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Can an Evil Person Attain Rebirth in the Pure Land? Ethical and Soteriological Issues in the Pure Land Thought of Peng Shaosheng (1740-1796)

Hongyu Wu¹

Abstract

In Pure Land literature in China, it is not uncommon to find accounts about morally flawed or evil persons attaining rebirth in the Pure Land. The rebirth of evil persons in the Pure Land, in fact, is an issue that can work both for and against Pure Land proponents. On the one hand, the soteriological inclusiveness of evil persons can be employed by promoters to prioritize Pure Land belief and practice over other forms of Buddhist thought and practice. On the other hand, belief in the saving power of Amitābha Buddha might discourage people from doing good or, even worse, legitimize evil behavior—a point that critics both within and outside the Buddhist community were quick to point out.

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The moral failures of Pure Land practitioners surely garnered criticism and hostility that were directed both toward the individual and toward the Pure Land teachings—and, as Pure Land beliefs and practices in China were not sectarian, the misconducts of the Pure Land practitioners could eventually damage the reputation of the whole Buddhist community. This paper focuses on Peng Shaosheng, a Confucian literatus turned Buddhist layman and a prominent advocate of Pure Land practice, to examine how he employed a syncretic approach by drawing on concepts such as karmic retribution, sympathetic resonance (*ganying*), no-good (*wushan*), and ultimate good (*zhishan*) to develop a scheme that neither denied the saving power of Amitābha Buddha and supremacy of Pure Land practice nor endorsed “licensed evil.”

Introduction

The Pure Land scriptures include statements about a morally flawed person or an evil person attaining rebirth in the Pure Land; for example, in the *Wu liang shou jing* 無量壽經 (*Infinite Life Sūtra*, Sk: *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*), the eighteenth original vow made by the future Amitābha Buddha, while still the Bodhisattva Dharmakāra says,

I will not attain my Buddhahood if all the sentient beings generate faith in me with great sincerity and joy, longing for rebirth in my land, with ten *nian* 念 (contemplating or

reciting)² of my name, cannot attain rebirth in the Pure Land. Only those who have committed the five gravest offenses (*wu ni* 五逆, Sk: *pañcānantarya*)³ or have slandered the true Buddhist *Dharma* are excluded. (T12, no 360: 268a26-28)

In the *Guan wu liang shou jing* 觀無量壽經 (*Amitāyus Meditation Sūtra*, Sk. *Amitāyurdhyāna Sūtra*), Śākyamuni Buddha told Queen Vaidehi that an evil person “who did not do any good deeds, committed the five gravest offenses, ten kinds of evils⁴ and other bad deeds” could have a rebirth on the lowest level of the lowest grade in the Pure Land if he or she could encounter a good *Dharma* friend who preached Pure Land Buddhism to him/her, exhorted him/her to generate faith in Amitābha Buddha, and invoked the Buddha’s name ten times with devotion at the last moment of his/her life (T12, no365: 346a12-26).

In addition to the scriptures, we can also find testimonials of evil persons attaining rebirth in the Pure Land in the *Wang sheng zhuan* 往生傳 (*Stories of Rebirth in the Pure Land*). Here is one of the examples:

Xiongjun’s 雄俊 secular name is Zhou, a native of Chengdu. He excelled in speech but was lenient in precept observance. He once returned to lay life to serve in the army for some time, and later he was ordained to reenter the saṅgha. After returning to monastic life, he repented [his

² In Chinese, *nian* can mean “contemplate” or “orally recite.” Unless the context clearly shows it means mentally contemplate or orally recite, I will translate *nian* as contemplate/recite to indicate the two possibilities.

³ The five gravest offenses refer to killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, and causing disharmony or schism in the Buddhist community.

⁴ Ten evils refer to killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, frivolous talk, greed, jealousy, and wrong view.

past misconduct], and often recited Amitābha Buddha's name. He died suddenly and was brought to the netherworld. The judge of the netherworld reprimanded him and sentenced him to hell. Xiongjun was shocked and retorted [in response] to the verdict, "The *Meditation Sūtra* says that even a person who has committed the five gravest offenses can be saved to the Pure Land if he recites the name of Amitābha Buddha ten times at his last moment. Although I created bad karma, I have never committed the five offenses. If you allow me to chant Amitābha Buddha's name, I should be able to be reborn in the Pure Land; otherwise, what the Buddha said is a lie." Then joining his palms, he invoked the name of Amitābha Buddha. At the moment a platform decorated with jewels appeared, he stepped on the platform and headed towards the Pure Land. Someone going to the netherworld with Xiongjun transmitted this story after this person came back to life. . . . (XZJ 135: 0241a6-13)

The above cited story was included in *Jingtu sheng xian lu* 淨土聖賢錄 (*The Records of the Sages and Worthies of the Pure Land*) compiled by Peng Xisu 彭希涑 (1761-1793) in 1784 (see further discussion below), but there are several earlier versions collected in biographical collections such as *Song gao seng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (*Song Biographies of Eminent Monks*) compiled by Zanning 贊寧 (919-1002) in 988, *Jingtu wang sheng zhuan* 淨土往生傳 (*Rebirth story in the Pure Land*) by Jiezhū 戒珠 (985-1077), and *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 (*The Comprehensive History of Buddhas and Patriarchs*) compiled by Zhipan 志磐 (n.d.) in 1269.⁵ There are differences in these versions (see further discussion below), but all the versions show that Xiongjun was lenient in his

⁵ My acknowledgement to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of these earlier versions.

observance of Buddhist precepts and probably had violated the Buddhist precept of non-killing when he served in the army or committed other evil acts. His rebirth in the Pure Land, especially his self-apologia, raised a seemingly irresolvable ethical and soteriological issue. That is, if one who recites Amitābha Buddha's name with devotion cannot be saved by Amitābha Buddha due to wrongdoings, Amitābha Buddha's original vows are not true; or to put it another way, if Amitābha Buddha's original vows are true, one can attain rebirth in the Pure Land as long as one recites the Buddha's name with great devotion, regardless of what evil one has done.

