

Article

A Brief Discussion on Chan–Pure Land Syncretism in Dunhuang: Centered on Dunhuang Literature

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Abstract

This article investigates the convergence of Chan and Pure Land practices in medieval Dunhuang, highlighting a fluid and integrative religious phenomenon that challenges conventional sectarian boundaries. Drawing on a rich corpus of manuscripts, including treatises, lecture notes, liturgical texts, and portrait praises, the study demonstrates how meditation-centered approaches, often associated with Chan, coexisted with Pure Land devotion. In Dunhuang's frontier setting, these practices were neither mutually exclusive nor rigidly compartmentalized; monks and lay practitioners alike combined Chan-style introspection with faith-based recitation of Amitābha's name. The paper first clarifies the conceptual categories of "Chan" and "Pure Land" by placing them in contemporary scholarly debates on sectarianism, thereby questioning modern assumptions that retroactively impose later institutional labels on the medieval past. An analysis of key texts illustrates the consistent emphasis on introspective meditation and the aspiration for rebirth in Amitābha's Western Paradise. Poetry, portrait eulogies, and sermon materials likewise reveal practitioners who excelled in Chan while cultivating Pure Land rituals. These findings attest to a broader pattern of adaptability in Chinese Buddhism and underscore Dunhuang's significance as a site where diverse doctrinal streams converged.

Keywords: Chan; meditation; Pure Land; Dunhuang; Syncretism

1. Introduction

Dunhuang played a vital role as a conduit for East–West exchanges and for introducing Buddhism into China. Its culture and beliefs exhibit a high degree of integration, shaped in part by governance under various ethnic groups over time. Once flourishing, Dunhuang Buddhism served as a key channel for the spread of Buddhism from the Western Regions to China proper. Its cave temples, sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts continue to attract scholars worldwide. Early Buddhism in Dunhuang inherited and developed characteristics of Indian Buddhism, absorbing mainstream Buddhist thought as its theoretical foundation. It integrated Indian and Central Asian religious civilizations, gradually forming a mature Buddhist doctrinal and belief system, one that directly initiated the translation and transcription of scriptures representative of medieval Chinese Buddhism (ca. 317–907). In Dunhuang, the integration of distinct modes of faith is common, a phenomenon linked to the region's particular characteristics of Buddhist development and the composition of its monastic community. Besides being evident in Dunhuang-related literature, this tendency is also reflected in cave-temple remains, further illustrating the diversity and integration of Buddhist belief modes in Dunhuang. Chinese Buddhism has



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often been studied primarily through the lens of the imperial heartlands. This article instead examines the integration of Chan and Pure Land thought (Gu 2012) in Dunhuang, shifting attention to a frontier region whose manuscript culture preserves how these practices actually converged outside those centers.

Dunhuang's position along the Silk Road exposed it to Indian, Central Asian, Tibetan, and Chinese cultural currents. Under successive administrations, including the Tibetan Empire (786–848) (Van Schaik 2015) and the Guiyijun regime (848–1036), its Buddhist communities developed within a manuscript culture shaped by copying, liturgy, donor practice, and visual devotion (Galambos 2020). Over time, Buddhism in Dunhuang became a localized form of practice in which meditative, devotional, and ritual elements often appeared together. This local archive therefore provides a useful case for reconsidering the boundaries between Chan and Pure Land without assuming that they functioned as fully separate institutions in medieval Dunhuang.

Archaeological and textual evidence supports this claim. The Mogao Caves contain over 490 decorated grottoes spanning the 4th to 14th centuries, with Pure Land transformation tableaux appearing from the Sui dynasty onward. The Library Cave (Cave 17), sealed around 1002 CE, preserved some 50,000 manuscripts. These include canonical scriptures, liturgical manuals, meditation guides, repentance texts, and administrative documents. Tanaka (1983) catalogued over one hundred texts related to meditative practice, while Pure Land liturgies and recitation manuals constitute another substantial category. This record shows that Dunhuang's Buddhist communities engaged with both meditative and devotional practices without treating them as separate institutional traditions.

This paper examines how Chan-oriented and Pure Land-oriented elements appear together in Dunhuang materials from the late Tang to the early Song. It uses “syncretism” cautiously: the term does not imply that two fully separate institutions were mechanically combined, but names the overlap of meditative, devotional, liturgical, and rebirth-oriented practices. Section 2 clarifies the conceptual problem; Section 3 discusses materials generally classified as Chan; Section 4 turns to materials generally classified as Pure Land; and the conclusion considers what this evidence suggests about sectarian labels in medieval Chinese Buddhism.

The labels “Chan” and “Pure Land” follow modern cataloguing conventions and previous scholarship; they do not necessarily reflect how Dunhuang practitioners classified themselves. References to texts such as Nantianzhu Putidamo Chanshi Guanmen (S.2583) and Jingtu Wuhui Nianfo Songjing Guanxing Yi are therefore used to trace how practice vocabularies cross categories, rather than to prove the formal fusion of two sectarian institutions.

2. Definition of the Concept of Chan–Pure Land Syncretism

In this article, “Chan” is used as a heuristic label for a cluster of meditative vocabulary, mind-cultivation discourse, direct-realization claims, and lineage-making rhetoric. The term derives from Sanskrit *dhyāna*, but in medieval Chinese contexts it could refer both to meditation in a broad Buddhist sense and to materials later associated with Chan as a lineage. The analysis below therefore avoids treating every occurrence of Chan as evidence for a self-contained Chan institution (Cole 2024).

“Pure Land” is used here to refer to practices and discourses centered on Amitābha, Sukhāvatī, nianfo 念佛, visualization, vows, merit transfer, and aspiration for rebirth. It does not necessarily designate an autonomous Pure Land sect in Dunhuang. This distinction matters because Pure Land practices circulated widely in Chinese Buddhism and often appeared within ritual, devotional, and contemplative settings that were not institutionally separate.

“Chan–Pure Land Syncretism” is therefore used in a limited sense. It refers to the overlap of meditative and devotional repertoires, not to the simple merger of two already fixed schools. This caution is also necessary in relation to figures such as Huiyuan of Mount Lu (Y. Chen 2008) and Yongming Yanshou (Welter 2010). As Welter has shown, Yanshou’s later reputation as a Chan–Pure Land syncretist was shaped by subsequent historiography (Welter 2008): Zanning’s *Song gaoseng zhuan* (988 CE) classified him as a “promoter of blessings” (*xingfu*), the *Jingde chuandeng lu* (1004 CE) recast him as a paradigmatic Chan figure, and later Tiantai materials, beginning with the *Longshu jingtu wen* (1160), appropriated him as a Pure Land patriarch. Yanshou’s own writings, especially the *Zongjing lu*, present a broader Mahāyāna vision rather than a narrow synthesis of two discrete schools (Welter 2011, 2013).

In Chinese Buddhist studies, *zong* 宗, *pai* 派, “school,” and “sect” are not neutral or interchangeable categories (Foult 1992). They may refer to doctrine, lineage, institutional identity, ritual affiliation, or later scholarly classification. Modern taxonomies of Chinese Buddhism were also shaped by Japanese and Western models of religion (Zürcher 1982). For this reason, the present article treats sectarian labels as historically useful but analytically unstable, especially when applied to local manuscript cultures such as Dunhuang. It is therefore more productive to read Chinese Buddhism through crisscrossing lines of influence, or lineages, than through mutually exclusive schools: the drawing of boundaries between “schools” was itself a rhetorical strategy of limited analytical value, since even self-consciously distinct traditions such as Chan borrowed eclectically from Yogācāra, Madhyamaka, Tiantai, and Huayan. Reading the Dunhuang materials as intersecting lineages rather than sealed schools yields a parallax view that keeps both the practitioners’ own sense of affiliation and their actual eclecticism in focus at once.

A related issue is the influence of Japanese Buddhist sectarianism on the modern study of Chinese Buddhism. In Japan, Jōdo-shū under Hōnen (1133–1212) and Jōdo Shinshū under Shinran (1173–1263) developed as legally and institutionally distinct sects, but this model should not be projected uncritically back onto medieval China. Schickelanz has shown how Japanese narratives of sectarian decline shaped modern Chinese Buddhist historiography (Schickelanz 2017). Tang Yongtong challenged the Sui–Tang “ten schools” narrative as early as 1936, and Chen Jidong has traced how Gyōnen’s *Hasshū kōyō*, transmitted to Yang Wenhui in 1891, helped form the modern Chinese “eight schools” framework (J. Chen 2024). Together with Sharf’s critique of rigid Chan/Pure Land separation (Sharf 2002), these studies support a more cautious use of the category “Pure Land school” for medieval Chinese materials.

