨土宗智究竟道 (MFQ 171: 460) in a similar context.

<sup>54</sup> 「問曰：念佛妙在往生淨土。何必要辯智愚乎？答曰：佛是一切智者。故，吾人學佛亦是求智慧。有智慧則福報隨之而生。當知西方極樂種種莊嚴皆是隨一切智慧之阿彌陀佛而有者。今若念佛而不求智慧，則與阿彌陀佛之一切智慧不相應。何能往生乎」 (MFQ 172: 146).



tions the ultimate liberating insight will become possible only after prolonged instruction, given by various bodhisattvas and teachers of Dharma.<sup>55</sup>

With this argument, Tang effectively turns Yinguang's faith-based model of practice on its head. It will be remembered that according to Yinguang a single-minded recitation of Amitābha's name allows even 'ignorant men and women' to attain 'correspondence' between their mind and the mind of Amitābha and thereby to 'secretly penetrate Buddha-Wisdom'. Tang, on the contrary, defines the 'correspondence' between common practitioners and Amitābha in terms of the practitioners' aspiration to seek and develop wisdom – the same kind of aspiration that was developed by Amitābha on his way to Buddhahood. Apparently, there is something different about the way in which Yinguang and Tang Dayuan understand the very concept of wisdom. This difference becomes clear in the next passage in 'Establishing the Pure Land School Anew', which expresses yet another doubt of an archetypal traditional Pure Land preacher:

Question: The scriptures say that Wisdom is something that men are originally endowed with. It is enough to break through the obstacles to make it manifest. Why would it be necessary to seek wisdom by studying scriptures and treatises extensively?

Answer: When the scriptures say that Wisdom is something that men are originally endowed with, it refers to the Fundamental Wisdom, which is only a partial attainment of meditative concentration. Since this kind of wisdom does not involve conceptual discrimination, it cannot perform any function. It is not much different from ignorance. As for wisdom that discriminates properly and can actually be used, the aforementioned Fundamental Wisdom needs to give rise to the Subsequently Acquired Wisdom. Only then can it be applied without limits.<sup>56</sup>

Tang insists that wisdom worthy of this name is necessarily conceptual and that it operates in the realm of physical objects and concepts by engaging in discrimination (*fenbie shili* 分別事理). The primordial luminosity of mind unstirred by conceptual thought is, *by itself*, no better than ignorance. It is called 'Wisdom' only because it facilitates enlightened conceptual cognition, the 'Subsequently Acquired Wisdom', which allows one to communicate and interact with others.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> MFQ 172: 145–146.

<sup>56</sup> 「問曰：經言智慧本具。只須破障顯之。豈必廣學經論以求智慧耶。答曰：經言智慧本具者只是根本智，不過定之一分。既無分別亦不能起作用。與愚癡略等。若善分別而有用之智慧，則須待由根本而起之後得智，方能運用無窮」 (MFQ 172: 146).

<sup>57</sup> The concepts of the Non-conceptual Wisdom (*wufenbiezhi* 無分別智), or Fundamental Wisdom (*genbenzhi* 根本智), and the Subsequently Acquired Wisdom (*houdezhi* 後得智) are derived from the doctrinal treatises associated with the Indian tradition of Yogācāra, such as the *Fo-dijinglun* 佛地經論 (T 26.1530: 302c25–26), or the commentary to Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* (*Shedachenglungshi* 攝大乘論釋) attributed to Vasubandhu (see e.g. T 31.1595: 242c11–243a4,

Regarding ‘breaking the obstacles’, Tang reminds his interlocutor that in the view of Buddhist scholastics, ‘obstacles’ to liberation are twofold – some are related to mental states that cause suffering and anxiety (*fannaο zhang* 煩惱障), while others result from deep ignorance as to the nature of reality (*suozhi zhang* 所知障).<sup>58</sup> Practice limited to ethical conduct and contemplation can quell afflictions of the former kind, but it cannot eradicate the fundamental ignorance (the so-called ‘undefiled ignorance’, *buran wuzhi* 不染無知), which is the ultimate root of suffering. This latter, much more formidable hindrance cannot be overcome solely by pious conduct and the assiduous recitation of Amitābha’s name. It requires at least some degree of intellectual investigation into the core principles of Buddhist teachings in order to rectify one’s flawed perception of reality.<sup>59</sup>