The rebirth of evil persons in the Pure Land, indeed, can pose a difficult problem to Pure Land followers. On the one hand, the superiority of Pure Land beliefs and practices that the proponents promote lies in Amitābha Buddha's original vows that extend his salvific power to everyone and in the practice of *nianfo* (especially the oral invocation), which is accessible to everyone regardless of whether one is intelligent or not, virtuous or evil.⁶ On the other hand, the omnipresence of Amitābha Buddha's salvific power, especially the soteriological inclusiveness of evil persons, may invalidate one's effort for moral cultivation, discourage people from doing good or, even worse, endorse doing evil—a point that critics both within and outside of the Buddhist community can be quick to point out. For example, in the *Fo zu tong ji* version, Xiongjun chanted the name of Amitābha Buddha to cancel his bad karma while he was committing evil (T49, no.2035: 0275b05-0275b19). A similar narrative can be found in *Jingtu wang sheng zhuan* (T51, no.2071: 0120b06-0120c18). This narrative in *Fo zu tong ji* implies that people may interpret the chanting of the Buddha's name as an effective way to eliminate one's evil, therefore giving them free rein to commit evil as Xiongjun did.

Another well-known example of this type of situation is the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land sect) in Kamakura, Japan. Shinran (1173-1263),

⁶ See Shandao T37 n1753: 0249a7-17, and Zhuhong XZJ 109: 133b-134b.

the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū, advocated that Amitābha Buddha's saving power was the only cause of one's rebirth in the Pure Land. To free one from attachment to the self-effort that hindered one's faith in Amitābha, he idealized evil persons as those that were more inclined to entrust themselves to the Buddha due to their deep awareness of their evil. Although Shinran had no intention to encourage evil actions, a side effect of his teaching was the pervasiveness of licensed evil among his followers (Dobbins 53-56). The moral failures of Pure Land practitioners surely entailed criticism and hostility that were directed both toward the individual and toward the Pure Land teachings they followed—and had the potential to eventually damage the reputation of the whole Buddhist community. Thus, the rebirth of an evil person in the Pure Land can be an issue that works both for and against Pure Land believers.

Scholars of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism agree that the Chinese Pure Land thinkers never denied that a Pure Land practitioner should behave well and abstain from doing evil, and nobody has questioned the necessity of doing good deeds (Jones "Foundations" 4). Did Pure Land thinkers in Chinese Buddhist history ever consider the possible contradiction between the universal salvation Amitābha Buddha promised in his original vows and the motivation or necessity to do good and avoid unethical behavior? If some of them realized the contradiction, how did they reconcile the conflicting claims through deeming ethical behavior and keeping precepts as essential without endorsing licensed evil or overemphasizing one's self-effort to eclipse the other power of Amitābha Buddha? And how did they provide doctrinal support to motivate and rationalize doing good? This paper will examine how Peng Shaosheng 彭紹升 (1740-1796, *Dharma* name: Jiqing 際清, courtesy names: Erlin jushi 二林居士, Zhiguizi 知歸子), a Confucian literatus turned Buddhist layman in the Eighteenth century, viewed and responded to these questions, and it will analyze how he avoided potential pitfalls in the Pure Land teaching by developing a

scheme that neither denied the saving power of Amitābha Buddha and supremacy of Pure Land practice nor encouraged licensed evil, and instead provided incentives and rationalization for doing good.

Contextualizing Peng's Life and Thought

Peng Shaosheng was a prominent Buddhist layman, an ardent Buddhist apologist, and a devoted Pure Land practitioner under the Qianlong reign 乾隆 (1736-1796) of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). Late Qing and early Republican reformers such as Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792-1841), Wei Yuan 魏源 (1794-1857), Yang Wenhui 楊文會 (1837-1911), and Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 (1865-1898) were all indebted to his Buddhist thought and practice.

A brief introduction to Peng's life and the cultural, social, and religious milieu in which he lived is necessary before turning to Peng's Pure Land thought. Peng's view on the relationship between ethical behavior and the salvific power of Amitābha Buddha largely grew out of his interaction with internal Buddhist critics and with external Confucian detractors.

According to his autobiography collected in *Jushi zhuan* 居士傳 (*Biographies of Buddhist Laymen*), Peng Shaosheng was born into an elite Confucian family in the culturally sophisticated and economically prosperous southern Yangtze River region. His extended family included a number of successful candidates of the national civil service exam. His great-grandfather was a Hanlin academician, his father was the minister of the Board of War, and his elder brother was also a government official. Among his nephews and grandnephews, there were more than a few successful candidates and government officials (XZJ 149: 1009b5). Peng Shaosheng himself passed the national civil service exam, and gained his *Jin shi* 進士 degree at a young age (XZJ 149: 1009b5). Peng took a different

path than other successful candidates in his family. Instead of seeking a position in the government, he began his spiritual search after he passed the civil service exam. At first, he devoted himself to the Confucian classics in order to follow the examples of Confucian sages. Among the Confucian paragons, he admired the righteous Han Confucian statesman Jia Yi 賈誼 (200-168 B.C.E.),⁷ who was pivotal in building a prosperous society under the reign of Han Wendi 漢文帝 (re: 180-157 B.C.E.) by serving as a sagacious and moral councilor of the emperor. According to Peng's autobiography, he examined successful and unsuccessful examples of governments in history in the hope of finding a way to an ideal Confucian society, but this soon proved to be an impossible task for him. Following a friend's suggestion, he spent three years in Daoist practice to no avail (XZJ 149: 1009b7-11). Following the steps of his great-grandfather, Peng Shaosheng had a strong interest in the thought of the Ming neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529). Peng's preference for Wang Yangming went against the intellectual mainstream of his time because Wang was often accused by Peng's contemporaries of blending Buddhist ideas and Confucian concepts.