Within Chinese Buddhism, Chan contemplation and Pure Land devotion were often retrospectively organized within broader classificatory schemes (McRae 2003) of Buddhist “traditions,” including the familiar eight-, ten-, or thirteen-tradition models.¹ These categories became especially prominent in later accounts of Chinese Buddhist practice (Ch’en 1964). Yet in practice, meditation, recitation, visualization, repentance, and rebirth aspiration frequently crossed such boundaries. The categories “Chan tradition” and “Pure Land tradition” are therefore useful only if they are not treated as rigid institutional compartments.

As noted by the renowned scholar Hu Shi, understanding the early history of Chan involves acknowledging a transition from the complex tenets of Indian Buddhism to a more intuitive and simplified approach, which resonated more profoundly with the Chinese cultural context (Hu 1952). In this context, Dunhuang Buddhism, known for its more community-oriented character, distinctly favored and valued these ideas and practices. This community-oriented character is evident in the way Buddhism in Dunhuang was integrated into everyday life, serving monastic communities and laypeople alike, demon-

strating a pragmatic and inclusive approach to spiritual practice. The blending of Chan meditation and Pure Land devotion in Dunhuang texts reflects this practical synthesis, in which Buddhist teachings extended beyond doctrinal purity, adapting to meet the needs of a diverse society.

By “communitarian integration,” this article refers to the way Buddhist practice in Dunhuang was embedded in local ritual, donor, monastic, and lay life. The term is not meant to suggest that Dunhuang Buddhism was less doctrinally serious than Buddhism in imperial centers. It points instead to a manuscript and ritual environment in which Buddhist teachings were adapted to concrete devotional, memorial, and communal needs (Teiser 1994).

In the Tang Dynasty and earlier, Buddhism in the central regions was primarily controlled by the court and upper classes, with a focus on monastic discipline and doctrinal purity. In contrast, Buddhism in Dunhuang, especially in its interaction with local people’s daily lives, emphasized practical, accessible practices. This shift is evident in the many Buddhist manuscripts, relics, and murals found in Dunhuang, which highlight rituals, prayers, and other practices closely connected with daily life. These practices show a more inclusive approach that catered to a wider audience, thus illustrating its “secular” nature in terms of being more embedded in the day-to-day reality of local communities.

Additionally, Dunhuang Buddhism’s “communitarian integration” can be seen in how it merged various religious practices. Dunhuang was not only a Buddhist center but also a meeting point for folk beliefs, Daoism, and Confucianism. In popular Buddhist practices, elements of Pure Land and Chan Buddhism were integrated, reflecting the region’s inclusive religious culture. For example, many Dunhuang Chan texts combined Chan meditation with Pure Land practices, such as Buddha-recitation, which allowed practitioners to benefit from both practices.

Whether Dunhuang Buddhism was less sectarian than Buddhism elsewhere in China remains an open question. The apparent eclecticism of Dunhuang practice may partly reflect the survival of a broader range of source materials than is available for other sites. At any given monastery throughout medieval China, a variety of practices—including nianfo—could be present regardless of nominal sectarian affiliation. This is especially evident in major temples like the Three Realms Temple and the Pure Land Temple, where texts from different traditions were preserved, and monks practiced multiple systems simultaneously.

Accordingly, the article uses “integration” to describe local combinations of Buddhist practices and vocabularies, not a loss of spiritual depth or doctrinal coherence. Earlier scholarship often located Chan–Pure Land convergence in eminent figures such as Huiyuan, Zongmi, and Yongming Yanshou. Robert Sharf’s essay “On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch’an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China” (Sharf 2002) further cautions that Pure Land elements were often embedded within mainstream Mahāyāna and Chan practice, so “syncretism” can be misleading if it assumes two originally segregated traditions. Those discussions remain important, but the Dunhuang evidence shifts attention from elite doctrinal synthesis to the everyday textual and ritual settings in which meditation, nianfo, repentance, and rebirth aspiration appeared together. Such fluidity was not unique to China; it had Indian precedents. The Treatise on Rebirth (Wuliangshou jing youbotishe yuansheng ji, *Sukhāvativyūhopadeśa), traditionally attributed to Vasubandhu, comments on the Sutra of Immeasurable Life and expounds rebirth in Amitābha’s Pure Land, showing that a major scholastic tradition could also engage Pure Land practice. Even the seemingly firm Mahāyāna–Hīnayāna divide was porous: the pilgrim Faxian classified regions of Indian Buddhist practice into Mahāyāna, Hīnayāna, and mixed areas where both were practiced side by side. Read against this background, the

Dunhuang materials extend a long-standing pattern of practical eclecticism rather than marking a distinctively Chinese departure from it.

The study does not treat Chan and Pure Land as mutually exclusive sects in Dunhuang. Rather, it examines overlapping ideals: a meditative orientation toward realizing the nature of mind, commonly labelled “Chan,” and devotional practices directed toward Amitābha and rebirth in the Pure Land. When the paper refers to “Chan texts” or “Pure Land texts,” it follows content-based cataloguing labels while recognizing that local Buddhist communities may not have understood these materials as belonging to rigidly separate traditions.

The relationship between Chan and Pure Land should therefore be analyzed at two levels: discourse and practice. At the level of discourse, later scholarship often separated the two as distinct traditions. At the level of practice, Dunhuang materials show repeated crossings between meditation, recitation, visualization, ritual performance, and rebirth aspiration.² This distinction allows the article to retain the term “syncretism” while avoiding the assumption that two closed sectarian systems existed first and were later combined.

The exploration of the convergence between Chan and Pure Land traditions often centers around figures who embodied aspects of both, typically Chan monks engaging in practices aimed at rebirth in the Pure Land or in the recitation of the Buddha’s name. The absence of a singular scripture dedicated explicitly to this integrated ideology adds complexity to its study. Post-Song Dynasty, with a growing trend towards Buddhist integration, the amalgamation of Chan and Pure Land practices became a more pronounced subject of scholarly discussion. This phenomenon is viewed through a lens colored by sectarian perspectives. Prior to this well-defined era, Chan monks who sought rebirth in the Pure Land during their meditative practices, as well as practitioners primarily devoted to Pure Land Buddhism but achieving advanced Chan meditative states, were also considered part of this integrated approach. In the context of Dunhuang Buddhism, which is uniquely shaped by its role as a cultural crossroads along the Silk Road and its exposure to diverse religious traditions, discussions on Chan–Pure Land integration encompass texts that traverse both Chan and Pure Land ideas. This unique context arises from Dunhuang’s geographic position, its historical interaction with multiple ethnic groups, and the synthesis of Indian, Central Asian, and Chinese cultural influences, which led to a distinctive blend of Buddhist practices. This approach transcends the traditional boundaries of sectarian labels, offering a broader and more inclusive understanding of the interplay between these two significant Buddhist traditions. In the following, we will select relevant texts to further discuss the concept of Chan–Pure Land integration in Dunhuang Buddhism.

Contextualizing Sectarian Divisions in Chinese Buddhism. Modern scholarship has shown that the labels “Chan tradition” and “Pure Land tradition” may overstate the rigidity of sectarian boundaries in medieval China. Unlike in Japan, where a clearly delineated Pure Land tradition eventually emerged, Chinese Buddhism throughout the medieval and later imperial periods often witnessed more fluid and overlapping practice networks. As several scholars (e.g., Tang Yongtong, Hubbard, Sharf) have argued, “Chan” and “Pure Land” were not always distinct traditions or sects in China but rather heuristic rubrics denoting certain texts, doctrines, or emphases in practice. Thus, while this paper employs “Chan” and “Pure Land” for analytical convenience, it does not imply a strict sectarian dichotomy existed in medieval Dunhuang.

When using the term “Chan–Pure Land Syncretism,” this study refers to the interplay of meditative and devotional elements, especially Chan-oriented cultivation and Pure Land-oriented nianfo 念佛. References in Dunhuang manuscripts to meditation alongside vows for rebirth indicate a local engagement with both sets of practices. The claim is not

that Dunhuang produced a formal sectarian synthesis, but that its manuscripts preserve shared repertoires of practice that later labels tend to separate.

Recent scholarship has also highlighted the central role of the Tiantai tradition in promoting Pure Land practice. Stevenson demonstrated that Zhiyi (538–597) incorporated Amitābha recitation into the Tiantai meditation curriculum through the “Constantly Walking Samādhi” (changxing sanmei), a 90-day practice of circumambulating an Amitābha image while chanting (D. B. Stevenson 1986). In the Song dynasty, Tiantai monks such as Siming Zhili (960–1028) became the primary institutional promoters of Pure Land devotion. Getz has argued that the very concept of a Pure Land patriarchate was a Tiantai creation (“T’ien-t’ai Pure Land Societies and the Creation of the Pure Land Patriarchate,” in Getz 1999, pp. 477–23). This complicates the conventional Chan–Pure Land syncretism narrative, since the primary institutional vehicle for Pure Land practice was Tiantai, not Chan.

