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Bodhisattva and Daoist: A New Study of Zhunti Daoren 準提道人在《Canonization of the Gods》

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Abstract: Although the portrayal of Zhunti Daoren (Cundī Daoist 準提道人) in the *Canonization of the Gods* (Fengshen yanyi 封神演義) is relatively subdued, it has garnered considerable scholarly interest owing to the pivotal role he fulfills in advancing the narrative and the profound cultural connotations encapsulated within the character. Scholars have put forward three distinct hypotheses: “Zhunti Daoren as a Buddhist deity”, “Zhunti Daoren as a Daoist deity”, and “Zhunti Daoren as the Panchen Lama”. Based on the theory that the figures in the novels of gods and demons (Shenmo xiaoshuo 神魔小說) embody symbolic characteristics, as well as the sociocultural background of Ming–Qing times, this study uses literary image analysis to investigate these three different interpretations. A basic examination is also performed to explore the correlation between Zhunti Daoren and Jieyin Daoren (Welcoming Daoist 接引道人), with the aim of illustrating the relationship between the cult of Zhunti and Pure Land Buddhism in late imperial China.

Keywords: *Canonization of the Gods*; Zhunti Daoren; Cundī Bodhisattva; Pure Land

1. Introduction

Zhunti Daoren, a character in the Ming (1368–1644) novel *Canonization of the Gods* (hereafter *Canonization*), embodies both ordinariness and extraordinariness. The character’s ordinariness is evidenced by his sporadic appearances between Chapters 61 and 84,¹ with most illustrated editions of *Canonization* omitting depictions of Zhunti Daoren. However, the character’s extraordinariness lies in his unique position as one of the hierarchs of the “heterodox” Xifang jiao 西方教 (literally, the religion of the West). Furthermore, despite his limited appearances, Zhunti Daoren is a fleshed-out figure (at least, not a flat character), having an integral function in the plot and contributing to the relevant protagonist.

Despite the lack of dedicated studies on Zhunti Daoren in non-Chinese languages, his significance was initially recognized by the French missionary Henri Doré (1859–1931) (Doré 1915, pp. 303–11) during the late Qing (1644–1912) and early Republican periods (1912–1949).² Doré’s approach integrated folktales gathered through fieldwork with the narrative of the novel, culminating in a reconstruction of the mythological background of the Buddhist deity Zhunti (Cundī 準提).³ Another pivotal scholar in this field is Ts’un-yan Liu, whose seminal work *Buddhist and Taoist Influences on Chinese Novels* delves into the correlation between Zhunti Daoren and Cundī Bodhisattva (Liu 1962, pp. 6–7). Following Liu’s lead, scholars such as Wei Juxian 衛聚賢 (Wei 1982, pp. 221–22) and Zeng Qinliang 曾勤良 (Zeng 1984, pp. 72–76) pursued research on Zhunti Daoren, and their works concur with Liu’s assertion that Zhunti Daoren in *Canonization* embodies Cundī in Buddhism. More recently, Yamashita Kazuo 山下一夫 (Yamashita 1999, p. 250) and Chen Xingyu 陳星宇 (X. Chen 2012, pp. 167–72) have analyzed the relationship between Zhunti Daoren and Xifang jiao, as well as the interplay between the Zhunti cult and Pure Land Buddhism during the late imperial era. Further scholarly attention to Zhunti Daoren is evident in the works of Jin Dinghan 金鼎漢 (Jin 1993, pp. 55–56), Chen Liao 陳遼 (L. Chen 1987,



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p. 72), Pan Baiqi 潘百齊 (Pan 2000, p. 188), and Xue Keqiao 薛克翹 (Xue 2016, pp. 234–37), all of whom have contributed to the study of the mythic quality of *Canonization*.

In general, the scholarship on Zhunti Daoren predominantly revolves around the figure's affiliation with Buddhism and Daoism, and the linkage to the Pure Land belief. Specifically, with respect to the issue of affiliation, there are three distinct perspectives: “Zhunti Daoren as a Buddhist deity”, “Zhunti Daoren as a Daoist deity”, and “Zhunti Daoren as the Panchen Lama”. This divergence can be ascribed to the multifarious academic orientations of the researchers and the deep-seated symbolic implications represented by the figures in mythological narratives.

In his *A Stylistic Study of Chinese Novels of Gods and Demons* (*Zhongguo shenmo xiaoshuo wenti yanjiu* 中國神魔小說文體研究), Feng Ruchang 馮汝常 (R. Feng 2009, pp. 164–217) presents three principal characteristics of God-Demon figures grounded in semiotics—the conceptual image (*yinian xingxiang* 意念形象), the cultural significance (*wenhua yiyi* 文化意義), and the informational function (*xinxi gongneng* 信息功能)—which are clearly aligned with the three different interpretations of Zhunti Daoren's identity (see Figure 1).⁴ Building upon Feng's theoretical framework, the study conducts a meticulous review of the three hypotheses concerning Zhunti Daoren's identity/affiliation. This process not only re-contextualizes this literary figure but also contributes to the investigation of the origins of characters in *Canonization*.⁵ Furthermore, the research delves into the intricate relationships among Zhunti Daoren, Jieyin Daoren, and Xifang jiao, proposing that Zhunti Daoren's role as a hierarch in Xifang jiao, alongside Jieyin Daoren, is more likely to have been influenced by the Pure Land transformation of the Zhunti cult in late imperial China than any connection with Guanyin. This perspective offers a unique insight into the development of the Ming–Qing Zhunti cult.

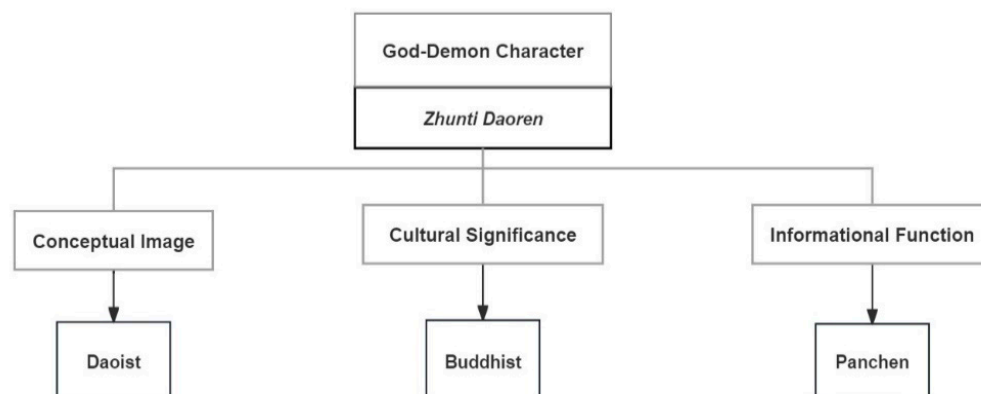


Figure 1. Zhunti Daoren as a God-Demon character.