After several years of spiritual searching, Peng turned his attention to Buddhism and eventually became a Buddhist due to the influence of Xue Jiasan 薛家三 (1734-1774), a long-term friend (Peng *Yixingju* 1: ii). It is noteworthy that Peng's conversion to Buddhism did not mean that he totally gave up Confucian values; instead, he believed that the two shared the same values and Buddhism was a better way to achieve a Confucian ideal (Shek 96). After his conversion, Peng wrote extensively to defend and promote Buddhism, and Pure Land Buddhism in particular. The gen-

⁷ Jia Yi, an official in the Former Han dynasty who wrote extensively on statecraft, was particularly instrumental in developing agriculture and implementing policies favorable to farmers.

res of his writing are very diverse, including treatises, commentaries, poems, biographies of exemplary Buddhist laymen and laywomen, and afterlife accounts of Buddhists, which he collected through a planchette or spirit-writing.⁸ Although he did not compose a text to systematically formulate the relationship between ethical behavior and rebirth in the Pure Land, his views on this issue can be found in many of his works on Pure Land belief and practice. This paper will piece together the views explicitly and implicitly conveyed in Peng's writings to draw an outline of his scheme that relates ethics to the saving power of Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land.

There has been a consensus among scholars that Pure Land Buddhism in China has never been an independent sect; instead, it is considered to be more like "common property of all Chinese Buddhists" (Jones "Foundations" 3). Nevertheless, views on how to define the Pure Land and how to attain rebirth in the Pure land are not monolithic among Buddhists. For example, one camp in the Eighteenth century promoted the idea of dual cultivation of Chan (Jp: Zen) and Pure Land. In brief, dual cultivation refers to the idea that the practice of meditation and the study of *gong'an* (Jp: *kōan*) were as essential to realizing enlightenment as was the invocation of the name of Amitābha Buddha to spiritual cultivation and the assurance of salvation after death in the Pure Land. Moreover, enlightenment and rebirth in the Pure Land became fundamentally the same

⁸ Planchette (*fujū* 扶乩) was a divination practice popular among the literati in the Ming and Qing Dynasty. A god, or a goddess, or the spirit of a deceased person was invoked to possess a person, who would use a suspended sieve or tray to direct a stick to write characters in sand or incense ashes. For detailed discussion of the ritual and its history, see Jordan and Overmyer 36-88. Although planchette was controversial and eminent monks, such as Zhuhong, discouraged this practice (Yü 186), Peng Shaosheng defended this practice as an effective method to prove one's rebirth in the Pure Land (Peng Yixingju 8: 9a-b).

goal. Peng Shaosheng himself embraced the idea of dual cultivation with a preference for the Pure Land practice.

On the other hand, disputes between Pure Land proponents and Chan practitioners did not cease in the Eighteenth century despite the fact that the Pure Land proponents had proposed the scheme of the dual cultivation of Chan and Pure Land as means to settle the dispute between the two systems. Some Chan practitioners insisted that the Pure Land was only a construction of one's mind, and condemned the claim of physical existence of a pure land outside the *sāha* world as a violation of the Buddhist concept of non-duality.⁹ Pure Land practice, such as oral invocation of Amitābha Buddha's name, was saved only for those who lacked the mental capacity to understand Buddhist doctrines or to practice meditation.

The Chan adherents and Pure Land promoters were also involved in another controversy. In the recorded sayings of Chan masters and the *gong'an* stories, there were Chan masters who employed enigmatic language and antinomian behavior to help disciples attain enlightenment. It was not uncommon for literati and monastics to imitate the ancient Chan masters in using baffling language and unconventional behavior as a spontaneous expression of enlightenment and non-duality. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, the imitating of dialogue and antinomian behavior was ritualized and performed publicly in monasteries controlled by Chan monks (Wu 9). This practice, however, was not accepted by everyone within the Buddhist community. For example, Zhuhong 祿宏 (1535-1615), one of the most prominent advocates of the recitation of Amitābha Buddha's name in the Ming Dynasty, criticized copycats of the Chan *gong'an* stories as "charlatans sporting counterfeit testimonials" (Wu 42). Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568-1610), a Ming literatus and Pure Land

⁹ In a debate between Peng Shaosheng and an anonymous monk about the Pure Land, the latter held this view. See Peng Yixingju 7: 12.

promoter, also criticized the *kuangchan* 狂禪 “crazy Chan” practitioner of his time, probably Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), the famous iconoclastic literatus and lay Chan teacher of the Ming (Jones “Yuan Hongdao” 110), who disregarded Buddhist precepts and serious religious cultivation. Peng admired Li Zhi’s talent, but he did not condone Li Zhi’s antinomian behavior, such as his negligence of the sex segregation prescribed by Confucian social norms, and his leniency in Buddhist precept observance (XZJ 149: 949b13b-0950a8). He praised Zhuhong for his effort to proselytize single-minded recitation of Amitābha Buddha’s name, and his insistence on strict observance of Buddhist precepts, but blamed Li Zhi for the popularity of the antinomian behavior in Chan practice (XZJ 149: 972b11-14).

In addition to the centuries-long internal Buddhist disputes between Pure Land proponents and Chan practitioners, the disputes between Confucians and Buddhists continued in the Qing Dynasty. To defend Buddhism, Buddhists of the Qing period followed the steps of their predecessors to promote the compatibility of Buddhism and Confucianism. Not surprisingly, Peng Shaosheng argued for the parallels between Confucian concepts and Buddhist ideas; he frequently employed Confucian terms and concepts to illustrate Buddhist ideas. Many Confucians, on the other hand, explicitly rejected the compatibility of the two teachings. This exclusive and purist view was represented by the *Kao zheng xue pai* 考證學派 (Evidential School) in the Eighteenth century. This school attempted to return to “authentic” interpretation of Confucian classics through philological studies. The Evidential School scholars favored the interpretation of Confucian classics in the Han dynasty, which predated the introduction of Buddhism in China, but disapproved of the Song and Ming interpretations of Confucian classics, which they believed to be tainted and distorted by Buddhism and responsible for the collapse of the Ming Dynasty.¹⁰ The centuries-long Confucian critique of Buddhism—that Buddhists failed to

¹⁰ On the Evidential School, see Elman.

fulfill their familial and social responsibilities and caused moral degeneration in society—also found its voice in the Eighteenth century. Pure Land practitioners in the Eighteenth century were also subject to another centuries-old Confucian critique: that the Pure Land belief was an obvious expression of the fear of death and attachment to long life and that the oral invocation of the name of Amitābha Buddha to attain rebirth in his Pure Land was foolish.