3. Chan–Pure Land Syncretism in Dunhuang Chan Buddhism Texts

A terminological clarification is necessary here. The Chinese term chan (禪), a transliteration of Sanskrit dhyāna, referred to meditative concentration as a generic Buddhist practice for centuries before the Chan lineage tradition emerged. As Greene has shown, meditation masters (chanshi) formed a recognized professional category from at least the 4th century CE—alongside Dharma masters (fashi) and Vinaya masters (lüshi)—long before any self-conscious Chan school existed (Greene 2021). The Chan lineage tradition did not reach institutional maturity until the Song dynasty (Schlütter 2008), after the Jingde chuandeng lu was compiled in 1004 CE (Welter 2006). Because the Dunhuang Library Cave was sealed around 1002 CE, its manuscripts predate this codification. When this paper identifies “Chan” elements in Dunhuang texts, many of these reflect the broader, pre-sectarian tradition of Buddhist meditative practice (chan, lowercase) rather than the institutionally defined Chan school of the Song. The coexistence of meditation and nianfo in these manuscripts need not imply a “syncretism” of two schools. It may simply reflect standard Mahāyāna practice.

In keeping with recent scholarship, it is crucial to note that classifying a text as “Chan” in Dunhuang manuscripts does not necessarily imply the community adhered strictly to an independent “Chan tradition.” Rather, these writings feature core meditative themes, often inspired by Indian dhyāna or Chinese Chan lineage teachings, while freely incorporating references to Pure Land. Such integrative tendencies are evident, for example, in S.2583, attributed to Bodhidharma, where meditation instructions culminate in a listing of ten virtues of Buddha-recitation.

From the late 8th to the 10th century, Chan Buddhism was highly prevalent in Dunhuang. As indicated by Ryōshō Tanaka’s statistics, there were over one hundred texts related to Chan Buddhism during this period. Fang Guangchang, in his study of the Chan collection in Dunhuang³, supports the claim that the collection of Chan-related scriptures compiled by Zongmi is reliable and comprises more than 100 texts (Tanaka 1983). The selected Chan texts discussed below include treatises, lecture notes, and poetry relevant to the theme of this article.

3.1. The Integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism in Dunhuang Texts

The following analysis examines selected texts from this corpus—including treatises, meditation poetry, and sutra lecture texts—to illustrate how meditative and devotional practices intertwined in Dunhuang’s Buddhist literary production.

3.1.1. S.2583 Nantianzhu Putidamo Canshi Guanmen 南天竺國菩提達摩禪師觀門 [Observations by Bodhidharma, the Chan Master from Southern India]

In the corpus of Chan texts from Dunhuang, S.2583, titled Nantianzhuguo putidamochanshi guanmen 南天竺國菩提達摩禪師觀門 [Observations by Bodhidharma, the Chan Master from Southern India], stands out, particularly for its mention of the ten virtues of Buddha-recitation at the end of the text. This work, attributed to Bodhidharma and preserved in the British Museum's collection of Dunhuang manuscripts, has been introduced by Yabuki Keiki 矢吹慶輝 in *Mingsha yuyun 鳴沙餘韻* [Rare and unknown Chinese manuscript remains of Buddhist literature discovered in Dunhuang], and meticulously compared and annotated by Tanaka Ryōshō 田中良昭 across its three extant versions, analyzing its integrated themes of Chan, Pure Land, and Esoteric Buddhism (Copp 2014)⁴. The origin of Bodhidharma's teachings, as recorded in the most reliable sources, is famously associated with the *erru sixing* 二入四行 [two entrances and four practices] and *ningzhu biguan* 凝住壁觀 [wall contemplation]. Alongside Chan meditation techniques, this document also discusses Buddha-recitation and rebirth:

Chanting the Buddha's name aloud brings ten kinds of merit: (1) not hearing evil sounds, (2) undistracted recitation of the Buddha's name, (3) dispelling sleepiness, (4) being vigorously diligent, (5) delighting the heavenly beings, (6) instilling fear in demonic armies, (7) resounding across the ten directions, (8) relieving suffering in the three paths, (9) bringing forth samādhi, and (10) being reborn in the Pure Land.

大聲念佛得十種功德：一者不聞惡聲，二者念佛不散，三者排去睡眠，四者勇猛精進，五者諸天歡喜，六者魔軍怖畏，七者聲振十方，八者三途息苦，九者三昧現前，十者往生淨土。⁵

The text first defines Chan meditation and sets out seven contemplative techniques, then turns to Buddha-recitation and rebirth. Its closing list of ten merits does not specify which Buddha should be invoked, but the final merit, rebirth in the Pure Land, places recitation within a broader soteriological frame. This conjunction is also visible in early Chinese materials associated with Tanluan 曇鸞 and Sengchou 僧稠, where contemplative discipline and Pure Land aspiration appear in the same practice world. Japanese scholarship has connected aspects of Bodhidharma-lineage meditation to the *Guan Wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經 [Contemplation Sūtra] (Manako 2015, p. 247). Sueki Fumihiko likewise reads the sutra as a distinctive form of contemplative scripture closely related to Chan methods (Sueki 1992, pp. 181–82).

The Dunhuang manuscript S.2583, titled *Observations by Bodhidharma, the Chan Master from Southern India*, exemplifies the Chan–Pure Land integration. Attributed to Bodhidharma, this text introduces Chan meditation techniques alongside a discourse on Buddha-recitation and rebirth. The closing section enumerates ten virtues associated with Buddha-recitation, emphasizing its efficacy in dispelling distractions, instilling samādhi, and attaining rebirth in the Pure Land.

This dual focus does not prove a formal institutional fusion. It shows that Dunhuang Chan-oriented texts could place meditation, Buddha-recitation, samādhi, and rebirth aspiration within one textual sequence. A similar pattern appears in Dunhuang Chan poetry.

3.1.2. Chan Poetry

The Dunhuang manuscripts contain poems associated with Chan meditation. Works such as *Wu Geng Zhuan* 五更轉 and *Shi Er Shi* 十二時 arrange practice across the night watches or the twelve periods of the day, offering vivid depictions of meditative awareness. P.2943 *Xue Dao Shi Er Shi* 學道十二時 [Learning the Way in Twelve Time Periods], for example, states:

By observing one's own mind, one can transcend the dichotomy of "existence" and "non-existence," and quietly comprehend the principle that all phenomena are ultimately empty. At the hour of the rooster (approximately dawn), one can realize that the true essence surpasses the opposition between emptiness and existence. By maintaining a non-attached state of observation, one can gradually cultivate and attain the state of Amitābha Buddha (embodying infinite life and infinite light beyond dualistic distinctions).

觀心超有無，寂然俱空理……雞鳴醜，實相離空有，但作不住觀，熏成無量壽。
(Ren 2006, p. 1406)

"Contemplating the mind" is a practice valued in Chan. It moves beyond the dichotomy of existence and nonexistence in order to grasp the principle of emptiness. During the hour of the Ox, the practitioner perceives true nature without attaching to either emptiness or existence. The subsequent verses introduce Amitābha, or Wuliangshou, as a Pure Land focus within this meditative setting. Another poem, S.6077 Wu Xiang Wu Geng Zhuan 無相五更轉, states:

The fifth watch urges, Buddha's day brilliantly unfolds the wonderful realm.
Transcending the four dhyānas' empty stillness, in a single thought, the Tathagata is seen.

五更催，佛日凝然妙境開。超透四禪空寂處，相應一念見如來。(Ren 2006, p. 1455)

The poem discusses how through deep Chan meditation, entering the four dhyānas, one can behold the presence of the Buddha. Both poems primarily discuss the experience of meditation and encountering Amitābha Buddha in this state. Another Dunhuang manuscript, "Wu Geng Zhuan·Nan Zong Zan" 五更轉·南宗贊, focuses on praising the Southern tradition of Chan. Besides discussing the spirit and methods of Southern Chan practice, it mentions the Pure Land ideas of rebirth through Buddha-recollection in the fourth and fifth watches:

The Bodhi seed sits on the red lotus, unstained by the mud of afflictions, always with the Pure Land and golden countenance. Buddha's eighty years in the world, the meaning of Prajñā, lies beyond words. Night and morning, constantly mindful of the Buddha.

菩提種子坐紅蓮，煩惱泥中常不染，恒將淨土共金顏。佛在世，八十年，般若意，不在言。夜夜朝朝恒念佛。⁶

The text refers to keeping the Pure Land and the golden countenance together, followed by nightly devotion to the Buddha. This points to the influence of Pure Land ideas on Dunhuang Chan monks. Next, the discussion will move to two Buddhist scriptures central to Mahāyāna Buddhism and widely used in Chan contexts, the Diamond Sutra and the Vimalakīrti Sūtra.