Tang was not the first or only Buddhist modernist of his age to question the traditional Chinese view of liberating wisdom as a wholly non-discursive cognition intrinsic to the nature of one’s mind. The most likely inspiration in this case is Ouyang Jingwu,<sup>60</sup> the scholar with whom Tang frequently corresponded on matters of Buddhist doctrine. In the early 1920s Ouyang took issue with the received Chinese interpretations of the concept of wisdom, or knowledge of true reality (*zhi* 智), which is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice. In brief, Ouyang argued that Buddhist wisdom is never complete without ‘wondrous activity’ (*miaoyong* 妙用), which ‘produces verbal discourse for the benefit of others’ (*qi yanshuo yi li ta* 起言說以利他) – precisely the function of the ‘Subsequently Acquired Wisdom’.<sup>61</sup> In a similar vein, in his popular philosophical essays Tang Dayuan reproached pre-modern Chinese scholiasts for their lack of appreciation of the Subsequently Acquired Wisdom, which allows one to employ conceptual discrimination and communicate one’s liberating insight to others (‘to turn the Dharma-wheel’). Tang’s seemingly scholastic discussions of the distinction between two kinds of wisdom were thus woven into larger arguments against old vices of traditional Chinese Buddhists, in particular the followers of Chan: their neglect of the ethical practice of the bodhisattva in favour of seeking self-benefit and their indifference towards the study, interpretation and preaching of the Buddhist doctrine, which was wrongly perceived as inferior to non-conceptual insight.<sup>62</sup>

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T 31.1597: 366a15–29). The latter text (T 31.1597: 366b20–29) already brings up the contentious status of the Non-conceptual Wisdom as a form of wisdom, although it discusses this issue from a stance that appears more nuanced than Tang’s.

<sup>58</sup> On the history of these concepts, see Muller (2014).

<sup>59</sup> MFQ 172: 147.

<sup>60</sup> Aviv 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Ouyang 1977: 9–12. As a matter of fact, Ouyang referred to a threefold distinction between ‘Wisdom of Added Practice’ (*jixingzhi* 加行智), the ‘Fundamental Wisdom’ and the ‘Subsequently Acquired Wisdom’.

<sup>62</sup> Some of Tang’s discussion of the two Wisdoms in this context can be found in his ‘Ex-

It should be noted, however, that Tang never meant to present the Subsequently Acquired Wisdom as a purely theoretical activity. His understanding of Buddhist wisdom is, all things considered, embedded in religious practice. In ‘Advice to Contemporary Practitioners of Buddha-recollection’, he explicitly rejects the approach to Consciousness-only studies that equate Buddhist teachings with ‘philosophy’ (*zhexue* 哲學).<sup>63</sup> Tang’s discussion with his traditionalist opponent in ‘Establishing...’ makes clear that he regards studying, explaining and preaching Buddhist sūtras or treatises as a form of virtuous conduct that engages intellect, but also speech and body. Echoing the famous Neo-Confucian philosopher Wang Yangming (1472–1529), Tang claims that an understanding that does not result in practice is never a real understanding. Those who only speak, but do not act, are simply lacking understanding, rather than forsaking practice in its favour. Therefore, there is no need to draw a contrast between the two and fear that scholars of Consciousness-only doctrines will abandon the path of Pure Land path practice altogether. As illustrated by Tang’s own example, they can still recollect the Buddha piously as long they perceive a personal karmic bond (*yuan* 緣) with Amitābha’s vows.<sup>64</sup>