Ethical Behavior, Karma, and Rebirth in the Pure Land

It is against this backdrop of the Chan vs. Pure Land and Confucianism vs. Buddhism debates that Peng Shaosheng addressed the relationship between the saving power of Amitābha Buddha and ethical behavior. Peng's views on the rebirth of the morally flawed or evil person in the Pure Land are reflected in several life stories.

The first example is the story of Empress Dugu 獨孤 (544-602). When Peng compiled his *Shannüren zhuan* 善女人傳 (*Biographies of Good Women*), a collection of biographies of exemplary Buddhist laywomen, he decided to exclude the life story of Empress Dugu from his collection because she was alleged to have killed an imperial consort out of jealousy, even though *Fozu tong ji* claims that she was reborn in the Pure Land. According to Peng,

Compassion and non-killing are the first priorities of Pure Land practice. As she [Empress Dugu] had not eradicated the bad karma that resulted from killing, how could she attain rebirth in the Pure Land? Furthermore, [the *Fozu tong ji*] does not note its sources, and errors could have occurred in the process of circulation. For these reasons, I exclude her story [from my collection]. (*Shannüren* 1: iia)

This statement shows Peng's reluctance to accept that Empress Dugu, a murderer and an offender against Buddhist and Confucian ethics, could attain rebirth in the Pure Land. His disbelief is based on the view that bad karma created by doing evil, such as committing murder, would necessarily obstruct one's rebirth in the Pure Land (unless the bad karma had been eliminated). However, Peng's stance had a twist when he prefaced *Jingtū sheng xian lu*, which was compiled by his nephew, Peng Xisu (two years after the completion of the *Shannüeren zhuan*). In this collection, Peng Xisu confirmed the empress's rebirth in the Pure Land and also mentioned her jealousy, a vice that both Confucian and Buddhist moralists admonished women to overcome, but he omitted the murder episode. Instead, nephew Peng stressed the empress's devotional practices (XZJ 135: 0386b3-12). Xisu's account conveys a message that a morally flawed person is also eligible for rebirth in the Pure Land thanks to the saving power of Amitābha Buddha and one's related devotional practice. Peng Shaosheng was highly involved in his nephew's project by annotating, proof-reading, and even contributing several entries to this collection (XZJ 135: 0190a2-4); therefore, it is unlikely that he did not know about the inclusion of Empress Dugu's story and thus the apparent contradiction to his own condemnation of the empress in his *Shannüeren zhuan* (Peng *Shannüeren* 1: iia). In his preface to Xisu's *Jingtū sheng xian lu*, Peng Shaosheng explains the inclusion of the rebirth accounts of those who committed evil, such as Empress Dugu and Xiongjun (whose story was mentioned previously):

I examined the conducts of all the exemplary people collected in my *Jūshi zhuan* [*Biographies of Buddhist Laymen*] and *Shannüeren zhuan*. If there were some flaws in a person's behavior, I excluded his or her stories from those collections. But this collection is based on the post-mortem lives [of the biographical subjects] and does not consider their past misconducts. Since [evildoers], such as Xiongjun, Weigong, Zhongkui and Shanhe, were reborn in the lowest level of

the Pure Land and joined the sages, [their rebirth stories are included in this collection]. . . . Their rebirths testify to the incredible power of Amitābha's original vow, which is as inclusive as the sea that accepts hundreds of rivers flowing into it, and as bright as the sun that casts its light everywhere without leaving a single small spot [in darkness]. Amitābha Buddha will not desert anyone who has faith in him. The Buddha Amitābha will surely accept all sentient beings that generate faith in him. (XZJ 135: 189b14-190a1)

According to Peng Shaosheng's view, the inclusion and exclusion of evil persons' life stories are decided by different motivations of the two kinds of biographical collections. Peng Xisu's collection was compiled to testify to Amitābha Buddha's compassion and to argue for the supremacy of the Buddha's saving power, while Peng Shaosheng's biographical collections of Buddhist laymen and laywomen were intended to set good examples for people to follow. By drawing a clear line between the two kinds of biographical collections, Peng Shaosheng cautioned his audience that people should follow the examples of the virtuous Buddhists even though morally flawed or evil persons could be reborn in the Pure Land due to the compassionate vows of the Buddha. In this sense, Peng was not oblivious to the connection between the all-embracing salvific power of Amitābha and the potential risk of licensed evil.

Xiongjun's story mentioned earlier may furnish further evidence that the two Pengs were aware of the uneasy relationship between the other power of the Buddha and unethical behavior. Because Peng Xisu noted the source of each of his rebirth stories in his *Jinggu Sheng xian lu*, we are able to know that his version of Xiongjun's rebirth story cited previously was from *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, not from *Fozu tong ji*. Peng Xisu also annotated the difference in Xiongjun's story between his version and the one in *Fozu tong ji*:

According to *Fozu tong ji*, Xiongjun defended himself with the merit of reciting Amitābha Buddha's name in hell, so King Yama returned him to life. He then went to Xishan to concentrate on reciting Buddha's name with one mind. Four years later, after he bid farewell to people, he had a rebirth in the Pure Land. In this respect, it [the *Fozu tong ji* version] is different from my account. (XZJ 135: 0241a13)