2. Zhunti Daoren as a Daoist Deity

The portrayal of characters in novels of gods and demons is shaped by two literary environments (*wenxue huanjing* 文學環境). The first is the micro textual environment (*wenben xiaohuanjing* 文本小環境), which pertains to the specific time and space in which the characters of the novel exist (R. Feng 2009, p. 183). In fact, irrespective of any profound implications that transcend the text, the foundation of these characters relies on the author's characterization, which establishes the conceptual image.⁶ Scholars advocating Zhunti Daoren as a Daoist deity, such as Chen Liao and Pan Baiqi, primarily base their arguments on textual analysis, asserting that Chanjiao 闡教 (literally, the religion of elucidation), Jiejiao 截教 (literally, the religion of interception), and the enigmatic Xifang jiao are all attributed to Daoism, which leads to the natural conclusion that Zhunti Daoren is a Daoist deity crafted by the author (Pan 2000, pp. 183–86; L. Chen 1987, p. 74). Put simply, both Zhunti Daoren and Jieyin Daoren are designated as “Daoren” 道人 (Daoist), a term exclusively reserved for Daoist figures, whereas Buddhist characters should be referred to as “Bodhisattvas”, “Buddhas”, or “Arhats” (L. Chen 1987, p. 72). Looking through this

lens, the scholars have identified numerous examples in the novel, such as Zhunti Daoren's initial appearance in Chapter 61, "Yin Hong Is Killed by the Taiji Diagram" (*taijitu yinhong jueming* 太極圖殷洪絕命):

As he lifted his sword to behead Ma Yuan, Heavenly Master heard someone shouting behind him, "Brother of the Way! Have mercy on the life under your sword". He turned and saw a man in Daoist robes with a yellowish face, two coils of hair, and a short beard. The man greeted him politely.

"Where do you come from and what can I do for you, my friend of the Way?" Heavenly Master asked as he returned his greeting.

文殊廣法天尊舉劍纔待要斬馬元, 只聽得腦後有人叫曰: 道兄劍下留人! 廣法天尊回顧, 認不得此人是誰: 頭挽雙髻, 身穿道服, 面黃微須。道人曰: 稽首了! 廣法天尊答禮, 口稱: 道友何處來? 有甚事見諭? (Z. Xu 1992, p. 112)

The depiction of Zhunti Daoren in "Daoist robes" with "a yellowish face, two coils of hair, and a short beard", addressing the Heavenly Master of Outstanding Culture (*wenshu guangfa tianzun* 文殊廣法天尊) as "brother of the Way" and being referred to as "friend of the Way",⁷ clearly demonstrates that Zhunti Daoren belongs to Daoism.

Further evidence can be found in Chapter 71:

Zhunti climbed up the mountain and shouted, "Kong Xuan! Would you dare to come out to see me?"

Kong Xuan rushed out and saw a man arriving in a peculiar way. Why? There is a poem on him:

Clad in Daoist robes, with a branch in hand.

By the Eight Virtues Pond, the Way is preached, beneath the Seven Precious Trees, the Three Vehicles are expounded.

Holy relics overhead, wordless scriptures by hand.

Elegantly drifting as a true guest of the Way, exquisite and truly extraordinary.

Ascending to the Western world, dwelling in the superior realm, attaining eternal life, leaving the dusty world.

The lotus body manifests infinite wonders, the head of the West and great immortal is coming.

話說準提道人上嶺, 大呼曰: 請孔宣答話! 少時, 孔宣出營, 見一道人來得蹊蹺。怎見得? 有偈為證, 偈曰:

身披道服, 手執樹枝。

八德池邊常演道, 七寶林下說三乘。

頂上常懸舍利子, 掌中能寫沒文經。

飄然真道客, 秀麗實奇哉。

煉就西方居勝境, 修成永壽脫塵埃。

蓮花成體無窮妙, 西方首領大仙來 (Z. Xu 1992, p. 203).

The terms "Daoist robes", "true guest of the Way", and "great immortal", all seem to point to Zhunti Daoren's affiliation with Daoism.

While inferring the author's intent based on the text holds validity, the disregard for the social and cultural background often results in substantial biases in comprehension. Regardless of the affiliations of Chanjiao, Jiejiao, and Xifang jiao, the contention that Zhunti Daoren should be categorized as a Daoist deity relying on the term "Daoren" alone is highly questionable. As a matter of fact, "Daoren" first appeared in *Zhuangzi's* 莊子 "Floods of Autumn" (Qiushui 秋水), denoting individuals of exceptionally high moral character (F. Wang 1964, p. 141). It was later employed in the "Biography of Jing Fang" (Jingfang zhuan 京房傳) of the *History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Hanshu 漢書) to signify a thaumaturge (*fangshi* 方士) (Ban 1962, p. 3164). This change indicates that within the cultural context of early China, "Daoren" was not exclusively associated with Daoism (Yang 2009, pp. 305–7).

The subsequent introduction of Buddhism to China as a foreign religion led to the assimilation of "Daoren" into Buddhist lexicon. This absorption can be attributed to the

strategic adoption of pre-existing traditional terminologies and designations, a significant facet of early Buddhist translation activities. For instance, in the “Biography of Gu Huan” (Guhuan zhuan 顧歡傳) of the *History of the Southern Qi* (Nanqi shu 南齊書) (Xiao 1972, p. 935), monks are addressed as “Daoren”. The practice of using “Daoren” to refer to Buddhist monks was even assimilated into the Turkic languages, becoming a fixed appellation (S. Li 2006, p. 53).

Although the development of Buddhist translation activities led to the establishment of specific titles for Buddhist monks, the practice of referring to Buddhists as “Daoren” continued to endure. This phenomenon was particularly notable during the Ming and Qing dynasties, where it became fashionable among the social elite to adopt “so-and-so Daoren” as an art name (Hao 號). This group of self-identified “Daoren” intellectuals included individuals affiliated with Daoist or Buddhist traditions, as well as those who were not aligned with either religious affiliation. Consequently, while “Daoren” is linked to Daoist beliefs in certain instances, it predominantly serves as a non-religious designation, akin to the term “Shanren” 山人 (Mountain Dweller) which reflects a free-spirited mindset rather than a literal abode in the mountains (B. Feng 2008, pp. 10–26). Furthermore, “Daoren” conveys an additional meaning in Ming–Qing literary works. For example, Chapter 8 of *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (Jinpingmei 金瓶梅) contains the following passage:

The foreman of the lay workers (*daoren* 道人) from the temple arrived early in the morning, at the fifth watch, bearing with him the sutras that would be used in the liturgy. He prepared the consecrated space in which the ceremony would be held and hung up Buddhist effigies.