Such remarks indicate rather clearly that Tang’s reformist proposal has no dire consequences for popular Pure Land piety. It is only meant as a reminder to the pious devotees that their practice needs to be backed by doctrinal understanding in order to be successful *as* Buddhist practice. Acquiring this doctrinal understanding does not, by itself, weaken the resolve to recite the name of Amitābha or the aspiration to be reborn in a literally understood Pure Land. As Tang explained elsewhere, inasmuch as the Consciousness-only scholar regards all that is real as a product of the mind, he can still speak about Amitābha and Pure Land as entities no less ‘real’ than anything else.<sup>65</sup> Tang’s reformist postulates and critiques are targeted not so much against naïve Pure Land belief of the masses as against the traditional doctrinal framework that was accepted by most exegetes of the Pure Land tradition, including Yinguang – the framework that emphasises the ineffable and innate ‘Fundamental Wisdom’ at the expense of study and propagation of the doctrine. What Tang appears to be advocating is, therefore, not some philosophical ‘rationalisation’ of the Pure Land faith but rather a reinterpretation of its religious imagery. On

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position of the Truth of Eastern Psychology’ 東方心理學闡真 and ‘The Experimental Study of Consciousness-only’ 唯識實驗學, collected in Tang (1927a: 70-71, 104–106; reprinted in WWQB 65: 544–545, 578–79).

<sup>63</sup> See MFQ (171: 461).

<sup>64</sup> MFQ 172: 147–8

<sup>65</sup> This point is made, for example, in Tang’s essay called ‘Detailed Exposition of Consciousness-only’ (*Weishi fawei* 唯識發微) (cf. Tang 1927b: 113–114, reprinted in WWQB 66: 189–190).

this interpretation the splendid Western Pure Land is first and foremost a place of study and instruction in Dharma. Amitābha, on the other hand, is a role model and teacher of true Wisdom – a wisdom that has to be communicated to those in need of instruction.

### Concluding Remarks

In most of his published writings, Tang had nothing but praise for Yinguang, the man widely regarded as a beacon of Buddhist piety in contemporary China. However, in spite of numerous conciliatory remarks, Tang's principled criticism of simple Pure Land faith could not but create a division between himself and his old master. In a letter addressed directly to Tang (published in various collections of Yinguang's writings), Yinguang warns the ambitious layman that Buddhism is a matter related to life and death, not intellectual investigations. He points out that someone who seeks understanding (*mingliao* 明了) at the expense of practice (*shixing* 實行) is more like an actor parroting Buddhism than a student of doctrine.<sup>66</sup> After the publication of 'Establishing the Pure Land anew', Tang was publicly chastised by several critics, including the layman Feng Da'an 馮達庵, who denounced his reformism as a complete misunderstanding of the egalitarian spirit of the Pure Land.<sup>67</sup>

Tang's conflict with Pure Land 'conservatives' reflects various internal tensions within the Chinese sangha, some of which were probably more personal than strictly doctrinal. Regardless of the exact motifs behind these polemics, it appears that neither side was particularly interested in appealing to the Western opposition between religion and philosophy – or, for that matter, any opposition of Western origin. Tang's critique of the contemporary Pure Land 'school' rebukes Pure Land believers for their unwarranted disdain towards those who employ intellect to study and discuss Buddhist doctrines. Tang appears aware that these anti-intellectual tendencies within the Pure Land tradition were themselves sanctioned by certain theoretical assumptions that had been deeply ingrained within mainstream intellectual traditions of Chinese Buddhism. Consequently, in his critiques of the Pure Land 'school', he either implicitly rejects those assumptions or subjects them to explicit criticism, without, however, departing too far from the framework of traditional scholasticism.

One of the traditional assumptions that Tang appears to be abandoning in his own exposition of the Pure Land is the application of the distinction between

<sup>66</sup> 'Reply to the layman Tang Dayuan' 復唐大圓居士書 (YFW 2: 339–340).

<sup>67</sup> See Feng's polemic 'Tang Dayuan's Reform of the Pure Land School – an Erroneous View' (唐大圓改革淨土宗之妄見) in the journal *Hongfa shekan* 弘法社刊 12: 1–3 (MFQB 36: 455–457).