This statement shows that Peng Xishu had a close reading of the version in *Fozu tong ji*. Interestingly, when Peng Xisu compared the two versions, he skipped another difference between the two versions. The one in *Fozu tong ji* says,

When Xiongjun heard that the [Pure Land] scriptures say, "if one chants Amitābha Buddha's name ten times, one's gravest offenses of eighty eons can be cancelled," he happily said to himself, "Fortunately, I can rely on this statement." From then on, when he did evil, he chanted Amitābha Buddha's name. (T49, no.2035: 0275b05-0275b19)

This account found in the *Fozu tong ji* suggests the possibility of misusing Amitābha Buddha's saving power to endorse doing evil. Evidenced by his extensive reference to this collection in his *Jūshi zhuan* and *Shannüren zhuan*, Peng Shaosheng was also familiar with *Fozu tong ji*; it is therefore safe to assume that Peng Shaosheng had read the version in the *Fozu tong ji*. A possible reason for the two Pengs' (if considering Peng Shaosheng's active involvement in his nephew's work) choice of the *Song gao seng zhuan* version over the *Fozu tong ji* version is that they were concerned about the abuse of Amitābha Buddha's salvific power and avoided circulating such a story to encourage people to do evil.

Unlike Japanese Jōdo Shinshū, which found prevailing licensed evil among adherents in its early years, no existing record or other valid evidence so far has been discovered to suggest there was pervasive licensed evil among Chinese Pure Land followers before or during the Eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the two previously discussed examples suggest that Peng had a keen awareness of the possibilities that people might misunderstand the power of the Buddha's compassionate vows, as Xingjun did, as a free pass to commit evil. To discourage people from doing evil without discrediting the all-encompassing saving power of Amitābha Buddha, Peng says:

Due to the original vow of Amitābha Buddha, there is *gany-ing* [sympathetic resonance/stimulus and response] existing [between the Buddha and all the sentient beings]. Therefore, self and other are identical. There is no distinction between real and delusion. The Suchness permeates in all the dharma realms . . . The meditation sutra says that the lowest grade in the Pure Land is inhabited by those who have done evil but return their mind to the Buddha at the end of their life, while in this sūtra [*Infinite Life Sūtra*], it says those who committed the five gravest offenses are excluded. People may ask why the two sūtras are different.¹¹ It is true that no one who contemplates/recites Amitābha Buddha's name with one mind will not be reborn in the

¹¹ Peng was not the only person who realized the discrepancies between the scriptures, and the tension between the Buddha's salvific power and ethical behavior; for example, Shandao viewed the scriptural statement that those who slandered the dharma or committed the five gravest sins would be excluded from the Pure Land as an expedient means of the Buddha to prevent people from doing evil, and Amitābha Buddha's all-embracing salvific power definitely extended to them (Zhang 15-19). It was probable that Peng Shaosheng was familiar with this view since Shandao was revered as one of the Pure Land patriarchs, but Peng apparently did not view the statement as an expedient means.

Pure Land due to the power of Amitābha Buddha's original vow. But, if one's bad karma is so severe, it is difficult for that person to come across a good dharma friend who will help her or him to generate faith in Amitābha Buddha and vow to be reborn in his Pure Land. The sun shines everywhere, but the innately blind cannot see it; the Ganges River is deep and wide, but it [is too far away] to quench one's thirst. This is frightening, isn't it? (XZJ 32: 0540a1-16)

What is at work explicitly and implicitly in the above statement are the concepts of *ganying* (sympathetic resonance or stimulus and response) and karma.¹² Peng Shaosheng understands *ganying* as the underlying principle that actualizes Amitābha Buddha's original vow of saving people to his Pure Land through their faith and meditating/reciting his name.¹³ In other words, *ganying* means that one's rebirth in the Pure Land is not a one-dimensional favor showered on him/her by the Buddha; instead, it involves two sides: the savior and the saved. The one who cries for help has to activate or stimulate the Buddha's resonance. Knowing Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land, generating faith in him, and contemplating or chanting his name were essential factors to bring about sympathetic resonance from Amitābha Buddha to attain a successful rebirth (Peng *Yi xing ju ji* 4: 32a-32b). Peng assures his audience of attaining rebirth in the Pure Land through *ganying*, which is set in motion by faith and meditating/reciting the Buddha's name, yet he also points to the possibility of a failed rebirth. This failure, in the view of Peng, is not the inefficacy of Amitābha Buddha, but the karmic retribution of one's moral failings. If one never has a chance to know Amitābha Buddha in this life due to the

¹² On *ganying* in Chinese Buddhist thought, see Sharf 119-133.

¹³ One example is Jixing Chewu, Peng's contemporary, who explained the efficacy of meditation/invoke of Amitābha Buddha's name based on the concept of *ganying*. See Jones "Mentally" 61-62. Peng Shaosheng's view on *ganying* shared some similarities with that of Jixing Chewu.

bad karma accrued by unethical behavior (not only the five gravest offenses but also other offenses accumulated to a certain degree), there is no way for one to conduct these devotional practices. Consequently, sympathetic resonance with the Buddha and a successful rebirth are out of the question (at least in this lifetime). In this sense, the key to turning on the whole system of sympathetic resonance is contingent upon one's karma.

An analogy can be made to illustrate Peng's scheme. Amitābha is like a firefighter on call, who is ready to reach out and save the victims as soon as he receives the call; and the supplicant is the one who picks up the phone to dial 911 for help. If one does not know the number 911 and is unable to make the phone call, the help does not come. In the same vein, a person who cannot generate faith in Amitābha or meditate/chant his name due to obstacles brought about by the bad karma is like the one who does not know the number and is therefore unable to make the 911 call. When the person cannot call for Amitābha's help, the salvation is not available. By holding the individual accountable for his or her failed rebirth in the Pure Land, Peng Shaosheng makes individual moral cultivation essential without undermining the power of Amitābha Buddha or degrading the Pure Land teachings.