3.1.3. Scripture Lecture

P.2133 金剛經講經文 [The Diamond Sutra Lecture Texts]

Since the Fifth Patriarch Hongren 弘忍 (602–675) used the Diamond Sutra for imparting the essence of mind, and the Sixth Patriarch Huineng 慧能 (638–713) achieved enlightenment upon hearing the Diamond Sutra, this text has cemented its position in the history of Chinese Chan Buddhism. It has long been regarded as a pivotal Buddhist scripture for expounding Chan thought. Lecture texts are a mode of popularizing and orally transmitting Buddhist scriptures, a practice that was especially common in the Dunhuang region. Within the Dunhuang lecture texts on the Diamond Sutra, the concepts of Pure Land Buddhism are evident. This integration reflects the way Dunhuang lecture texts could carry Chan and Pure Land vocabulary within a single exegetical setting. For example:

Righteous practices deserve to be cultivated in a sequential manner; fruitless are the efforts and results without genuine cause. The unblemished fruit fully matures in the nourishing land... Ordinary beings, lacking a fixed time of realization, are solely dependent on the creation of their actions. Sincere faith naturally leads to birth in the Pure Land... Diligent practitioners follow this path of learning and cultivation, while those in the world, clinging to greed and sinking into misfortune, strive for rebirth in the upper-grade lotus of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss.

善法值得次第修，虛施功果沒因由，無漏果圓生澤土， 凡夫由來沒定期，只是全由造業時，政信自然生淨土， 勤人依此學修行，世間貪戀沈淪福，爭得似蓮花朵朵上生。(Pan 1994, pp. 108–18)

In the teachings of the Diamond Sutra, terms such as “rebirth in the Pure Land” and “lotus” are closely associated with Pure Land discourse. The term “superior rebirth” further points to the Western Pure Land. The Larger Sukhāvatīyūha Sūtra discusses three levels of rebirth, upper, middle, and lower, while the Contemplation Sūtra elaborates nine grades of rebirth, including the uppermost grade of superior rebirth. These references connect the lecture text’s vocabulary with established Pure Land categories:

Endure and mitigate hardships throughout life, and at life’s end, certainly reside in the Western Paradise.

在世之中消苦難，臨終決定住西方。(Pan 1994, p. 106)

The Diamond Sutra Lecture Texts in the Dunhuang corpus highlight the integration of Chan and Pure Land thought. For example, the phrase “strive for rebirth in the upper-grade lotus of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss” captures the aspirational ethos of Pure Land practice while resonating with Chan’s emphasis on mental discipline and clarity. Such expressions present Pure Lands as mental states as well as soteriological destinations, aligning with the Chan language of “mind-only Pure Land.” The Diamond Sutra lecture materials therefore show how Pure Land categories could be incorporated into scriptural exposition associated with Chan. A comparable pattern also appears in the Lectures on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra.

維摩詰講經文 [Lectures on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra]

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra is centered on nonduality and a middle way that avoids the extremes of existence and nonexistence. As an important scriptural source for Chan, this concept is also evident in S.3872, “Vimalakīrti Sūtra Lectures (Part II),” where Chan and Pure Land vocabularies appear together:

The recognition that the body is void leads to the understanding of the ultimate truth. The Buddha is the mind, and the mind is the Buddha; outside the mind, there is no Dharma, and outside the Dharma, there is no mind. Purity and impurity are of the same essence and are originally without distinction. Defiled regions and Pure Lands are both transformations of the mind; they have no fixed essence and neither arise nor cease. The three realms are consciousness-only, and all phenomena are mind-only. To realize the source of the mind is to realize the Pure Land. The Pure Land has never been far away; once recognized, it appears. It is only inches away, yet the deluded mind does not see it. When the mind is seen, the Pure Land appears. There is no need for strenuous search; this is the path of expedient means. The principle of the Pure Land resides only in the mind. Those who are unskilled see only profound meaning in words. Once enlightened, one finds it only in the mind; while deluded, where else could one seek it?

知身是空，了達實法。即佛是心，即心是佛，心外無法，法外無心，淨穢同體，本無分別。穢方淨土，皆由心變，無有根本，亦無生滅，三界唯識，萬法唯心。了悟心源，即是淨土。淨土何曾遠，認得還須顯，都來咫尺間，迷心終不見。見了只在心，心了淨方現，莫更苦尋求，只此除方便。淨方道理只居心，心拙唯言義校深，悟了只於心上取，心迷何處漫追尋…… (Pan 1994, p. 273)

Huifang Jingtu does not directly refer to Amitābha's Western Pure Land, but this does not make the discussion irrelevant to Pure Land thought. Although Vimalakīrti seeks rebirth in the Abhirati Pure Land (Nattier 2000), the Vimalakīrti Sūtra contains a broader discourse on Buddha-lands, especially in the chapter on the Buddha-land. In this context, Huifang Jingtu emphasizes the Pure Land as a mental and spiritual realm. Schopen (1977) and McBride (2020) have both noted the wide circulation of Amitābha devotion in Indian Buddhist literature and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The text moves from the relation between the mind and the Buddha to the relation between impure and pure lands, arguing that the nearness or distance of the Pure Land depends on the clarity or delusion of the mind. The idea that "mind is Buddha" is central to Chan Buddhism and is echoed in the Contemplation Sūtra's statement, "This mind is Buddha, this mind becomes Buddha." The passage thus expresses a nondual view of Chan and Pure Land that leans toward the later Chan idea of "mind-only Pure Land" and "Amitābha of one's own nature." This point also recalls a Platform Sūtra passage that links the nearness of the West to the purity of the mind (Huang 2021, p. 264).

3.1.4. 九想觀及其他 [The Nine Contemplations and Other Poems]

In Theravāda Buddhist meditation, practices such as the contemplation of impurity and the contemplation of the white bones are commonly employed. The poem⁷ in the Nine Contemplations follows a sequence that spans from a person's birth, through childhood, aging, illness, and death, to the decomposition of the body into white bones. This approach clearly draws on traditional Theravāda meditation techniques. Thus, it is unambiguous to interpret this as a form of meditation poetry. In the ninth contemplation, primarily dealing with the contemplation of white bones and concluding remarks, the version held in the Shanghai Museum (No. 48 [41379]), "Nine Contemplations," touches upon the concept of the Pure Land:

The twelve-linked chain of causation drives the cycle of rebirth, yet it is impermanent and not to be intimately associated with. The wise, upon comprehending this truth, should heed the causes leading to the Pure Land in the West. In the West lies a Buddha named Amitabha, in a realm called Ultimate Bliss that pervades the Saha world. A hundred birds and spiritual creatures chant virtues, and the leaves in trees resonate with the Dharma conch as the wind blows... Struggling to enter the cycle of rebirth in the six realms, few traverse the path to that blissful realm.

十二因緣輪回轉，但是無常莫共親。智者若能悟此事，聽取西方淨土因。西方有佛號彌陀，國名極樂遍娑婆。百鳥靈禽皆念善，樹葉風吹擊法螺…… 六趣輪回爭路入，彼方極樂少經過。⁸

The text suggests that understanding life's cycle as driven by the twelve links of dependent origination should lead one to aspire to be reborn in the Pure Land. It then describes the virtues of the Western Pure Land, noting that while most are caught in the endless cycle of the six realms, only a few are reborn in the realm of Ultimate Bliss. Similarly, the Dunhuang poem "In the Supreme Vehicle (Following the Flow of Water)," in its first stanza, states:

No other words, no other speech, without words and speech is the name unattainable. Inconceivable across countless eons, instantly relinquish to be reborn in the Pure Land.

別無言，別無語，無言無語名不取。無量劫來不思議，即應即舍生淨土。⁹

The opening lines, emphasizing the absence of words and speech, reflect Chan's advocacy of 'no words, no teachings, and no reliance on written texts,' representing another mode of discourse. The final lines, discussing the aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land, demonstrate a convergence of Chan and Pure Land teachings. These examples show how Chan-oriented writings could include Pure Land aspiration. The next section examines the same issue from the side of Pure Land-oriented texts.