道人頭五更, 就挑了經擔來, 鋪陳道場, 懸掛佛像. (Anonymous 2013, p. 164)

“Daoren” in this context denotes a menial laborer who performs miscellaneous tasks in the temple (Wang and Ye 1993, p. 728). A parallel usage can be also discerned in Chapter 36 of the *Journey to the West* (Wu 2012, p. 152).

In light of this, it is apparent that without establishing a substantial nexus to Daoism, the specific reference of “Daoren” to Daoist adherents remains indeterminate. Nonetheless, bracketing the issue of “Daoren” does not impede our exploration of the Daoist elements in the cult of Zhunti. Within the existing body of scholarship, the Zhunti cult has frequently been construed as being solely Buddhist or as a quintessential representation of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism (*hanchuan mijiao* 漢傳密教) (Lan 2013, p. 46). However, the Japanese Esoteric Buddhism expert Osabe Kazuo 長部和雄 (1907–1990) posits that Daoist elements were already evident in the translations of *Cundī Dhāraṇī* as early as the Tang Dynasty (618–907) (Osabe 1975, p. 45). Related clues can also be discerned in the renditions by Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735) and Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705–774) (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 1983, T20, no. 1078, p. 187a7–11; T20, no. 1076, p. 179b19–20; T20, no. 1076, p. 179c2–6).

The Dunhuang manuscript *Talismans and Seals of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva* (Guan-shiying pusa fuyin 觀世音菩薩符印), dating from the Five Dynasties period (907–960), contains an entry titled “The Heart Seal of the Buddha–Mother of the Seventy Million Buddhas” (Qijuzhi fomu xinyin 七俱胝佛母心印). Li Xiaorong 李小榮 (X. Li 2003, pp. 317–18) claims that this seal is an outgrowth of the *Ritual of the Great Cundī Dhāraṇī: the Heart of the Buddha–Mother of the Seventy Million Buddhas* (Qifo juzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni fa 七佛俱胝佛母心大準提陀羅尼法), which exhibits pronounced Daoist influences. While a specific visual representation of this seal is absent in the manuscript, an image entitled “The Seal of the Sanskrit Cundī Mantrā” (Fanwen zhuntizhou yin 梵文准提咒印, Figure 2) is documented in the temple gazetteer of the Great Fragrant Hills (Da xiangshan 大香山) in Tongchuan 銅川, Shaanxi Province (Hou and Zhang 2008, p. 32). The gazetteer explains that this seal has been used for healing and exorcism since the Tang Dynasty, and there are many related miraculous tales.⁸

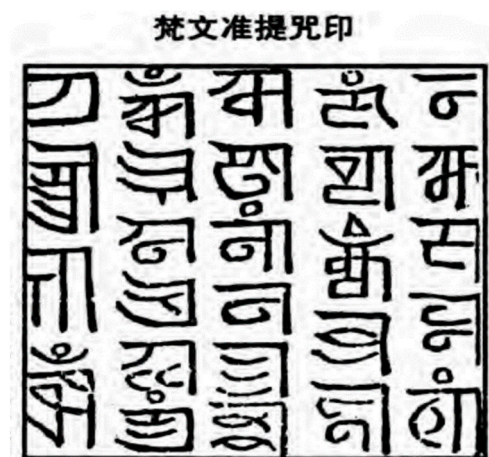


Figure 2. The Seal of the Sanskrit Cundī Mantrā.

Subsequently, in late imperial China, the “Unity of the Three Religions” (Sanjiao heyi 三教合一) movement further facilitated the amalgamation of the Zhunti cult with Daoism, with the *Heart Sutra of Zhunti* (Zhunti xinjing 准提心經) representing a notable outcome of the syncretism. This text was compiled by Wu Haiyun 吳海雲 (n.d.), a disciple of the Qing Dynasty bibliophile Wu Zhao 吳焯 (1676–1733). While similar to the majority of the ritual manuals pertaining to the Zhunti cult circulated during Ming–Qing times, which are excerpts from the renowned *Collection of Essentials for Realization of Buddhahood in the Perfect: Penetration of the Exoteric and the Occult Teachings* (Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji 顯密圓通成佛心要集),⁹ this scripture is distinctive due to its absence from the Buddhist canon. Instead, it is included in the *Collected Works of Zhang Sanfeng* (Zhangsanfeng quanji 張三丰全集) within the *Essentials of the Daoist Canon* (Daozang jiyao 道藏輯要).

In 1906, the abbot of the Two Immortals Chapel (Er’xian an 二仙庵) in Chengdu augmented the original eight volumes of the *Collected Works of Zhang Sanfeng* with the *Commentary on the Poetry of the Rootless Tree* (Wugenshu ci zhujie 無根樹詞註解) and the *Wish-Fulfilling Jewel* (Ruyi baozhu 如意寶珠) which encompasses the *Heart Sutra of Zhunti*. This editorial endeavor, as interpreted by Guo Xuyang 郭旭陽, was motivated by Sichuan’s (Chengdu) role as a vibrant center for Tibetan Buddhism. The incorporation of texts such as the *Heart Sutra of Zhunti* was a strategic move to attract new adherents, a factor essential for the survival and development of Daoism. This maneuver underscores Daoism’s adaptability, particularly during the period referred to as the “Unity of the Three Religions” (Guo 2011, pp. 12–16). Hsieh Shu-wei 謝世維 also emphasizes that the emergence of the *Heart Sutra of Zhunti* demonstrates that the Zhunti cult transcends the boundaries of Buddhism and is embraced by various traditions, including Daoism (Hsieh 2018, p. 224).

The character of Zhunti Daoren, born out of these circumstances, not only transcended the literary domain but also deeply permeated the sociocultural fabric of local society (Liu 1962, VII). As per the record from the gazetteer of the Weibao Mountain 巍寶山 in Dali 大理, there were once two statues of Zhunti Daoren: one was enshrined as the principal deity in the Zhunti Pavilion (Zhunti ge 準提閣), while the other served as an attendant, accompanying the Supreme Venerable Sovereign (Taishang laojun 太上老君) in the Qingxia Monastery (Qingxia guan 青霞觀) (Weishan 1989, pp. 22–26).

Another example can be found in the village of Quyang Qiao 曲陽橋 in Hebei. Owing a great debt of gratitude to Zhunti Daoren, the villagers established a shrine to worship him and instituted festivals commemorating his arrival on 25 February and his defeat of the malevolent peacock spirit, Kong Xuan, on November 15. A sculpture of Zhunti Daoren riding a peacock was also erected around the late Ming or early Qing period (see Figure 3),¹⁰ functioning as what Japanese folklorist Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962) calls a “monument” (*kinen butsu* 記念物) (Yanagita 1985, pp. 26–27). This “monument” attests to the

authenticity of the folktale and witnesses how Zhunti Daoren gradually transformed the local religious landscape.