Losing an opportunity for rebirth in the Pure Land because of evil-doing probably was sufficient to keep "licensed evil" at bay, but motivating people to observe precepts and do good was another issue Peng Shaosheng had to address because he sensed a lack of motivation to keep Buddhist precepts and to do good among his fellow literati Pure Land believers. For example, in one of his letters to Wang Jin (汪縉, 1725-1792), a close friend of his and also a believer of Pure Land Buddhism, Peng wrote, "You took great effort to promote 'good,' but your conduct does not fit what you promote . . ." (Peng Yixingju 4: 4b). In another article, he lamented again that few people in his time were willing to follow Zhuhong's

example to devoutly practice *nianfo* and observed precepts rigorously:¹⁴ “My friend Wang Jin admired Master Zhuhong, but looked down upon today’s monastics. I invited him to follow Master Zhuhong to set up a Lotus Society with me, but he was indifferent to my invitation.” (Peng Yixingju 5: 10a).

In this context, Peng Shaosheng proposed a dynamic to motivate people to keep Buddhist precepts and to do good. As discussed previously, the power of Amitābha Buddha’s compassionate vows is the precondition for a successful rebirth in the Pure Land, but other elements, such as faith in Amitābha Buddha, understanding Buddhist doctrines, meditating/reciting Buddha’s name, doing good, and observance of Buddhist precepts, are also indispensable for connecting oneself with the Buddha through *ganying* to actualize Amitābha’s saving power. The life and afterlife story of Peng’s wife demonstrates how these conditions, especially ethical behavior, work to enable a successful rebirth. Through planchette, Peng came to know that his wife had been reborn in the Xie man guo 懈慢國 (the Land of the Lax and Arrogant), just over the border from Amitābha Buddha’s Pure Land (Peng Yixing ju 8: 17a). Xie man guo is a place from which one can transition to the Pure Land. This land is reserved for people who cannot fully understand Buddhist doctrines or maintain the Buddhist precepts (Peng Yixingju 8: 17a). People reborn there need not go through transmigration in the six realms, but will attain rebirth in the Pure Land more quickly if they practice diligently.¹⁵ Peng views this region as better

¹⁴ Zhuhong’s Pure Land society was famous for its advocacy of intense devotional practices and rigorous observance of Buddhist precepts, for details see Yü 64-100, 192-222.

¹⁵ The earlier discussion of Xie man guo can also be found in Shi jingtu qunyi lun 釋淨土群疑論 (T47 1960) by Huaigan 懷感 (?-699) of the Tang Dynasty (618-904). My acknowledgement to the anonymous reviewer for reminding me of this piece. The Yuan brothers in the late Ming—Yuan Hongdao (1568-1610) and Yuan Zhongdao (1570-1624)—also spoke about this place. The Yuan brothers singled out precept practice over other criteria for rebirth in the Pure Land. See Eichman 236-237. Peng also mentions the Yuan

than the six realms of transmigration and he counts it as the border of Pure Land, even though there is still a gap between this land and the lowest of the nine grades of the Pure Land (Peng *Yixing ju* 8: 17a). The planchette also told Peng that his wife was in Xie man guo with Tao Shan 陶善 (style name: Qionglou 瓊樓, 1756-1780), the wife of Peng's nephew,¹⁶ and Lu Shiquan 陸士詮 (style name: Jintang 近堂, 1749-1788), a friend of Peng.¹⁷ These two people were well-versed in Buddhist doctrines, but Jintang was said to have broken his vow of maintaining a vegetarian diet in his lifetime (Peng *Yixinju* 1: 3b). Peng explained why his wife could be reborn in the same place as the other two people:

My wife observed Buddhist precepts more rigorously than the two people though her understanding of Buddhist dharma is inferior to these two people. According to karmic cause and effect, it is reasonable that she had a rebirth in the Xie man guo with [Qionglou and Jintang], and she will eventually be reborn in the Pure Land. (*Yixingju* 8: 17b)

According to Peng, in addition to Amitābha Buddha's compassion, it was his wife's moral behavior that secured her a position on the outskirts of the Pure Land, and the possibility of eventually progressing to one of the nine grades in the Pure Land. Peng's scheme for a positive rebirth is a holistic one; that is to say, moral behavior in his system is in such an elevated position that it can supplement other criteria, such as good understanding of Buddhist doctrines, even though moral virtue does not completely replace other components. In this sense, successful rebirth in the Pure Land or its outskirts provided an incentive for behaving morally.

brothers' account in his writings to emphasize the importance of adhering to Buddhist precepts. See below for details.

¹⁶ For Tao Shan's life, see Peng Shannuren 2: 35a-36b.

¹⁷ For Lu Shiquan's life, see XZJ 135: 0411a10-0412b4.

In addition to this holistic dynamic, Peng Shaosheng also adopted the idea of nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land as some Pure Land predecessors had done to encourage the observance of Buddhist precepts.¹⁸ He cited Yuan Hongdao, the prominent lay Buddhist of the late Ming as the example.

Yuan Hongdao's younger brother dreamed that Hongdao said to him, ". . . I am in the Pure Land now, but because I am lax in precept observance, I am unable to ascend to the jeweled altar of the ultimate emptiness with the Buddhas and bodhisattvas [i.e., the highest grade of the Pure Land]. . . if I could observe the precepts more rigorously, I should be in a higher grade. Those who have good understanding of the dharma and observe the precepts rigorously will have a rebirth in the highest grade. The next grade is those who observe precepts meticulously and their positions in the Pure Land are secured. Those who have good understanding of the dharma, but do not observe precepts might be wandering like Astasena due to their karma. I have seen a lot of people born into Astasena." . . . Thus we know [from Yuan Hongdao's experience], the provisional supply of the Pure Land [Jingtu zi liang 淨土資糧] was merits. The foundation of merits is keeping precepts. (XZJ 32: 0538b2-9)

Through the afterlife account of Yuan Hongdao, Peng did not only put ethical behavior before good understanding of Buddhist doctrine in securing a position in the Pure Land, but he also highlighted that observance of Buddhist precepts could move one up to a higher grade of rebirth. The advantage of attaining a good rebirth in companion with the Buddhas and

¹⁸ Wang Rixi 王日休 (?-1173) is an example. See Jones "Ethical Foundation" 7-8.

bodhisattvas could be a stimulus for people to hold precepts and behave ethically.

