

# The “Latter Days of the Law” Ideology among Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Proponents: The Case of Tao-ch’o and Ching-ying Hui-yüan

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MODERN scholars have long pointed out the close connection between the arrival of the “latter days of the Law” (Ch. *mo-fa*, Jp. *mappō* 末法) and the emergence of Pure Land Buddhism in China as well as in Japan. For example, Jan Nattier, in her work, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*, speaks of “dispensationalism,” wherein the conditions are believed no longer possible to carry out earlier practices, thus calling for an entirely new form of practice. She then goes on to cite Tao-ch’o 道綽 (562–645) of China, along with Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) of Japan as prime examples of those who based their formulations of new religious ideas and practices on the arrival of *mo-fa*.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I wish to concentrate on two sixth-century Chinese figures who contributed to the emergence and growth of Pure Land thought and practice in China: Tao-ch’o,<sup>2</sup> alluded to above, and Ching-ying Hui-yüan 淨影慧遠 (523–592).<sup>3</sup> Hui-yüan was older, and they shared twenty-seven years during the second half of the sixth century. At that time, interest in *mo-fa* ideology was perhaps at its highest, coinciding with the publication of Hui-ssu’s 慧思 (515–577) essay on *mo-fa* in 558, the *Nan-yüeh Ssu ta ch’an-shih li shih-*

<sup>1</sup> Nattier 1991, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed treatment in English on Tao-ch’o, see Chappell 1996.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed treatment in English on Hui-yüan’s Pure Land thought, see Tanaka 1991.

*yüan wen* 南嶽思大禪師立誓願文.<sup>4</sup> Hui-ssu's text contained the first detailed discussion of the three periods of "true dharma" (*cheng-fa* 正法), "semblance of the true dharma" (*hisang-fa* 像法) and "latter days of the dharma."

Given the above background, I shall seek in this short essay to:

- 1) Examine the nature of Tao-ch'o's argument for regarding the Pure Land path as the most appropriate path in the *mo-fa* period.
- 2) Describe Hui-yüan's understanding regarding the *mo-fa* doctrine and related attitudes.
- 3) Suggest reevaluating the dominant modern understanding of the role of *mo-fa* in the development of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.

### *Tao-ch'o and his An-lo chi*

Tao-ch'o's arguments in his *An-lo chi* 安樂集 (A Collection of Passages on [Rebirth in the Realm of] Peace and Bliss) are found under the third of the Great Questions, where there are five topics, the third of which is concerned with the condition of sentient beings that transmigrate endlessly through the Three Realms and Five Destinies. And there are five further topics in reference to this point, and in regard to the fifth of the five topics a questioner asks the following:

Fifthly, a questioner asks, "All sentient beings possess Buddha-nature, and they should have met up with many Buddhas since immemorial past. Why is it that they have not been able to exit on their own from the burning house of the cycle of birth and death?"

I shall answer as follows. "According to the sacred teachings of Mahāyāna, there are two kinds of superior teachings to exit the cycle of birth and death. Without them one cannot exit this burning house. What are the two? They are the teachings of (1) the sagely path and (2) the birth in the Pure Land. Of the two, it is difficult in this age to attain enlightenment through the sagely path. This is due to the fact that (1) the Great Sage (Śākyamuni) is long gone, and (2) the teachings are too deep for people to understand fully. Consequently, the *Ta-chih yüeh-tsang ching* 大集月藏經 (Sutra on the Great Collection of the Moon Storehouse) states:

<sup>4</sup> Taishō no. 1933, p. 786c.

In our Last Period of the Dharma (*mo-fa*), millions of people generate practice and cultivate the path, yet none has attained enlightenment. This period is, indeed, the Last Period of the Dharma, and the world of the Five Corruptions. However, there is the Pure Land gate, which is the *only* road for entering enlightenment. Hence, it states in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* (*Ta-ching* 大經):<sup>5</sup>

If a being who has committed evil all through one’s life recites my name at least ten times at the end of his life and does not attain birth (in the Pure Land), then I shall not become enlightened.<sup>6</sup>

What I have just cited from Tao-ch’o’s *An-lo chi* contains a number of extremely interesting points related to our topic. In reiterating them, they can be summarized as follows:

- 1) The questioner inquires about a dilemma, where beings have Buddha-nature and have met up with Buddhas, yet they are still not enlightened.
- 2) Tao-ch’o acknowledges two paths, the sagely and the Pure Land paths.
- 3) The sagely path is difficult on two grounds. Buddha Śākyamuni is no longer in the world and the teachings are too difficult for people to fully comprehend.
- 4) Millions practice, yet none has attained enlightenment on account of being in the Last Period of the Dharma, *mo-fa* and in the world of Five Corruptions.
- 5) The Pure Land path is the *only* one for enlightenment.
- 6) Even a transgressor can be reborn in the Pure Land by reciting the name at least ten times.