Figure 3. The sculpture of Zhunti Daoren riding a peacock. Qing. Photo by author.

A final noteworthy point comes from *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, compiled in the 1930s by Lewis Hodous (1872–1949) and William Edward Soothill (1861–1935). Under the entry for the character “準”, it is indicated that “[Zhunti] in China [is] identified with Marīcī 摩里支 or 天后 Queen of Heaven” (Hodous and Soothill 2014, p. 405). Due to the substantial influence of the dictionary, it has been frequently cited by scholars to prove the connection between the Zhunti cult and the belief in the Mother of the Big Dipper (Doumu 斗姥). This information, however, turns out to be a longstanding misconception in Western Sinology originating from the works of Samuel Beal (1825–1889) and Henri Doré, which erroneously equate Zhunti with Marīcī, Doumu, and Guanyin (Beal 1871, p. 412; Doré 1915, pp. 303–11).

3. Zhunti Daoren as a Buddhist Deity

The characterization in supernatural novels, specifically within narratives that feature divine and demonic figures, is deeply influenced by the overarching literary conventions and cultural milieu from which they derive (*wenxue yuanliu dahuanjing* 文學源流大環境). This context dictates that these characters inevitably carry cultural significance that extends beyond the confines of the text (R. Feng 2009, p. 183). In Wolfgang Iser’s sense, a God-Demon character can take on a form only by being literally inserted into the real world. This insertion contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, and cultural systems that exist as referential fields outside the text (Iser 1993, p. 4).

The character of Zhunti Daoren is an interesting example. Although he is labeled as a “Daoren”, Liu points out that the term “Zhunti” is not of Chinese origin, but rather a transliteration of the Sanskrit word “Cundī” (Liu 1962, p. 6). Moreover, the descriptions of Zhunti Daoren in the novel also serve as crucial evidence supporting the claim that he is, in fact, conceived from the very image of Cundī Bodhisattva, who was widely venerated in late imperial China.¹¹

The portrayal of Zhunti Daoren in *Canonization* primarily takes place in Chapter 71 “Jiang Ziya Divides his Troops into Three Routes” (Jiang ziya sanlu fenbing 姜子牙三路分兵) and Chapter 78 “Three Religions Meet to Defeat the Immortal-Slaughtering Deployment” (Sanjiao huipo zhuxian zhen 三教會破誅仙陣). The following passage is from Chapter 71:

An explosion rang out from Kong Xuan’s light beams, and Zhunti Daoren appeared on his back with twenty-four heads and eighteen arms, holding a neck-

lace of gems, a parasol, a vase, fish intestines, a precious vajra, a precious rasp, a gold bell, a gold bow, a silver spear, a pennant, and many other precious objects. 只聽得孔宣五色光裡一聲雷響，現出一尊聖像來，十八隻手，二十四首，執定瓔珞，傘蓋，花罐，魚腸，加持神杵，寶鏟，金鈴，金弓，銀戟，旛旗等件。 (Z. Xu 1992, p. 203)

Chapter 78 provides a similar description:

Zhunti then transformed himself into a figure with twenty-four heads and eighteen arms, holding a necklace of gems, a parasol, a vase, fish intestines, a gold bow, a silver spear, a precious vajra, a precious rasp, a gold bottle, and many other precious objects. They all surrounded the Grand Master of Heaven in a fighting circle.

準提現出法身，有二十四首，十八隻手，執定了瓔珞，傘蓋，花貫，魚腸，金弓，銀戟，加持神杵，寶鏟，金瓶，把通天教主裹在當中。 (Z. Xu 1992, p. 267)

From the above two passages, we can summarize that the basic image of Zhunti Daoren bears a great resemblance in terms of the physical appearance and attributes to the iconographic instruction on Cundī translated by Amoghavajra (see Figure 4):

She also wears goddess robes, a necklace of gems, and a crown; her arms are encircled with conch-shaped bangles; and on her little fingers are jeweled rings. The image has a face with three eyes and her arms number eighteen. Her two topmost hands make the preaching gesture. On the right, the second hand makes the fear-quelling gesture, the third holds a sword, the fourth a jeweled banner, the fifth a citron fruit, the sixth an axe, the seventh a goad, the eighth a vajra, and the ninth a rosary. On the left, the second hand holds a wish-fulfilling gem pennant, the third a red lotus blossom in full bloom, the fourth an aspergillum, the fifth a cord, the sixth a wheel, the seventh a conch, the eighth an auspicious vase, and the ninth a sūtra box.

復有天衣角絡，瓔珞，頭冠，臂環皆著螺釧，檀慧著寶環。其像面有三目，十八臂。上二手作說法相，右第二手作施無畏，第三手執劍，第四手持寶鬘，第五手掌俱緣果，第六手持鉞斧，第七手執鉤，第八手執金剛杵，第九手持念珠，左第二手執如意寶幢，第三手持開敷紅蓮花，第四手軍持，第五手胃索，第六手持輪，第七手商估，第八手賢瓶，第九手掌般若梵夾。 (Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 1983, T20, no. 1076, p. 184c7–26. Translated by Gimello (2004, pp. 226–27))

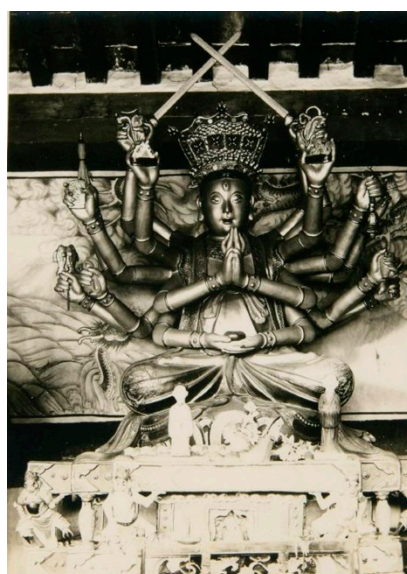


Figure 4. A typical statue of Cundī Bodhisattva. Qing. Photo by Shimazaki Ekiji 島崎役治 (n.d.) (Shimasaki 1932, p. 538).

They are both depicted with “eighteen arms”,¹² adorned with “necklaces of gems”, and holding “vases”, “vajras”, and “pennants”. Additionally, Xue (2016, p. 236) suggests that the use of “fish intestines” in the novel likely refers to a precious sword, aligning with Cundī’s sword in the third hand to his right.