Pure Land Belief, Enlightenment, and Ethical Behavior

The Pure Land critics among Confucians and Chan adherents could easily find fault with the idea of doing good and avoiding unethical behavior for the sake of a positive rebirth. For example, Confucian critics either dismissed concern for the afterlife as foolish or ridiculed the Buddhist ascetic lifestyle and observance of the precepts as a selfish desire for a long life (Yuan 340), while it was also possible that the Chan opponents could criticize the emphasis on doing good for a successful rebirth in the Pure Land as attachment to the dualism of good/evil and the Pure Land/*sahā* world. Although Peng did not name specific Chan practitioners who held this view, his writings reveal that he kept these actual and potential challenges within and outside the Buddhist community in his mind. In those writings, he provided a rationale for moral behavior other than selfish interest, and he also argued that Pure Land belief was in line with Confucian ethics and Buddhist non-dualism. For example, he says,

The *Sukhāvatīvyūha sūtra* instructs people to do good, to remove evil and pursue salvation with a devoted mind. Buddhist teaching provides people with different ways to escape from *saṃsāra*, but all teach people to do good and avoid doing evil. The Pure Land is the place of *zhishan* 至善 [ultimate good]. Aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land functions to achieve the ultimate good. If one is not reborn in the Pure Land, one's good cannot be completed and evil cannot be cleansed because all sentient beings are trapped in transmigration, their *ālāya* [storehouse consciousness]

defiled by their past karma to produce the *sahā* world. It is just like a dirty food vessel filled with manure and maggots. Even when delicious food is placed in it after lightly cleansing it with water, the stench still lingers. If one is reborn in the Pure Land, then one can see the Buddha, listen to his sermons and attain the *wu sheng ren* [forbearance of the unborn] without being trapped in transmigration. Upon exterminating the roots of evil and eventually attaining the roots of good, one can reenter the *sahā* world to preach the true dharma and save all sentient beings by helping them to gain rebirth in the Pure Land. [Doing so], one embodies goodness and illuminates virtue between heaven and earth. (XZJ 32: 551a7-551b1)

Peng aptly tied Pure Land belief and practice to the realization of the world of ultimate good. To the best of my knowledge, Peng is the first to equate the Confucian concept of *zhishan* (the ultimate good) and the evil-free Pure Land. The ultimate good is a concept presented in the Confucian classic *Da xue* 大學 (*Great Learning*), selected by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) during the Song Dynasty as one of the Four Books of Confucianism.¹⁹ The ultimate good was also the topic discussed by Dai Zhen 戴震 (1724-1777) in his *Yuan Shan* 原善 (*On the Good*) and *Mengzi zi yi shu zheng* 孟子字義疏證 (*Evidential Study of the Meaning of Words in The Mencius*). Dai Zhen was a major Confucian critic of Peng Shaosheng and a leading figure of the Evidential School, which represented the Confucian intellectual trend of Peng's time. Peng and Dai were involved in a debate through correspondence right after Dai Zhen sent Peng the two books.²⁰

¹⁹ The first sentence of the *Da xue* reads: "The way of the Great Learning lies in illuminating virtues, loving people and achieving the ultimate good." See Zhu 20.

²⁰ On the debate between Peng and Dai Zhen, see Shek 100-106.

Dai Zhen designated *ren* 仁 (benevolence), *li* 禮 (rites/propriety), and *yi* 義 (righteousness) as the major and indispensable aspects of the ultimate good (Dai 160). As previously mentioned, Peng did not abandon Confucianism even after his conversion to Buddhism; in fact, he still embraced Confucian values, but believed that Buddhism could be more effective to achieve the Confucian moral ideal. Therefore, Peng did not oppose the pursuit of ultimate good, although he disagreed with Dai Zhen's approaches to realizing the ultimate good. Dai Zhen proposed philological study of the Confucian classics of antiquity and the investigation of human relations and human needs as the ways to obtain moral truth, but Peng viewed this approach either as "holding on to names and forms" or "limited to personal opinions" (Peng "Yu Dai Dongyuan" 492). Instead, as the above-cited passage tells us, Peng argued that faith in Amitābha Buddha and aspiration to be reborn in his Pure Land could achieve the goal of the ultimate good, and rebirth in the Pure Land could completely eradicate all the causes of doing evil and eventually enable one to achieve moral perfection, even though one would return to the *sahā* world to save others. Peng, by arguing for rebirth in the Pure Land as an effective way to achieve the Confucian sense of the ultimate good, gave Pure Land practice a moral justification. By integrating the Mahāyāna concept of universal salvation and the bodhisattva path into Confucian moral cultivation, Peng moreover affirmed that Pure Land adherents do good not for their own benefit, but for the salvation of all sentient beings.

Peng further reasoned that the Pure Land practice was equivalent to observance of Confucian ritual/propriety:

My friend Wang Jin says all the Pure Land adherents should follow the example of Yan Hui 顏回, that is to say, they should not look unless it is in accordance with the Pure Land; they should not listen unless it is in accordance with

the Pure Land; they should not say unless it is in accordance with the Pure Land; they should not move unless it is in accordance with the Pure Land. When all under heaven return to *ren* [benevolence], the world becomes the land of Amitābha Buddha. . . . What Mr. Wang says is absolutely right. (*Yixinju* 5: 9b-10a)

Wang Jin's statement came from the famous conversation on benevolence and rites/propriety between Confucius and Yan Hui, his favorite disciple who was renowned for his moral virtues. The Master said,

To return to the observance of the rites through overcoming the self contributes benevolence. If for a single day a man could return to the observance of the rites through overcoming himself, then the whole empire would consider benevolence to be his . . . (Lau 112)

When Yan Hui asked about the details of the observance of rites/propriety, the Master answered,

Do not look unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not listen unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not speak unless it is in accordance with the rites; do not move unless it is in accordance with the rites. (Lau 112)

In the Confucian view, observance of rites or propriety is indispensable for the realization of a moral world. What Wang Jin argued, and Peng ostensibly agreed with, was that Pure Land belief and practice could function as Confucian rites to transform people into moral beings and make an ideal society a reality.