These are all extremely interesting points in understanding the factors involved in the development of the Pure Land tradition, but given the aim of this essay, I would like to focus on the last point, which then, in effect, would indirectly throw light upon some of the other points.

In discussing the last point, allow me to re-read the relevant passage from Tao-ch’o’s text:

<sup>5</sup> There are five extant Chinese versions of this sutra; the one that is most often referred to is the *Wu-liang-shou ching* 無量壽經, Taishō no. 360.

<sup>6</sup> Taishō no. 1958, p. 13c.

If a being who has committed evil all through one's life recites my name at least ten times at the end of his life and does not attain birth (in the Pure Land), then I shall not become enlightened.

Now, modern scholarship is in basic agreement that the popularization of Pure Land teachings and practice was, in great measure, brought about by the simplification of practice in the form of oral recitation of the name, *nien-fo* 念仏, which was pronounced, "Na-wu O-mi-t'o Fo" 南無阿弥陀仏. Tao-ch'o, in particular, advocated oral recitation, at times resorting to the use of small beans to count the number of recitations. From his temple, Hsüan-chung ssu 玄中寺, this form of Pure Land Buddhism spread widely, particularly in the Northern provinces of Shansi 山西 and Shensi 陝西.<sup>7</sup>

In order for recitation to be an effective soteriological means, the seeker must access the Other Power of Amitābha. In other words, simplification of practice on the seeker's part requires the working of an efficient cause that lies beyond the seeker. In the Pure Land teachings, this is expressed as the guarantee of Amitābha's vow to save all who meet the conditions.

However, prior to Tao-ch'o, no one sutra taught *both* of these points *together*, i.e., Amitābha's vow and oral recitation. The *Larger Pure Land Sutra* includes the vows that promise to lead seekers to the Pure Land and to eventual enlightenment, but nothing on oral recitation. On the other hand, the *Kuan wu-liang-shou ching* 觀無量壽經 (henceforth *Visualization Sutra*)<sup>8</sup> offers oral recitation as means for birth in the Pure Land for those without any other recourse, but there is no *extensive* mention of the vows.

Thus, herein lies the significance of Tao-ch'o's sutra citation, for it constitutes an amalgamation of these two ideas expressed in the 18th vow of the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* and in the section on the lowest of the low category of beings born in the Pure Land found in the *Visualization Sutra*. There is no passage in the *Larger Sutra* that contains *both* of these doctrinal points as Tao-ch'o claims.

Hence, it appears that in light of the dire spiritual circumstances brought on by the arrival of *mo-fa*, Tao-ch'o engaged in a "creative juxtaposition" of two separate teachings from two disparate sutras in order to authenticate the practice of oral recitation.

This would have a significant influence on the development of at least one stream of Pure Land thought and practice in China. Several decades later in

<sup>7</sup> Chappell 1996, pp. 152-9.

<sup>8</sup> Taishō no. 365.

the mid-sixth century, one of Tao-cho's disciples, Shan-tao 善導 (613–681), emerged as a highly respected and successful propagator of Pure Land Buddhism in the capital of Ch'ang-an 長安. Shan-tao clearly interpreted *nien-fo* as "voicing or reciting the name," thus breaking with the original meaning of "contemplation" or "recollection." This can all be seen as an outcome of Tao-ch'o's earlier success in offering and legitimizing a simplified form of practice in keeping with the times.

### *Ching-ying Hui-yüan*

In turning to the other figure in this essay, Ching-ying Hui-yüan, we need, first of all, to note that this Hui-yüan differs from Lu-shan Hui-yüan 廬山慧遠 (334–416), who lived some 150 years earlier and is traditionally known as one of the earliest practitioners of the Pure Land way. His prominence is associated with his founding of what later came to be named the "White Lotus Association," a coterie of 123 lay and clerical disciples who made a collective vow to be reborn in the Pure Land together.<sup>9</sup>

Our Hui-yüan of Ching-ying Monastery was an exegete, a lecturer of the highest caliber, and an ecclesiastic leader of distinguished prominence within the Buddhist community from the latter part of the Northern Ch'i 北齊 period (550–577) to his death in 592 in the early years of the Sui 隋 period (581–618).