Another piece of decisive but often overlooked evidence is the poem in Chapter 70, “Zhunti Daoren subdues Kong Xuan” (Zhunti daoren shou kong xuan 準提道人收孔宣), which explicitly mentions Cundī Bodhisattva:

Cundī Bodhisattva was born in the Western Pure Land, with deep-rooted virtues and
immeasurable wonders.
The lotus leaf turns exquisite when there is wind, while the lotus flower stands firm
without any rain.
The golden bow and silver spear are not weapons, as the precious vajra and fish
intestines have other wondrous functions.
Do not say that Kong Xuan can transform, while under the Bodhi tree, Cundī is
known as the Wisdom King.
準提菩薩產西方, 道德根深妙莫量。
荷葉有風生色相, 蓮花無雨立津梁。
金弓銀戟非防患, 寶杵魚腸另有方。
漫道孔宣能變化, 婆婆樹下號明王 (Xinke 1994, p. 1857).

The materials presented above are highly compelling. However, a further rarely acknowledged yet indispensable clue that should be considered in demonstrating the relationship between Zhunti Daoren and Cundī Bodhisattva is the ambiguous background of the character. I therefore summarize the basic information of several figures in *Canonization* who are believed to be of Buddhist origin (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Basic information regarding the figures of Buddhist origin in *Canonization* (J. Zhang 2013, pp. 49–64).

Name	Place of Enlightenment (Daochang 道場)	Ride
Heavenly Master of Outstanding Culture	Yunxiao Cave (<i>yunxiao dong</i> 雲霄洞) in the Wulong Mountain (<i>wulong shan</i> 五龍山)	Green lion (<i>qingshi</i> 青獅)
Immortal of Universal Virtue (<i>puxian zhenren</i> 普賢真人)	Baihe Cave (<i>baihe dong</i> 白鶴洞) in the Jiugong Mountain (<i>jiugong shan</i> 九宮山)	White elephant (<i>baixiang</i> 白象)
Immortal of Merciful Navigation (<i>cihang daoren</i> 慈航道人)	Luojia Cave (<i>luojia dong</i> 落伽洞) in the Putuo Mountain (<i>putuo shan</i> 普陀山)	Golden Hou (<i>jinmao hou</i> 金毛猯)
Zhunti Daoren	None	None

Table 2. Basic information regarding the corresponding Buddhist deities (Li et al. 2011, pp. 32–33, 255–58, 417–19, 495–97).

Name	Place of Enlightenment	Ride
Mañjuśrī	Mount Wutai	Green lion
Samantabhadra	Mount E’mei	White elephant
Avalokiteśvara	Mount Putuo	Golden Hou
Cundī	None	None

Based on Table 1, it is clear that among the four figures, only Zhunti Daoren lacks designation regarding the place of enlightenment and mount. The subsequent alteration of his mount to a peacock was simply a narrative response to the subplot involving the

subjugation of Kong Xuan, devoid of any inherent connection to the novel's underlying background. This raises the question of why the author conspicuously omitted the specification of Zhunti Daoren's basic information. Table 2 offers an explanation: the author actually drew upon the backgrounds of the corresponding Buddhist deities when conceptualizing these characters.

As Gimello (2004, pp. 225–26) expounded, Cundī was spread into China with minimal information about her background, as no stories were told about her, no accounts were given of her history, and no specific geographical or cosmographical domains were assigned to her. She was placed in no particular “family” or array of buddhas and bodhisattvas and was accorded no particular doctrinal significance. Nor was she associated with any particular system of Buddhist thought. The lack of foundational information presents a challenge: there is no established reference point for characterizing Zhunti Daoren. However, owing to the strong connection between the Zhunti cult and Pure Land Buddhism during the Ming and Qing dynasties (as we will see later), many followers of Zhunti regarded the Pure Land as their ultimate destination. Consequently, the author simply provides an ambiguous description of Zhunti Daoren as hailing from the Western Pure Land (*xifang jile zhixiang* 西方極樂之鄉) without further elaboration.

4. Zhunti Daoren as the Panchen Lama

The significance of characters in a novel lies not only in being the subjects and actors of the story, but also in propelling the plot and contributing to the overall development of the narrative (the informational function, so to speak) (R. Feng 2009, p. 183). In response to Wei's assertion of “Zhunti Daoren as the Panchen Lama” (Wei 1982, pp. 221–22), critics underscore the absence of Tibetan Buddhist characteristics in both Zhunti and Jieyin, leading to the conclusion that Wei's hypothesis is far-fetched (P. Wang 1987, p. 8; Li and Yin 2007, p. 161). Although this criticism has its merits, it concentrates solely on isolated story fragments and neglects the broader narrative. In contrast, by integrating Zhunti Daoren, Jieyin Daoren, and Xifang jiao into the novel's whole storyline, Wei's perspective actually unveils their roles in the layout of the narrative framework.

In *Canonization*, the historical event of King Wu's campaign against King Zhou (Wuwang fazhou 武王伐紂) is employed as a metatext, serving to establish the primary backdrop for the conflict between Jiejiao and Chanjiao in the Eastern World (*dongtu* 東土). Upon his initial appearance in Chapter 61, Zhunti Daoren asserts his affiliation with Xifang jiao from the Western Pure Land. The juxtaposition of the “Western Pure Land” against the “Eastern World” unmistakably signifies Xifang jiao as a “foreign force” within the narrative. Yet, this “foreign force” is treated with profound reverence by the multitude of immortals in the Eastern World and is even accorded deference by the heads of Chanjiao, the Primeval Lord of Heaven (Yuanshi tianzun 元始天尊) and the Supreme Venerable Sovereign. The two hierarchs of Xifang jiao also willingly engage in warfare between the two religions, which redefines the preceding “civil war (conflict)” as a “mixed war”.

As per Wei's (1982, p. 221) interpretation, the Eastern World subtly represents China and the Western Pure Land is suggestive of India. Despite this, ancient Chinese history scarcely documents instances of Indian leadership or collectives involved in Chinese political affairs. The notable exception is the fifth Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso (1617–1682), who, in Wei's view, is associated with India because of the longstanding Chinese belief about the “Indian” origins of Buddhism.

The narrative further thickens with the “Biography of Wu Sangui” (Wusangui zhuan 吳三桂傳) in the *Draft Qing History* (Qingshi gao 清史稿). It chronicles the fifth Dalai Lama's plea to Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722) to cease hostilities and show mercy to Wu Sangui (1608–1678), a rebel against the Qing with the aspiration to found his own dynasty (E. Zhao 1977, p. 12845). The quashing of Wu's rebellion might be seen as a “civil war”, and the Dalai Lama's intervention as the involvement of a “foreign force”. Following this line of inquiry, and adding another layer of complexity, the oblique references to Jieyin Daoren and Zhunti Daoren could possibly be alluding to the Dalai Lama and the

Panchen Lama, respectively. Thus, Wei's perspective, when viewed from this angle, is not entirely baseless.