4. Chan–Pure Land Syncretism in Dunhuang Pure Land Buddhist Texts

Similarly, Pure Land-oriented Dunhuang texts often contain explicit meditative instructions and vocabulary associated with samādhi, “no-mind,” or “mind-only Pure Land.” These features do not make the texts Chan works, but they show that Pure Land devotion in Dunhuang could be practiced through contemplative and liturgical techniques. As Sharf (2002) and Faure (1991) note, such combinations of doctrine, devotion, and practice are common in Chinese Buddhist history and do not necessarily imply discrete, competing sectarian institutions. The assumption of a fully distinct Chinese Pure Land tradition has also been questioned by Tang Yongtong, Mark Lewis, and others (Jones 2019), especially when compared with Japanese institutions such as Jōdo-shū and Jōdo Shinshū. Given the influence of Sanjie jiao 三階教 (Hubbard 2001) in medieval China and the presence of Three Stages materials (Lewis 1990) among the Dunhuang manuscripts, the discussion below treats “Pure Land” as a content-based label for sources centered on Amitābha, nianfo, visualization, vows, merit transfer, and rebirth aspiration, rather than as evidence for a separate Pure Land sect on the Japanese model.

4.1. S.382 大乘淨土贊 [*Mahāyāna Pure Land Praises*]

In the Dunhuang manuscripts, praises (zan) occupy a significant position, with each eulogy crafted for a specific class of sutras or particular subjects, sung in a lyrical form. For example, the Mahāyāna Pure Land Praises¹⁰ integrate Chan contemplative insights with Pure Land aspirations. The verses emphasize the internal cultivation of pure awareness through meditation while simultaneously advocating for the recitation of the Buddha's name as a means to attain rebirth in the Pure Land. This dual emphasis underscores the complementary relationship between meditative discipline and devotional practices within Pure Land literature:

The Dharma mirror reflects upon the void... revealing a pure and wondrous awareness in the mind, permeating the Dharma realm. The jewel of intention remains ever pure, its light illuminating all directions. The ultimate heart dwells nowhere, liberation attained in clarity... Contemplation as if without contemplation... When enlightened, there is nothing to cling to, sitting or lying in emptiness... Speaking of our inherent root, constantly observing through meditation, the true treasure of Samadhi... Some devote themselves to reciting the Buddha's name, entering deep Chan meditation. In the first watch of the night, with a focused mind seated, the Western Land appears before the eyes. To recite is to understand non-recitation, non-recitation is thus... The Pure Land is in the mind, yet fools seek it externally. Within the depths lies the treasure mirror, unrecognized, one's life is spent in vain. All Buddhas reside in the mind... Diligently reflecting back upon oneself, no dust or impurity can trespass... The inherent nature is originally pure, the path of enlightenment lies in understanding this prin-

ciple. Reciting the Buddha's name leads to the cessation of birth... The thought of Buddha is emptiness without thought, the ultimate truth is silent and unspoken. Speaking of teachings in words, such talks belong to deluded Chan. Nirvana, the ultimate hidden Dharma, is secretly transmitted, not openly shared. The mind, when in communion, is always self-sufficient, mightily guiding those with affinity...

法鏡臨空照..... 現心淨妙察, 法界亦通□, 意珠恒自淨, 身光照十方, 至心無處住, 解脫得清□, 觀想如無想..... 悟則無所緣, 坐臥空消裏..... 說我本根由, 住想常觀察, 三昧寶王真..... 有人專念佛, 念佛入深禪, 初夜端心坐, 西方在目前, 念則知無念, 無念是□如..... 淨土在心頭, 愚人向外求, 深中有寶鏡, 不識一生休, 諸佛在心頭..... 懃懃返自照, 塵垢莫來過..... 自性本□□, 悟理之修趣, 念佛即無生..... 佛想空無想, 真如寂不言, 口談文字教, 此界妄想禪, 涅槃末藏法, 祕密不交傳, 心通常自用, 威當度有緣..... (Zhang 2006)

Mahāyāna visualization practices had entered China through texts such as the Sutra on the Ocean-Like Samādhi of the Visualization of the Buddha and the Contemplation Sūtra. This hymn repeatedly mentions contemplation while centering on praise of the Western Pure Land, indicating the integration of Mahāyāna contemplative practices with Pure Land discourse. It discusses “contemplation as if without contemplation” and “constant observation in meditation, the true treasure of samādhi,” and then states that through deep meditation one can witness the Western Land. It further notes that reciting and contemplating the Buddha reveals all Buddhas and the Pure Land within the mind. The Mahāyāna Pure Land Praises therefore frame the Pure Land not only as an external destination, but also as a reality returned to and found within the mind. Other Pure Land eulogies in the Dunhuang manuscripts, such as S.370 Joint Assembly for Rebirth in the Pure Land, contain related material:

Earlier assemblies spoke of directly reciting the Buddha's name, later assemblies emphasized the practice of seated meditation. Tranquility and cessation of birth is the true Dharma, each thought clear and naturally serene.

前會言直念佛, 後會重釋坐禪門, 寂滅無生是真法, 心心明淨自然澄。¹¹

This passage combines the practices of reciting the Buddha's name and seated meditation, highlighting their close relationship.

4.2. *Jingtu Wuhui Nianfo Songjing Guanxing Yi* 淨土五會念佛誦經觀行儀 [Rite for Intoning the Buddha's Name, Reciting Scripture, and Performing Meditation According to the Five Tempos of the Pure Land]

The influence of Pure Land Buddhism in Dunhuang is reflected in manuscripts, mural paintings, and donor inscriptions. D. Stevenson (1996) discusses Fazhao's Wutai-related visionary context and material associated with the *Jingtu Wuhui Nianfo Songjing Guanxing Yi* (淨土五會念佛誦經觀行儀). For the present article, this text is especially relevant because it presents Buddha-recitation, scripture recitation, and contemplative practice as coordinated disciplines. The extant second volume (P.2066) and third volume (P.2250 and P.2963), together with the condensed version *Jingtu Wuhui Nianfo Lue Fashi Yizan* 淨土五會念佛略法事儀贊 recorded in Ennin's 圓仁 catalogue, show that the work circulated as a ritual and devotional guide. The following analysis continues to rely on the Taishō Tripiṭaka versions while reading the text as evidence for the ritual coordination of nianfo and contemplation (Ueyama 1976).¹²

Engaging in seated meditation, reciting scriptures, and frequently chanting the name of the Buddha with diligence can lead to the realization and attainment of Bodhi, although discerning this progress can be challenging.

坐禪誦經常念佛(努力)，會當證果得菩提(難識)。¹³

The passage links seated meditation, scripture recitation, and Buddha-recitation to the pursuit of bodhi. Its claim should be read as programmatic rather than as proof of automatic enlightenment: disciplined chanting and meditative sitting are presented as mutually supportive practices.

The aspiration to align with the path of samādhi is initiated through the focused contemplation of a single sutra.

欲與三味道，正觀一經開。¹⁴

The text states that the attainment of samādhi depends on contemplation guided by scripture. Another section links delusion among sentient beings to the difficulty of entering a Chan meditative state:

The six emotions and false appearances pervasively cling and connect, preventing samādhi from manifesting. With diligent effort, cut through the darkness of ignorance, and swiftly ascend to the precious lotus.

六情妄相遍攀緣，三昧無由得現前，勤勤光斬無明賊，急急相將上寶蓮。¹⁵

The text notes that the contact between the six senses of sentient beings and external phenomena leads to a proliferation of delusions, thereby hindering the attainment of true samādhi. Here, Buddha-contemplation cuts through ignorance and leads the practitioner toward lotus rebirth. Beyond the procedural steps of the ritual, the text also includes numerous eulogies of the Pure Land. Some of these were composed by Fazhao himself, while others are compilations of works by different authors that he incorporated. For instance, in the Tan Xifang Jingtū Wuhui Miaoyin Zān 歎西方淨土五會妙音贊 [Eulogy of the Wondrous Sound at the Five Assemblies in the Western Pure Land] the narrative of how Buddha-recitation facilitates entry into deep Chan meditation is mentioned, closely aligning with the Mahāyāna Pure Land Praises.

The first assembly calms the chaotic mind, the second resonates loudly with all beings connected by fate, the third's sound floats, evoking grace and compassion, the fourth harmonizes, truly pitiable, the fifth shakes, scattering the heavenly demons, enabling the practitioner to enter deep Chan meditation.

第一會時除亂意，第二高聲遍有緣，第三響颺能哀雅，第四和鳴真可憐，第五震動天魔散，能令念者入深禪。¹⁶

This eulogy presents Buddha-recitation as a practice that calms the mind and enables entry into deep Chan meditation. The fifth assembly is especially important because chanting is said to scatter demonic obstruction and lead the practitioner into deep Chan. The Rituals then develops the theme in the section titled Nianfo zhi shi de nianfo zan 念佛之時得念佛贊 [Eulogy of Attaining Buddha-Recitation in the Moment of Recitation].