Hui-yüan's greatest contribution to Pure Land Buddhism lies in the compilation of a commentary to the *Visualization Sutra*, *Kuan wu-liang-shou ching i-shu* 觀無量壽經義疏 (Commentary on the Sutra of Visualization on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, henceforth, *Commentary*).<sup>10</sup> The *Commentary* is the oldest extant commentary of this sutra, which played a significant role in the doctrinal development of Pure Land Buddhism in China. Through his commentary, he successfully transformed this sutra into a legitimate object of study among the scholastics of the late sixth century and early T'ang 唐 period. Although most scholars have credited this achievement to Shan-tao, it is Hui-yüan who was responsible for "authenticating" the Pure Land teachings within the broader Buddhist community. Hui-yüan accomplished this by constructing an acceptable doctrinal framework that placed the teachings of the *Visualization Sutra* within a broader Mahayana doctrinal context. The *Commentary* exerted a substantial and enduring influence on many of the later commentaries of the *Visualization Sutra*, particularly on that of Shan-tao, but

<sup>9</sup> Taishō no. 2059, p. 358c.

<sup>10</sup> Taishō no. 1749.

also on those attributed to such eminent figures as T'ien-tai Chih-i 天台智顛 (538–597) and Chi-tsang 吉藏 (549–623).<sup>11</sup>

Tao-ch'o's *An-lo chi* was also meant to be a commentary on the *Visualization Sutra*,<sup>12</sup> which means Ta-ch'o and Hui-yüan wrote commentaries on the same sutra. As we saw earlier in his *An-lo chi*, Tao-ch'o's promotion of the oral recitation of the name of Amitābha signaled for him the recognition of the arrival of *mo-fa*. The question that now begs asking is, how was this regarded by Hui-yüan?

In stating the conclusion of my findings at the outset, I have not found any sense of alarm over the arrival of *mo-fa*. In fact, there is no evidence that *mo-fa* played any role in Hui-yüan's understanding of the Pure Land sutras. With regard to practice, contrary to general understanding among modern scholars, it turns out that Hui-yüan had recognized oral recitation among a formal list of practices for rebirth in the Pure Land called the "Four Causes." The four are 1) the cultivation of visualization (*hsiu-kuan* 修觀), 2) the cultivation of acts (*hsiu-yeh* 修業), 3) the cultivation of mind (*hsiu-hsin* 修心), and 4) devotion (*kuei-hsiang* 歸向). The oral recitation is found listed under the fourth cause, which includes contemplation (*nien* 念), worship (*li* 禮), praise (*t'an* 歎), and recitation of his (Amitābha's) name (*ch'eng-ch'i-ming* 稱其名).<sup>13</sup>

As is evident here, Hui-yüan, unlike Tao-ch'o, did not accord oral recitation a privileged status as the only legitimate practice. For Hui-yüan, recitation was only one path among many for realizing rebirth.

This finding in the doctrinal arena can be corroborated by Hui-yüan's actions and attitudes in his personal life, for there is no evidence of any special dispensation or acquiescence to lowered expectations in light of *mo-fa*. I believe this was apparent in the way he conducted himself during the Buddhist persecution at the hands of Emperor Wu of Northern Chou.

In the second year of Ch'en-kuang (577), Emperor Wu invaded Northern Ch'i and instigated a severe persecution of Buddhists in the newly-conquered territory. According to the *Kuan hung-ming chi* 弘明集, the devastating Ch'i repression effected the confiscation of 40,000 temples by the imperial and aristocratic families, the laicization of three million monks and the conscription of many others into military service. Buddhist images were burned, and government officials seized monastic property.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Tanaka 1991, pp. 45, 108–10.

<sup>12</sup> He noted, "Here, this Visualization Sutra [which is being commented upon] received its title on the basis of the 'person' and of the Dharma." Taishō no. 1749, p. 4a.

<sup>13</sup> Taishō no. 1749, pp. 182c–3b.

<sup>14</sup> Taishō no. 2103, p. 153c.