Of course, Wei's opinion raises several concerns. For instance, *Canonization* was published during the Ming Dynasty, whereas the historical event of the Dalai Lama interceding on behalf of Wu Sangui took place in the early Qing. Additionally, within the reincarnation system of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama is considered to be the incarnation of Avalokiteśvara, rather than Amitābha. Similarly, the Panchen Lama is believed to be the incarnation of Amitābha, as opposed to Cundī, thus calling into question the proposed correlations.

5. Zhunti Daoren and Pure Land Buddhism

The interconnections among Zhunti Daoren, Jieyin Daoren, and Xifang jiao, as well as the correlation between the Ming–Qing Zhunti cult and Pure Land belief, have previously been studied in the works of Liu (1962, pp. 6–7) and Yamashita (1999, pp. 241–62). These scholarly inquiries are unanimous in asserting that, irrespective of the connotations of Chanjiao and Jiejiao, the term Xifang jiao unequivocally alludes to Buddhism, particularly Pure Land Buddhism, while Jieyin Daoren symbolizes Amitābha Buddha; furthermore, given the widespread prevalence of Pure Land Buddhism during the Ming and Qing periods, the parallel portrayals of Zhunti Daoren and Jieyin Daoren undoubtedly reflect the amalgamation of the Pure Land belief and the Zhunti cult (X. Chen 2012, p. 172). Yamashita (1999, pp. 260–61) further highlights that the foundation of this fusion is grounded in the intimate relationship between Guanyin, one of the “Three Saints of the West” (Xifang san-sheng 西方三聖), and Zhunti: “Originally, Guanyin could have been considered a companion of Jieyin, but she has already assumed the role of the Immortal of Merciful Navigation in Chanjiao, so Zhunti, who is close to her, has assumed Guanyin's responsibilities”.

The pairing of Jieyin and Zhunti is, in fact, not only found in *Canonization*. The *Comprehensive Mirror of Successive Divine Immortals* (Lidai shenxian tongjian 歷代神仙通鑑), which was published slightly later than *Canonization*, contains a similar configuration:

Rulai (Tathāgata) requested that Yaoshi (Bhaiṣajyaguru), Jieyin, Zhunti, Shizhi (Mahāsthāmaprāpta), and other friends of the Way accompany them, leading them through the Western Hall, and respectfully inviting them to a banquet in the garden.

如來命藥師, 接引, 准提, 勢至諸道侶相陪, 逕過西方殿, 恭邀入園筵宴. (D. Xu 1995, p. 644)

This is followed by a detailed delineation of the appearance of Jieyin and Zhunti:

[Jieyin's] body is the color of gold, with an incomparably good appearance and brightness. He vows to save all sentient beings through forty-eight vows, and [in his light] there are immeasurable billions of transformed Bodhisattvas. He descends to the mortal realm on the second day after the winter solstice to enlighten the multitudes. He is the pure and tranquil Amitābha Buddha of infinite life, the welcoming Master. [Zhunti's] heart is filled with compassion, widely extending protection. He once manifested his Dharma body, with three heads and eighteen arms, known as Susiddhi, who is the Great Cundī.

身如金色, 相好光明, 度眾生以四十八願, 化菩薩以眾億無邊, 每於冬至後二日, 化度下方, 是為清靜無量壽接引大師阿彌陀佛。心惟慈悲, 廣垂加護, 嘗變現法身, 三頭十八臂, 一名蘇悉帝, 是為大准提. (D. Xu 1995, p. 648)

The figure of Jieyin clearly represents Amitābha Buddha in this context, while Zhunti refers to Cundī Bodhisattva. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that within Chinese Buddhism the “Three Saints of the West” traditionally encompass Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (Da shizhi 大勢至). However, here, Zhunti conspicuously supplants Guanyin as one of the saints. Thus, as proposed by Yamashita, one may inquire whether the interplay between the Zhunti cult and Pure Land Buddhism can be attributed to Zhunti's role as a “substitute” for Guanyin. In the absence of a definitive answer in Buddhist scriptures, our recourse lies in understanding the perspectives of Ming–Qing

contemporaries on the status of Zhunti in the Pure Land tradition. The Qing epigrapher Wang Chang 王昶 (1725–1806) included the following commentary on Zhunti in his *Anthology of the Essence of Bronze and Stone* (Jinshi cuibian 金石萃編):

The *Cundī Method of Developing One's Wisdom* (Zhunti huiye 準提慧業) in the Ming-Dynasty Buddhist Canon attaches special emphasis to the function of the six-syllabled Sanskrit incantation, which differs from the teachings of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. It is likely that, based on the teachings of the Western Pure Land, the Dharma Prince Mahāsthāmaprāpta and his fellow disciples guide believers who chant the name of Amitābha Buddha to the Pure Land. There, they are joined by fifty-two Bodhisattvas, of which Cundī is one.

明藏經有准提慧業以六梵字為用，與無量壽及觀世音大勢至所說不同。蓋西方之教，大勢至法王子與其同門攝念佛人歸於淨土，至有五十二菩薩，故准提亦其一耳。
(C. Wang 2000, p. 19)

The *Cundī Method of Developing One's Wisdom* is no longer extant. However, the author's juxtaposition of Cundī with Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, elevating Cundī as one of the fifty-two Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land realm, signifies the deity's distinct and independent position within the Pure Land tradition in late imperial China, instead of being merely a "substitute" for Guanyin. Sir Reginald Johnston (1874–1938), a British diplomat who served as the tutor and adviser to Puyi 溥儀 (1906–1967), the last Emperor of China, similarly believed that there was no canonical basis for conflating Zhunti with Guanyin or regarding the former as a substitute for the latter (Johnston 1913, p. 279).¹³ Thus, it is my contention that the amalgamation of the Zhunti cult and the Pure Land belief was not rooted in Zhunti's association with Guanyin; rather, it arose from Ming–Qing adherents of Zhunti leveraging Pure Land Buddhism's theories and practices to reform the Zhunti cult. This transformative endeavor is crystalized in the *Cundī Method of Purifying One's Karma* (Zhunti jingye 準提淨業), one of the era's seminal Zhunti scriptures.

The *Cundī Method of Purifying One's Karma*, authored by the lay practitioner Xie Yujiao 謝于教 (1565–1635) during the Tianqi 天啟 period (1621–1627) of the Ming Dynasty, has been thoroughly examined by Tada Kōshō 多田孝正 (Tada 2014, pp. 275–405), rendering further exposition on the text redundant. My aim here is to stress the most salient feature of this canonical work, namely, its assimilation of a substantial body of Pure Land theories and contemplative methods to promote the compatibility between the pursuit of rebirth in the Pure Land and the devotion to Zhunti. The dedication verse at the beginning of the text offers a revealing insight into the fundamental intent of the entire work:

I now recite the [name of] the Great Cundī, and immediately vow to attain great enlightenment.
May my meditation and wisdom swiftly become perfected, and may my virtues be completely fulfilled.
May my merit and blessings be universally adorned, and may I together with all beings attain Buddhahood.
The myriad karmic misdeeds that I had committed in the past, are all resultant from my primordial attachment, aversion, and delusion.
They came into being from my body, speech, and mind, I now repent and penance all of them.
May all obstacles be removed when I approach the end of life.
May I behold the Buddha Amitābha, and be reborn in the peaceful and joyous Pure Land.