Comparing seated meditation and Buddha-recitation, the Buddha's teachings at their core are not dualistic. It is only that the minds of sentient beings are unbalanced. In cultivating Chan, one's intention and meditation mind are purified, while in reciting the Buddha's name, one solely seeks to be greeted by the transformative Buddha. One person travels by cart up the mountain, another journeys by boat on water. Though mountains and waters differ in height and depth, the attainment in terms of virtues and principles is equally profound.

校量坐禪念佛贊，如來說法元無二，只是眾生心不平，修禪志發禪心淨，念佛唯求化佛迎。一個駕車山上走，一個乘船水裏行。山水高低雖有異，成功德理兩俱平。¹⁷

In this praise of Buddha-recitation, Chan practice and Buddha-recitation are regarded as two distinct paths. The text contrasts these paths through metaphors, suggesting that

although their methods of cultivation differ, the ultimate goal they lead to is the same. The phrase “Jie gongde li liang ju ping 戒功德理兩俱平 [The virtues and principles of discipline are equally balanced]” indicates that neither method is superior to the other in terms of merit and principle. Furthermore, in the “Loud Voice Recitation Praise,” it is also stated:

The ninth leads to deep Samadhi, silent and inactive, a state of Chan free from outflows.

第九能入深三昧，寂滅無為漏禪。¹⁸

The praise links Buddha-recitation to a quiet and inactive samādhi free from outflows. In S.382 and P.2130 Xifang Jile Zan 西方極樂讚 [Eulogy of the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss], recitation is not merely a devotional act directed toward future rebirth; it also functions as a present technique for calming the mind and approaching contemplative clarity.

Through the practice of Buddha-recitation, one extinguishes ignorance. Only those in deep Samadhi are thus aligned with true awareness.

由因念佛故，所以滅愚癡，唯深三昧者，方應同正知。¹⁹

In the “Five-Character Praise of the Pure Land,” it is emphasized that the pursuit of true samādhi should be an inward practice focused on one’s own mind. Likewise, the aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land is also to be sought within oneself. This aligns the approaches for both attaining rebirth in the Pure Land and achieving true samādhi with the Chan practice of introspective seeking. The essence of this concept is articulated in the original text as follows:

Desiring to attain Samadhi, there’s nothing beyond mastering one’s own mind. Without breaking the continuity of body and mind, the merciful master comes searching on his own. The pure land of utmost bliss is truly serene, unsurpassed by other realms. With every thought seeking Samadhi, entering meditation reveals Amitabha.

欲得求三昧，無過自攝心，身心莫間斷，慈主自來尋，極樂真國淨，餘方未得過，心心求三昧，入定見彌陀。²⁰

Those who wish to be reborn in the Pure Land must diligently seek within their own hearts. Accumulating treasures like mountains, beyond the reach of sentient beings, they hold within a bright and reflective mind, yet remain unaware of a lifetime’s respite.

欲生淨土者，心裏自勤求，積寶如山嶽，眾生不能求，內懷明懷鏡，不識一生休。²¹

Additionally, the rituals in the text connect the practice of Buddha-contemplation with the language of the unattainable and the Middle Way perspective. As stated in the text:

According to the scriptures, in the practice of Buddha-contemplation, whether in concentration or dispersion, whether chanting aloud or silently, one simply follows the inclinations of sentient beings’ hearts in reciting the Buddha’s name. All who do so will ultimately be reborn in the Pure Land and attain Buddhahood. Each and every one is ‘incomprehensible’, neither attainable nor unattainable. This is known as the perspective of the Middle Way.

但據經文，作觀念佛，或定或散，或高聲兼默念，但隨眾生心，稱念佛名者，盡得生淨土，成佛皆歸，一一亦不可得，無得無不得，是名中道觀。²²

The text discusses how engaging in Buddha-contemplation assures rebirth in the Pure Land and ultimately leads to an understanding of the Middle Way, characterized by the

principle of ‘incomprehensibility’ — where nothing is either attainable or unattainable. Similarly, Jingtu Wuhui Nianfo Songjing Guanxing Yi, attributed to Fazhao, outlines protocols that blend Chan meditation with Pure Land recitations. The text advocates for the synchronized practice of seated meditation (zuochan/zazen) and Buddha-recitation (nianfo), suggesting that such combined practices facilitate the attainment of samādhi and rebirth in the Pure Land. This points to the practical flexibility of Dunhuang Buddhism, where doctrinal boundaries were often porous. This section concludes the discussion on the integration of Chan and Pure Land approaches within the Guanxing Yi. Following this, we will examine the more accessible aspects of vow texts and scriptural lectures.

4.3. 講經文 *Texts of Sutra Lectures*

In S.6551 “Lectures on the Amitābha Sutra spoken by the Buddha,” the influence of Chan thought is evident in the interpretation of emptiness:

The sounds, scents, tastes, and touches are innately empty; emptiness and non-emptiness entwined are still empty. The Dharma realm, never arriving, is inherently pure, unconcerned with whether it is empty or not.

聲香味觸本來空，空與不空纏是空，法界無來本清淨，都不關他空不空。

(Pan 1994, p. 160)

In this verse — “Sound, scent, taste, and touch are originally empty; both emptiness and non-emptiness, when entwined, are empty; the dharma realm, naturally pure from the start, has no coming or going, and none of this pertains to emptiness or non-emptiness” — this passage draws on Mahāyāna prajñā themes, which informed Chan and other Buddhist traditions alike. It declares sensory phenomena empty and moves beyond the opposition between emptiness and non-emptiness. It points to the fundamentally pure nature of the dharma realm, emphasizing direct apprehension of intrinsic clarity rather than conceptual elaboration. This approach is compatible with Chan readings that emphasize direct apprehension without attachment to conceptual categories. A similar concept appears in the early Chinese translation of the Banzhou sanmei jing 般舟三昧經 [Skt. Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra, Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra]. This sutra, in discussing Amitābha Buddha of the West, integrates the prajñāpāramitā view of emptiness, suggesting that recitation of the Buddha’s name can lead to the realization of the samādhi of emptiness. Such crossings also appear outside texts explicitly classified as Chan or Pure Land.

4.4. Miaozenzan 邈真贊 [*Portrait Praises*]

In the Dunhuang “Portrait Praises” (miaozenzan 邈真贊), several examples show how Chan and Pure Land vocabularies appeared in commemorative writing. These portraits, often commissioned by local families at the time of death or on memorial occasions, combined an image of the individual with a eulogy. Their language records the virtues that communities wished to remember, including meditative accomplishment, discipline, ritual service, and hope for rebirth in the Pure Land. P.3726 Du Heshang Xiezen Zan 杜和尚寫真贊 [Portrait and Praise of the Reverend Du], for example, states:

In his youthful years, he pursued the path of enlightenment, garnering praise from all. Not confined to adhering to strict disciplines, his profound engagement in Chan meditation stood paramount... Casting aside impurity to embrace purity, in Buddhism, who else can... What can be relied upon? He thanks this turbid world, as the Pure Land warmly beckons. Once he enters the ultimate bliss of Nirvana, the ignorance of the three realms fades away.

髻年學道，眾口稱讚。非論持律，修禪最能…… 舍穢歸淨，佛教誰與…… 何以為憑，謝此濁世，淨土招承。一歸極樂，三界無明。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 133)

The monk, identified as the Reverend Du in the text, is described as being proficient in Chan meditation. He renounced the defiled land to return to the pure realm, ultimately achieving a timely rebirth into the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Similar narratives are also found in P.4660 (33), Fan Heshang Xiezhen Zan 范和尚寫真贊 [Portrait and Praise of the Reverend Fan]. The two passages are consistent in content:

Not merely adhering to precepts, but excelling in Chan practice, what can serve as proof? He bids farewell to this turbid world, as the Pure Land warmly welcomes. Returning to ultimate bliss, ignorance in the three realms ceases.

非論持戒，修禪最能，何以為憑，謝此濁世，淨土招承。一歸極樂，三界無明。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 143)

In P.4660 (32), Xuan She Li (Zhang Jinxuan) 炫閣梨 (張金炫) [Praise of Dhyāna Master Xuan She Li (Zhang Jinxuan)], it is stated:

The branch of Chan forever flourishes, the sea of nature remains clear and rippleless... As the transformation of the mundane world completes, the Pure Land further flourishes.

禪枝恒茂，性海澄漪…… 閻浮化畢，淨土加滋。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 144)

The praise presents Dhyāna Master Xuan She Li as accomplished in Chan. After his worldly ties ended and he entered nirvana, he is described as proceeding to the Pure Land to receive the continuing nourishment of the Dharma rain. A similar phrasing appears in P.4660 (26), Ning Gong Miaozen Zan 凝公邈真贊 [Praise of the Portrait of Master Ning]:

Internally encompassing the Tripitaka, externally studying the nine scriptures. Profound in discipline, boundless in Chan's tranquility... The meditation hall remains vacant, the staff hangs from the willow, at the lotus assembly, he bows endlessly with devotion.