How can Pure Land belief and practice bring about moral perfection? Peng explained,

When one meditates/recites the name of Amitābha Buddha for one moment, that moment one becomes the Buddha; if one meditates/recites the name of the Buddha at every moment, one becomes the Buddha at every moment. If one's mind is pure, and the land is pure. (XZJ 33: 0112b13)

In other words, when one meditates or recites Amitābha Buddha's name with great devotion, one forms oneness with the Buddha and his/her mind is identical with the pure mind of the Buddha; thus, the person is free from moral defilement and becomes morally perfect.

In contrast to those who had generated genuine faith in Amitābha Buddha, Peng pointed out there were two kinds of people who could not have faith in the Buddha. One kind is those "who have attachment to all the existence. For them, all the phenomena have substantial existence; therefore, they seek for fame and best interests for themselves . . ." (XZJ 33: 0111b7-8), while the second kind of people

. . . have attachment to emptiness. They say that there is no transmigration after one's death. There is no karmic retribution to good or bad behavior. . . . These "crazy Chan" adherents also say that purity and defilement are the same (by nature of emptiness). . . . there is no need to seek for rebirth in the Pure Land outside of this world. (XZJ 33: 0112b13-15)

The two kinds of people who could not generate faith in Amitābha Buddha were also those who misunderstood the true nature of emptiness and were easily subjected to moral failings. The first kind of view easily leads to attachment to material gain, sensual pleasure, and selfish behavior to benefit oneself at the cost of others. The second kind of attitude easily gives rise to moral nihilism and results in leniency in precept observance and licensed evil. Peng challenged the moral nihilism represented by

these “crazy Chan” adherents through connecting the Chan concept of *wushan* 無善 “no-good” to Confucian *zhishan* “ultimate good”:

Chan practitioners like the term *wushan* “no-good,” while Confucians say *zhishan* “ultimate good.” If [you] ask [me] what the difference is between the two, my answer would be that, since good is the opposite of evil, good ceases to exist when there is no evil. Therefore, when the pure mind of non-duality extends to the entire *dharmadhātu* and virtues permeate everywhere like the sands of the Ganges River, everything is transformed—perfect and complete. The good of no-good is the ultimate good. Those who talk about emptiness but behave in a dualistic way [by doing evil] create evil karma, but falsely claim it is no-good. They are the walking dead and the dregs of hell. The Buddha cannot save those who do not know what they are doing. (XZJ 32: 0551a14-0551b1)

Peng admitted to discrimination between good and evil on the conventional level, but ultimately, emptiness is the nature of all things and thus the dichotomy of good and evil no longer exists. To avoid blurring the boundary between good and evil and endorsing the latter, Peng drew on the interdependence of the two opposite extremes in the good-evil dichotomy to emphasize that so-called no-good is grounded in the complete eradication of evil. The realization of non-duality and emptiness by the enlightened person thus can be translated into moral perfection. In other words, the truly enlightened individual spontaneously avoids doing evil, while a person who claims to be non-dualistic but indulges in doing evil is still trapped in duality and far from enlightenment. Therefore, Peng wrote “the original good is the true emptiness . . .” and “the good is another name of the enlightened mind” (*Yixingju* 4: 6b).

We can summarize Peng's internal logic of the Pure Land and morality dynamic in this way: the genuine faith in Amitābha Buddha is enlightenment; enlightenment means the realization of non-duality and emptiness that free people from doing evil but motivate people to do good; thus, doing good can be considered as an external manifestation of one's genuine faith in Amitābha Buddha. It is thus safe to say that Peng Shaosheng sees faith in Amitābha Buddha, enlightenment, and moral perfection as completely identical. Not surprisingly, Peng Shaosheng claimed that, "[Chanting] Amitufo [Amitābha Buddha] is the extension of one's *liangzhi* 良知 (innate knowledge of the good)" (*Yixingju* 4: 1a). The extension of one's innate knowledge of good was advocated by the Ming neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming. Although Wang's thought was not popular during the Qing dynasty, no one would deny that moral self-cultivation was the spiritual career to which one should be devoted. By giving emptiness moral substance and asserting that Pure Land practices are instrumental for achieving the ultimate good, Peng Shaosheng's argument for the identity of Confucian and Buddhist ethics laid an ethic foundation for Pure Land belief and practice.

In summary, like many other Pure Land thinkers, who viewed the Mahāyāna concept of universal salvation and bodhisattva path as the ethical foundation of Pure Land Buddhism (Jones 14), Peng also believed that Pure Land practitioners should do good not for their own sake, but for the salvation of all the sentient beings. In addition to this commonly accepted Mahāyāna idea, Peng also aptly weaved the Buddhist and Confucian concepts of *ganying*, karma, Amitābha Buddha's vows, ultimate good or no-good together, and he proposed a dynamic that not only motivates and justifies doing good, but also avoids degrading Amitābha's saving power. By employing syncretic approaches to bridge the potential doctrinal disjuncture of ethical behavior and the universal salvation power of

Amitābha Buddha, he also argued for the complete compatibility of Confucian ethics, Pure Land practice, and enlightenment to defend Pure Land Buddhism against its internal and external detractors.

Abbreviations

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Taishō Tripiṭaka]
 XZJ *Xu zang jing* 續藏經 [Supplement to the Tripiṭaka]
 YQJ *Yuan Mei quanji* 袁枚全集 [Complete Works of Yuan Mei]

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