我今持誦大准提，即發菩提廣大願。
願我定慧速圓明，願我功德皆成就。
願我勝福遍莊嚴，願共眾生成佛道。
我昔所造諸惡業，皆由無始貪嗔癡。

從身語意之所生, 一切我今皆懺悔。
願我臨欲命終時, 盡除一切諸障礙。
面見彼佛阿彌陀, 即得往生安樂刹 (Manji shinsan dainihon zokuzōkyō 1975–1989, X59,
no. 1077, p. 229c13–19).

Influenced by this trend, some Ming–Qing Pure Land biographies document cases of practitioners who habitually recited the Zhunti incantation during their lifetimes but ultimately sought rebirth in the Pure Land. This phenomenon is evident in the entry on “A Girl of the Wu Family” (Wushi nǚ 吳氏女) in the *Compendium of Pure Land Sages* (Jingtu shengxian lu 淨土聖賢錄):

A girl of the Wu family, from Taicang, was born in a meditation position. As she grew older, she embraced the Buddhist faith with unwavering devotion and demonstrated exemplary filial piety, eschewing the pursuit of a household life. When advised otherwise, she adamantly pointed to the sky as a solemn pledge. Initially engaging in the study of the meaning of characters under the tutelage of her peers, she later delved into the recitation of Buddhist scriptures, achieving a profound understanding of their essence. She devoutly worshiped day and night. She then had a dream in which a deity bestowed upon her the Sanskrit Cundī Mantrā. Utilizing the Sanskrit characters, she miraculously cured a person afflicted with malaria, who immediately recovered. In another dream, she received a revelation regarding her destiny, disclosing her past incarnation as a distinguished monk in the Song Dynasty and her return to fulfill her filial duties, with the prophecy that she would gain enlightenment at the age of twenty-three. In the fourth year of the Chongzhen period, at the age of twenty-three, she secluded herself in a chamber, dedicating herself to the Pure Land practice. Towards the end of midwinter, she exhibited signs of a minor ailment and composed a verse urging her parents to persevere in their practice. At noon, she requested to wear a jade ring and then passed away while lying on her right side.

吳氏女, 太倉人。生時趺坐而下。稍長, 皈心佛乘, 事親孝, 不願有家, 人或勸之, 輒指天為誓。初從昆弟析諸字義, 已而誦佛經, 悉通曉大意。朝夕禮拜甚虔。俄夢神授以梵書準提呪, 有病瘡者, 以梵字治之, 立愈。嘗於夢中得通宿命, 自言曾為宋高僧, 此來專為父母, 年二十三當成道果。崇禎四年, 年二十三矣, 閉關一室, 專修淨土。仲冬之末, 示微疾, 作偈辭世, 勉親堅修勿懈。日方午, 索玉戒指佩之, 右脅而逝。(Manji shinsan dainihon zokuzōkyō 1975–1989, X78, no. 1549, p. 312c9–16)

In addition to Pure Land biographies, analogous examples can also be observed in local gazetteers, such as the tale of Liu Chongqing 劉崇慶 (n.d.) in the gazetteer of Guangfeng 廣豐 (modern-day Shangrao 上饒):

Liu Chongqing, a Provincial Graduate of Yongfeng, had a fondness for the philosophy of Chan Buddhism and recited the Great Cundī Mantrā every morning regardless of the weather, without interruption for over twenty years. In his later years, he became an Instructor in the Confucian School of Lushan. One day, while bedridden, he saw a radiating white light in the room, within which the image of Great Cundī appeared for several days. As he neared the end of his life, he vividly saw the Bodhisattva present a white object resembling a full moon, seemingly with the intention of welcoming him. Liu promptly sat up, recited the Great Compassion Mantrā, and passed away.

永豐孝廉劉崇慶, 雅好禪理, 每晨起持大準提呪, 寒暑不輟, 垂二十餘年。晚授魯山學博。一日臥病, 見室中放白毫光, 現大準提相者數日。將逝, 惺然見菩薩出一白物如滿月, 恍示以接引之意。劉遽起趺坐, 誦大悲咒訖而逝。(L. Gu 1975, pp. 2172–73)

In this particular case, Zhunti takes on the role of an ambassador to the Pure Land, a duty more often assumed by Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. Nevertheless, as is widely recognized, the ultimate goal of Esoteric Buddhism is the “attainment of Buddhahood in this very body” (Jishen chengfo 即身成佛), as opposed to “rebirth in the Pure Land” (Wangsheng jingtu 往生淨土). Yet works such as the *Cundī Method of Purifying*

One's Karma unequivocally advocate that, while chanting the Zhunti incantation, practitioners should aspire to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. This undoubtedly represents the Pure Land transformation of the Zhunti cult, which is exactly why Zhunti is juxtaposed with Jieyin and becomes the hierarch of Xifang jiao (*xifangjiao zhu* 西方教主) in *Canonization*.

6. Conclusions

Zhunti Daoren undeniably occupies a pivotal yet frequently disregarded position in *Canonization*. The character's significance is derived from the potential to provide an insight into the author's overall conception. Therefore, the interpretations of his identity/affiliation have generated divergent perspectives, essentially constituting an exploration of the various attributes associated with one symbolic figure.

Although both the hypotheses of “Zhunti Daoren as a Daoist deity” and “Zhunti Daoren as the Panchen Lama” possess some degree of credibility, it is the connection with Cundī Bodhisattva in Buddhism that seemingly provides the most persuasive linkage to Zhunti Daoren. The attribution of Zhunti Daoren as the hierarch of Xifang jiao, standing shoulder to shoulder with Jieyin Daoren, can be traced to the amalgamation of the Zhunti cult and Pure Land Buddhism during the Ming and Qing dynasties. This fusion, however, did not primarily arise from the strong tie between Zhunti and Guanyin; rather, it was a consequence of the Pure Land transformation of the cult of Zhunti in late imperial China. Therefore, instead of viewing the emergence of the literary character Zhunti Daoren as mere capricious invention by the author, it deserves to be acknowledged as a creation deeply ingrained in discerning observation and a comprehensive understanding of the intricate religious tapestry of the era.¹⁴