‘principle’ and ‘phenomena’. In the late-imperial tradition of Pure Land exegesis, appropriated by Yinguang, these categories inform a two-track approach to the practice of *nianfo*: the insight into the ‘principle’ (i.e., the universal Buddhahood shared by Amitābha and the practitioner) is a goal assigned to the minority of gifted meditators, while the majority of ordinary practitioners is supposed to focus on the ‘phenomenal’ level of the practice, which allows for simple unexamined faith. In Tang’s vision this bifurcated model is effectively replaced with one unified standard: practice informed by doctrinal ‘understanding’ to which everyone alike should aspire. As pointed out above, this postulate has much to do with Tang’s awareness of the critical spirit of modernity, which pressed Pure Land believers to form a reasoned response to the external (secular, or perhaps Christian) critics of Buddhism. However, Tang’s major concern throughout his polemic appears somewhat more traditional. Namely, he argues that attaining wisdom in this life remains a universal goal of all kinds of Buddhist practices, including the Pure Land practice of *nianfo*. In this respect he appears to side with the elitist stance that was traditionally represented by Chan masters, who underlined the importance of ‘seeing’ or ‘understanding’ the truth about reality already in the present life. Yet, as shown above, Tang also challenges the traditional stance of Chan, which in his opinion misconstrues the Buddhist notion of ‘understanding’ as something passive, ineffable and oriented inwards.

The more explicit part of Tang’s critique can be construed as an attempt at reworking this traditional notion of ‘understanding’. He does this by underlining another aspect of Buddhist enlightenment, defined as the ‘Subsequently Acquired Wisdom’, which encompasses conceptual knowledge and is attained through intellectual effort. Once again, it is easy to relate Tang’s case to the modern promotion of ‘rational’ knowledge – especially considering that Tang himself touted Consciousness-only scholasticism as the Buddhist response to science and scientific thought.<sup>68</sup> Yet, it might make at least as much sense to contextualise his arguments within some larger and continuous themes of Chinese intellectual history. The problem of the value of theoretical understanding, as opposed to practical or ethical ‘know-how’, is a recurring topic of debate in the history of Chinese thought. Such issues were discussed among learned Confucians and, at least to some extent, educated Buddhists at least since the late Ming (1369–1644) period.<sup>69</sup> The extent to which Tang Dayuan’s criticism of Pure Land anti-intellectualism might be related to those earlier currents is, of course, a matter open to critical discussion. Nonetheless, they should at least be seriously considered as possible antecedents to this modern debate about Buddhist ‘practice’ and ‘understanding’.

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<sup>68</sup> Hammerstrom 2014: 175–179.

<sup>69</sup> Yu 2018: 142–143.

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### Abbreviations

- MFQ *Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng* 民國佛教期刊文獻集成 [Complete Collection of Republican-era Buddhist Journals] 2006. Edited by Huang Xianian 黃夏年 et al., vol. 1–204. Beijing: Quanguo Tushuguan Wenxian Suwei Fuzhi Zhongxin.
- MFQB *Minguo fojiao qikan wenxian jicheng bubian* 民國佛教期刊文獻集成補編 [Supplementary Complete Collection of Republican-era Buddhist Journals] 2008. Edited by Huang Xianian 黃夏年 et al., vol. 1–83. Beijing: Zhongguo shudian.
- T *Taishō shīnshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [New Edition of the Buddhist Canon published in the Taishō Era] [2023]. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, vol. 1–85. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.
- WWQB *Weishi wenxian quanbian* 唯識文獻全編 [The Complete Anthology of Consciousness-only Texts] 2013. Edited by Wang Lianzhang 王聯章 et al, vol. 1–66. Beijing: Guojia Tushuguan.
- X *Manji shinsan Dainippon zokuzōkyō* 卍新纂大日本續藏經 [Manji Newly Compiled Supplementary Buddhist Canon of Great Japan] [2023]. Vol. 1–90. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association.
- YFW *Xinbian quanben Yinguang fashi wenchao* 新編全本印光法師文鈔 [Newly Edited Complete Collected Works of Master Yinguang] 2009. Edited by Beijing Dafang Guang Huayan Shuju 北京大方廣華嚴書局, vol. 1–24. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Guji.

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