內包三藏，外學九章。律通幽遠，禪寂無疆…… 空留禪室，錫掛垂楊，蓮花會上，親禮無央。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 153)

The phrase 'boundless in Chan's tranquility' reflects Monk Ning's profound level of Chan meditation. 'At the lotus assembly, he bows endlessly with devotion' suggests that after rebirth in the Pure Land, he manifests in the lotus pond, transforming without limit and paying homage throughout countless Buddha lands in a single day. A similar pairing appears in P.381 (11), Cheng Zhengxin Miaozen Zan 程政信邈真贊 [Praise of the Portrait of Cheng Zhengxin]:

Chan...purifies the dwelling, understanding reaches the origin of existence and non-existence... Profound in discipline, boundless in Chan and recitation. The lotus petals blend in flight, the soul departs to the West.

禪口住淨，理達有無之源…… 律通邃遠，禪誦無疆。混飛菡萏，魄往西方。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 256)

This passage directly discusses the relationship between Chan (Chan) and Pure Land Buddhism, affirming their compatibility. It suggests that practicing both can lead to rebirth in the Western Pure Land. In P3792 Zhang Heshang Xiezhen Zan 張和尚寫真贊 [Praise of the Portrait of revered Zhang], it is mentioned:

The Four Dhyanas are clear and protected like ice and snow... Frequently observing the silver wheel's westward journey.

四禪澄護而冰雪…… 每睹銀輪頻西轉。(Jiang et al. 1992, p. 320)

‘Four Dhyanas’ refers to the level of Monk Zhang’s meditation practice, while ‘silver wheel’ (silver lotus platform) symbolizes the practitioners who aspire to be reborn in the Pure Land. At the end of their lives, depending on their level of practice, they perceive golden, silver, or bronze lotus platforms arriving to guide them to the Western Pure Land. This illustrates the integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. Moreover, eulogies and portrait praises from Dunhuang further illustrate the integration of Chan and Pure Land elements. These praises often depict monks who excelled in Chan meditation while also engaging in Pure Land practices, highlighting the non-sectarian and syncretic nature of Buddhist practice in Dunhuang. Such narratives reinforce the notion that practitioners did not view Chan and Pure Land as mutually exclusive but rather as complementary paths towards enlightenment and rebirth.

4.5. Other Categories: Monastic Biography, *Zhaiwen* 齋文 [Funerary Texts], *Lichanwen* 禮懺文 [Repentance Rituals], *Jiezuowen* 解座文²³, and *Bianwen* 變文

In addition to the aforementioned, other Dunhuang Buddhist texts also reflect the integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. For instance, S.0556V *Shi Seng Rui Zhuan* 釋僧叡傳 [Biography of Monk Sheng Rui] mentions...

He also greatly promoted the practice of praise, aspiring to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. In all his actions, whether sitting or lying down, he never turned away from the West. At the moment of passing, he brought his palms together, and a five-colored light emanated from him.

又弘贊之業，皆願生安養。每行住□（坐）□（臥），不背西方，□（臨）終合掌，五色光從叡而出。（Zhong and Zhang 2014, p. 507)

After Kumārajīva came to China, he translated a series of meditation scriptures and transmitted Chan-related teachings. Monk Rui, a follower of Kumārajīva, learned Chan from him. The text states that at the time of his death, Monk Rui aspired to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss and oriented his daily activities, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, toward the West. This indicates Seng Rui’s aspiration for rebirth in the Western Pure Land. Monks like Rui, who were deeply versed in Chan and also aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land, have often been overlooked in studies of the integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. This point deserves attention. The text *She Zhai Zan Yuan Wen* 設齋贊願文 [Ritual Fasting Praise and Vow Text], authored by Dao Yin 道胤 (668–740) (Z. Wang 2016), also contains related material:

Dao Yin, a monk at the Great Jianfu²⁴ 薦福 Monastery, diligently studied the true scriptures and extensively explored historical records. When the Buddha appears, Bodhisattvas serve as his aides; when a holy king reigns, the wise and virtuous assist in governance. This contributes to the promotion of grand undertakings and the spread of virtuous influences. It provides great shelter to living beings and harmonizes social customs. Such actions establish an enduring reputation and set a precedent for future generations. Upon examination, this was indeed embodied by the great Master Da Hui 大惠 of the Tang Dynasty. It is my fervent wish for the Chan Master to sweep away the dust of confusion, clarify the waves of karma, briefly visit the heavenly palace, and observe the Compassionate One. In the world of Ultimate Bliss, once Amitabha is seen, to return to the mortal world, aiding and saving people, upholding the Dharma. His profound intention is to seek the Buddha land; his true vow, never to forsake sentient beings.

大薦福寺沙門道胤述述覽真經，緬尋載籍。如來出現，菩薩為之輔翼；聖王禦寓，賢俊於焉弼成。所以匡贊鴻業，掄揚景化。大庇生靈，輯熙風俗。建雄名於不朽，垂範令於將來。考事而論，則我大唐故大惠禪師有之矣。伏願禪師，刷蕩囂

滓，澄清業浪，知足天宮，暫觀慈氏。安養世界，一見彌陀，還向閻浮，濟人護法。其深心也，當取佛國；其正願也，莫舍眾生。²⁵

Dao Yin's *She Zhai Zan Yuan Wen* 設齋讚願文 describes Great Master Dahui as deeply versed in Chan and as aspiring to rebirth in a Pure Land. The text also distinguishes *Tuṣita* from *Amitābha's* Western Pure Land and ultimately prefers the latter, reflecting a wider medieval discussion of different rebirth destinations. Repentance literature offers another example. *Shi'er Guang Li* 十二光禮 [Twelve Light Rituals] (J. Wang 1998) states:

I wish that at the time of death, my disciples' minds will not be disturbed or confused, and they will not lose mindfulness. May their bodies and minds be free from all suffering and pain, experiencing joy as if entering into Chan meditation. May the holy assembly appear before them, and by the original vow of the Buddha, may they be reborn in the highest grade in the land of Amitabha Buddha. Upon arrival in that land, may they attain the six supernatural powers, travel to the ten directions to save and gather suffering sentient beings. As long as the void and the Dharma realm exist, so shall my vows. Having made this vow, I wholeheartedly entrust myself to Amitabha Buddha... On the first night... with courage and diligence in progress, always focusing the mind on Chan.

願弟子等臨命終時，心不顛倒，心不錯亂，心不失念，身心無諸苦痛，身心快樂如入禪定，聖眾現前，乘佛本願，上品往生阿彌陀佛國。到彼國已，得六神通，入十方界，救攝苦眾生。虛空法界盡，我願亦如是。發願已，至心歸命阿彌陀佛..... 初夜..... 勇猛勤精進，攝心常在禪。(J. Wang 1998, p. 76)

This document is a Western Pure Land repentance ritual from Dunhuang. It states that practitioners, at the moment of death, enter a state similar to meditation and are reborn in the highest grade of the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss. The conclusion discusses how practitioners, after making the vow to be reborn, continue with vigorous and diligent recitation of the Buddha's name, remaining constantly in a state of meditation. The passage brings together meditation, Pure Land practice, and repentance ritual. In addition, *Yi yi ge—Dunhuang chengfo* 易易歌-敦煌成佛 [Song of Effortless Enlightenment to Become a Buddha, title proposed by the editor] also refers to material from the *Guan Wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經 [Contemplation Sūtra]:

Song of Effortless Enlightenment to Become a Buddha says that without taking a single step, one can transcend the *sahā* world. Observing one's own body, one sees the Buddha within the heart. Clearly understanding that Ultimate Bliss is without Amitabha. *Song of Effortless Enlightenment to Become a Buddha* states that this mind is the Buddha, without Amitabha. This mind becomes Buddha; there is no other Buddha. Clearly knowing that Ultimate Bliss is indeed the *sahā* world.

解悟成佛易易歌，不行寸步出娑婆。觀身自見心中佛。明知極樂沒彌陀。解悟成佛易易歌，是心是佛沒彌陀。是心作佛無別佛，明知極樂是娑婆。(Ren 2006, p. 1220)

The concept in the text, 'observing one's own body to see the Buddha within the heart, and the indistinguishability of the *sahā* world and Ultimate Bliss,' carries the essence of Chan's philosophy of an intrinsically pure land in the mind. This inward-seeking approach is often regarded as characteristic of the Chan tradition, but the idea of 'this mind is the Buddha, this mind becomes Buddha' recalls the 'Dharma Body Contemplation' in the *Guan Wuliangshou jing*. Such poems reveal a trend where contemplating the Buddha as a method of Chan practice and the aspiration for rebirth in the Western Land of Ultimate Bliss became common in the daily practice and study of monks. This tendency surfaces in

texts focused on practice and, equally, in faith-oriented scriptures and offerings. Another example is found in P1191 Jiezuowen:

Initially, the teachings of existence benefited the masses, while the doctrine of emptiness led to enlightenment and understanding... Beings of all grades, high, middle, and low, are equally noted... Each individually recites the Buddha's name and returns to their abodes... Once the jeweled throne is complete, all the heavens surround it, and Amitābha himself ascends on a cloud. He will manifest to expound the Dharma, certainly becoming an indestructible Vajra body... Unceasingly reciting the Buddha's name, one heads towards the Western Paradise.