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Notes

- ¹ Based on the edition published by Shu Zaiyang 舒載陽 (n.d.), *Zhunti Daoren* appears in Chapter 61, Chapter 65, Chapter 70, Chapter 71, Chapter 78, Chapter 79, Chapter 82, Chapter 83, and Chapter 84.
- ² However, Europeans first encountered the goddess Zhunti much earlier. *China Illustrata*, a book compiled by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) and published in 1667, demonstrates seventeenth-century European knowledge regarding the Chinese Empire and its neighboring countries. It includes an illustration of Zhunti seated on a lotus, supported by two dragon kings (Kircher 1987, p. 128).
- ³ Interestingly, on his personal website, Barend ter Haar warns his students not to consult Henri Doré's work because, in his view, it is a “plagiarized version of Chinese research by a fellow Jesuit priest (Pierre Hoang 黃伯祿 (1830–1909), so to speak), with horrible westernized illustrations”. Nonetheless, Henri Doré was the first scholar to record the legend of Zhunti Daoren. Moreover, the so-called “westernized illustrations” are actually not so much “westernized” but rather greatly influenced by the style of traditional Chinese “new year paintings” (Nianhua 年畫) and “paper horses” (Zhima 紙馬) (Shen 2011; Tao 2011). See Barend ter Haar's personal website, accessed 17 October 2022, <https://bjterhaa.home.xs4all.nl/chinrelbibl.htm>.
- ⁴ Feng Ruchang's *A Stylistic Study of Chinese Novels of Gods and Demons* is a pivotal work that adeptly amalgamates Western stylistic theories with the distinct characteristics inherent in Chinese God-Demon novels. Feng delineates three evolutionary stages in the development of these novels—original works, imitations, and sequels—each characterized by unique stylistic nuances. Moreover, Feng proposes an innovative theoretical framework for the interpretation of the God-Demon figure. Despite the profound depth and originality of this approach, it has yet to receive adequate recognition within the sphere of contemporary scholarship. Consequently, the application of Feng's analytical framework to the character, Zhunti Daoren, fulfills a dual purpose: it not only exemplifies the practicality of Feng's model in the analysis of intricate characters but also emphasizes the pressing necessity for a more robust scholarly engagement with Feng's work.
- ⁵ The discourse surrounding the origins of characters in *Canonization* is tantamount to exploring the interplay between the novel's mythological universe and its contemporary religio-cultural context. There is a divergence in scholarly perspectives on these aspects. One faction of scholars, exemplified by the likes of Liu (1962, p. VII), accentuates the author's innovative use of mythology. Conversely, another faction, with Mark Meulenbeld (2015, pp. 208–9) as a notable representative, places emphasis on the influences of contemporaneous religio-cultural realities, with particular attention to the impacts of local pantheons. An important

distinction lies in the latter faction's focus on the portrayal of martial deities within the novel. This study, however, espouses a more centrist position, advocating for a nuanced, case-by-case examination of these elements.

- 6 Notwithstanding the absence of additional elucidation from Feng, drawing upon Hirsch's (1967, p. 8) differentiation between significance and meaning, I presume that there are two types of "conceptual images"—the conceptual image of the author vis-à-vis the reader.
- 7 This study employs Gu Zhizhong's 顧執中 translation of "Tianzun" as "Heavenly Master" from his version of *Canonization*. This departs from the usual academic convention—using "Heavenly Worthy" for "Tianzun"—to maintain consistency and avoid confusion due to the extensive use of Gu's translations in this paper.
- 8 It should be noted, however, that the incantation on the seal is carved in the Lantsha script, indicating that it is highly unlikely that this seal has been passed down from the Tang Dynasty.
- 9 On *Xianmi*'s significant influence on the later Zhunti cult, see Gimello (2004, pp. 231–39), Lü Jianfu 呂建福 (Lü 2011, pp. 547–48), and Hsieh Shu-wei 謝世維 (Hsieh 2018, pp. 203–22).
- 10 Based on the "Inscription on the Great Singing Spring Temple" (Damingquanmiao ji 大鳴泉廟記) written by Guo Mian 郭勉 (n.d.), a prefect of Zhending 真定 Prefecture during the Ming Dynasty, the Great Singing Spring Temple was established in 1374 by Manager of Affairs Li (zhongshu pingzhang ligong 中書平章李公, 1339–1384) to express gratitude to the God of the Great Singing Spring for nourishing the nearby population. Nonetheless, the identity of this "God of the Great Singing Spring" remains ambiguous. Another inscription (carved in 1572) celebrating the reconstruction of the temple indicates that the only deity worshipped in the Great Singing Spring Temple was a dragon king, who had a lifelike statue and was famous for great efficacy. Yet, in 1702, some 130 years later, when Zhou Bushi 周卜世 (?–1705) assumed the position of prefect, the Peacock Buddha Pavilion (Kongque foge 孔雀佛閣), housing the statue of Zhunti Daoren astride a peacock, was already established. This suggests that the statue was very likely sculpted during the period from 1572 to 1702 (W. Zhao 2006, pp. 166, 171–72).
- 11 For a brief history of the cult of Zhunti in China, see Gimello (2004, pp. 225–39) and Lei (2016, 2023).
- 12 In South, Southeast, and Central Asia, and in the Tibetan cultural realm, Cundī has taken multiple forms. There are images of her with only two arms as well as others with four, six, eight, twelve, sixteen, eighteen, and twenty-four arms (Gimello 2004, pp. 227–28).
- 13 The intricate relationship between Zhunti and Guanyin presents a captivating subject that invites deeper examination. Gimello posits that *Kāraṇḍavyūha* might be the origin of the tradition that identifies Zhunti with Guanyin, a perspective countered by Alexander Studholme who asserts that there is no explicit evidence in this scripture, suggesting Zhunti as an incarnation of Guanyin. Studholme's viewpoint is seemingly endorsed by others who concur that while an undeniable link exists, it would be overly simplistic and essentialist to equate Zhunti and Guanyin directly. Additionally, the concept of the "Six Avalokiteśvaras" (Roku Kannon 六觀音), which includes Cundī Avalokiteśvara (Juntei Kannon 准胝觀音), is worth noting. Two facets deserve special focus: initially, the origin of the Six Avalokiteśvaras concept can be traced back to China, but it didn't develop into as prominent a cult as it did in Japan, perhaps due to the waning influence of Esoteric Buddhism in China. Secondly, in the Tendai School's representations of the Six Avalokiteśvaras group, Juntei is replaced by Amoghapaśa (Fukū kenjaku 不空絹索), indicating a significant shift in the assembly composition. For further references, see Gimello (2004, p. 250), Studholme (2002, p. 59), Fowler (2017, p. 24), and Zhang Wenliang 張文良 (W. Zhang 2015, pp. 191–93).
- 14 In the same vein, Meulenbeld (2015, pp. 208–9) rejects the notion of *Canonization* as an entirely original creation and argues that many of the seemingly fictional characters are taken directly from the existing pantheons.

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