先開有教益群情，此說空宗令悟解.....上中下品皆蒙記.....各自念佛歸舍去.....寶座既成諸天繞，彌陀即便自乘雲。將為化身來說法，定為金剛不壞身.....無過念佛往西方。²⁶

Here, the doctrine of emptiness refers to Chan Buddhism, initially teaching the doctrine of existence to sentient beings, then leading them to the concept of emptiness to eradicate attachments. The mention of beings of all grades, high, middle, and low, are equally noted, referring to the three levels of rebirth in the Western Pure Land. The descriptions of the jeweled throne, the welcoming manifestation, etc., are based on the images of the last moments as described in the three levels and nine grades of rebirth in the Pure Land. It concludes with an emphasis on reciting the Buddha's name to go to the Western Paradise. Additionally, S.2614, Da Muqianlian Mingjian Jiumu Bianwen 大目乾連冥間救母變文 [The Transformation Text of Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother in the Underworld] also incorporates the integration of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism. It mentions content related to Chan Buddhist thought in the narrative of Mahāmaudgalyāyana's practice:

He then practiced meditation on emptiness while sitting in Chan. Through sitting in Chan and contemplating emptiness, he discerned good and evil, calming and steadying the mind without attachment.

便即觀空而坐禪。坐禪觀空知善惡，降心住心無所著。(Huang and Zhang 1997, p. 1025)

Emptiness is a core concept in Chan Buddhism. It is further mentioned that through meditating on emptiness while practicing Chan, one comes to understand good and evil, subduing the mind and making it free from attachments. The document concludes with a reference to Pure Land thought:

Returning hence, the world of Saha is no place to linger; life and death inherently have no dwelling. The Western Buddha Land is the most exquisite.

歸去來，閻浮提世界不堪停，生死本來無住處，西方佛國最為精。(Huang and Zhang 1997, p. 1038)

After describing various tribulations and practices in the Saha world, the text concludes by mentioning that to achieve liberation from the cycle of birth and death, the most expedient method is to aspire for rebirth in the Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss. Although the sections on the integration of Chan and Pure Land are narrated separately, they also reflect this ideological trend's influence in the Buddhist regions of Dunhuang.

5. Conclusions

The Dunhuang manuscripts examined in this article offer a detailed picture of medieval Buddhist practice outside the imperial heartlands. While they do not prove that Dunhuang shaped Chinese Buddhism as a whole, they preserve forms of liturgical, devotional, meditative, and commemorative writing that are often less visible elsewhere in

comparable volume (Galambos 2020). In this local archive, Chan-oriented and Pure Land-oriented elements repeatedly appear in the same textual and ritual environments.

The article therefore refines, rather than simply repeats, the language of “Chan–Pure Land syncretism.” Chan and Pure Land remain meaningful terms, but in the Dunhuang context they work best as historically situated labels for practices, vocabularies, and claims to authority. A Chan-oriented text may invoke Amitābha and rebirth in Sukhāvātī; a Pure Land-oriented text may present nianfo as a contemplative discipline. These crossings are part of the religious texture preserved by the Dunhuang archive.

This perspective also clarifies the article’s broader contribution. Dunhuang does not provide evidence for a formal institutional merger of two autonomous schools. It provides evidence for local combinations of meditation, recitation, visualization, repentance, memorial writing, and rebirth aspiration. Such evidence invites a more flexible account of medieval Chinese Buddhism, one that distinguishes later sectarian rhetoric from the practical and textual repertoires through which Buddhist communities actually cultivated, taught, commemorated, and hoped for rebirth.

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Abbreviations

T = *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Taishō Tripiṭaka]. Edited by Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai 刊行會. Tokyo: Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō Kankōkai 大藏出版株式會社, 1988.
X = *Manji shinsan dainihon zokuzōkyō* 叢新纂大日本續藏經 [Manji Newly Compiled Great Japanese Supplement to the Buddhist Canon]. Edited by Kawamura Kōshō 河村照孝. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai 國書刊行會, 1975–1989.

Notes

- ¹ The concept of multiple Buddhist traditions, ranging from eight to as many as thirteen, was initially proposed by Japanese scholars. This notion was later addressed and critiqued by scholars like Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 in works such as “The Non-existence of Ten Traditions in Chinese Buddhism,” offering a counter perspective to the Japanese classification. These discussions reflect the complexity and diversity of Buddhist thought and practice in China.
- ² (Shi 1991; Lai 1998; G. Wang 2000; Yang 2000; Kochi 1972; Ingram 1973, pp. 184–200). In these works, Shi Hengqing posits that the ideational characteristics of Chan–Pure Land syncretism are unique to China, influenced by the Chinese emphasis on integration, concreteness, and individuality (Shi 1991). Additional research includes Lai Yonghai’s comparative study of Chan and Pure Land Buddhism, Wang Gongwei’s discussion on the dual practice tradition in Chinese Buddhism (G. Wang 2000), and Yang Huinan’s exploration of the types and theoretical foundations of this dual practice. See (Yang 2000).
- ³ Many scholars have questioned the existence of the Chan Canon. However, based on the historical research and examination of the Dunhuang manuscripts by scholars such as Ran Yunhua and Fang Guangchang, it is believed that such a large anthology indeed existed and is likely preserved in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Kamaeda Shigeo suggests that Zongmi may have intended to write a hundred volumes but ultimately did not complete them. For more details, see (Jiang 2002). More recently, Cheng of Kuruma University has also compiled a catalog of the Dunhuang Zen Buddhist literature.

- ⁴ (Tanaka 1965a, 1965b, 1980). For further discussion of this text, see (Suzuki 1957; Sekiguchi 1969).
- ⁵ T no. 2832, 85:1270b.
- ⁶ See P.2963, Beizang 北藏 Zhou 周 Character Number 70, S.4173, S.4654, S.5529, 4x1363, P.2984, (Ren 2006, p. 1429).
- ⁷ For versions of “The Nine Contemplations,” see (Zheng 2017, pp. 57–86).
- ⁸ According to the version collated by Zheng, see (Zheng 2017).
- ⁹ (Ren 2006), according to S.5692,1009. The word “別” [bie] in Complete Dunhuang Poems, Volume 182, is written as “則” [ze]. The word “墮” [duo] is missing in Volume 182 of Complete Dunhuang Poems, and “入地獄” [entering hell] is written as “受勞漚” [suffering from flooding].
- ¹⁰ Regarding the Chan–Pure Land syncretism in this document, earlier research findings, such as those by Ru, indicate that it transcended the traditional Western Pure Land’s concept of mindfulness of Buddha, integrating the idealism of Chan and Tiantai to construct an Idealist Pure Land. See (Zhan 2003, p. 131).
- ¹¹ The same content is recorded in 羽 412.
- ¹² Daishun noted that Fa Zhao’s practice of the chanting the name of the Buddha Amitābha in Five tempos was influenced by the idea of Chan–Pure Land integration, see (Ueyama 1976).
- ¹³ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1248c.
- ¹⁴ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1250b.
- ¹⁵ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1257b.
- ¹⁶ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1257a.
- ¹⁷ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1259c.
- ¹⁸ See Note 17 above.
- ¹⁹ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1264c.
- ²⁰ T no. 2827, vol. 85:1265b.
- ²¹ See Note 20 above.
- ²² T no. 2827, vol. 85:1253c.
- ²³ One of the literary genres from Chinese Dunhuang literature, serving as the concluding remarks of a popular sermon.
- ²⁴ The character ‘薦’ [jian] in the original text is followed by a character that resembles ‘詎’ [ju], but also appears similar to ‘詐’ [zha]. In any case, Da Jianfu Temple was a famous temple in Chang’an 長安 during the Tang Dynasty. This character is likely an addition to the text and thus has been omitted based on the context.
- ²⁵ This text is based on the version organized by Wang. See (Z. Wang 2016, pp. 39–44).
- ²⁶ Zhou noted that the piece is a Miscellaneous Zhai text as indicated in the Index to the Catalogue of Dunhuang Manuscripts, (Zhou 2005, pp. 1528–29).

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