At the outset of this persecution in Northern Ch'i, Emperor Wu ordered over 500 of the *saṅgha* elders to gather. Emperor Wu himself then ascended the throne to proclaim his new policy toward religion. He gave three reasons for abolishing Buddhism. First, Buddhists had built monasteries and *stūpas* in flagrant violation of Buddhism's own claim that true Buddhas were formless. Second, building temples was wasteful, for it unnecessarily burdened people who, out of ignorance, contributed to the endeavor. Third, the renunciation by Buddhist monks of the ordinary householder's way of life conflicted with the practice of filial piety.<sup>15</sup>

The proclamation stunned the monks, including the Buddhist ecclesiastic head, but they were unable to refute the Emperor's accusations and instead turned pale and wept in silence. At this point, Hui-yüan became convinced that silence would only confirm the truth of Emperor Wu's contention, and he decided to refute the Emperor. His outspoken defense of Buddhism's legitimacy and right to exist in China was so effective that the Emperor was silenced on several occasions. Hui-yüan retained the offensive throughout most of the debate and at one point even threatened the Emperor with rebirth in hell.<sup>16</sup>

This infuriated the Northern Chou soldiers in the hall so greatly that they threatened to crush and boil Hui-yüan's bones. In contrast, his fellow Buddhist monks, who had remained silent through the debate, came over to Hui-yüan to express their gratitude for standing up to Emperor Wu.<sup>17</sup>

Hui-yüan responded that the truth needed to be defended even at the sacrifice of his own life. Hui-yüan then offered that the persecution was a sign of the times but that the Dharma would not perish; and he admonished them not to mourn the state of affairs. His own words were as follows:

Truth must be expressed. How can I be concerned about my own life! . . . Such is the fate of the time! But even the Sage (Emperor) cannot banish the [Dharma]. The fact that we cannot presently serve the [Dharma] is a great regret. The Dharma, however, is truly indestructible. Oh Venerables, please understand this, and I ask that you not be so sad and distressed.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 153a.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 153b.

<sup>17</sup> *Hsü kao-seng chuan* 續高僧傳, Taishō no. 2060, p. 490c.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

From his words, we do not get any sense of resignation or compromise on Hui-yüan's part; instead, he seems emboldened by the challenges that the persecution presented him.

One can, perhaps, make the argument that Hui-yüan was not a Pure Land proponent in the strict sense, for his writings spanned a wide range of doctrinal traditions that included the works from the Ti-lun 地論 lineage to the *Nirvāna Sutra* and to the well-known treatise, *Ta-ch'eng chi'i-hsin lun* 大乘起信論 (Awakening of the Mahāyāna Faith). While there may be some basis for that argument, it has nevertheless been noted that his influence on the Pure Land commentarial tradition was enormous.

### *Other Pure Land Writings*

Similar lack of reference to *mo-fa* ideology can be seen in other Pure Land writings in the mid-seventh century, written within sixty years after Hui-yüan's death and during the period in which the Pure Land doctrine gained ascendancy. A case in point is the *Ching-t'u lun* 淨土論 (Pure Land Treatise) by Chia-ts'ai 迦才 (ca. seventh century), in which he defends Pure Land teachings against the proponents of the Maitreya cult and its belief in Tushita Heaven. Chia-ts'ai's arguments for the superiority of the Pure Land include the following:

- 1) The Sukhāvātī Pure Land is superior to Maitreya's Tushita Heaven because it is beyond the present world, the Sahā Realm.
- 2) Whereas a life span in the Sukhāvātī is limitless like that of the Buddhas and transcends *saṃsāra*, a life span in Tushita lasts only 4,000 years, at the end of which one is forced back into the stream of *saṃsāra*.
- 3) The Sukhāvātī Pure Land is a realm of non-retrogression, with assurances of attainment of Buddhahood and no retrogression to the lower levels on the cultivational Marga path, but the same is not true in Tushita Heaven.<sup>19</sup>

Chia-ts'ai, thus, makes no mention of *mo-fa* in arguing the appropriateness of the Pure Land teaching. Instead, his arguments rested primarily on the *transcendent* quality of the Pure Land in relation to our Sahā Realm. This was seen to be a clear advantage over Maitreya's Tushita Heaven, which Chia-ts'ai regarded as being too proximate to and too much like the Sahā Realm.

<sup>19</sup> Taishō no. 1963, p. 100b.



The *Ching-t'u lun* also includes one of the earliest surviving sets of "birth legends" (*wang-sheng chuan* 往生伝), which are recordings of people gaining birth in the Pure Land at the moment of their death. The descriptions found in these legends normally fit a rather standardized pattern. They include the person's name, his or her background, aspiration, and encounter with a virtuous friend or teacher who showed the way; a description of the practice; and a description of the last moments as the person gained birth in the Pure Land. The *Ching-t'u lun* contains twenty such legends, fourteen of which are of five monks, one nun, three laymen and five laywomen from the post-Sui period from areas in which Tao-ch'ō was active.<sup>20</sup> Given this close connection with Tao-ch'ō, one would expect some reference to their concern with *mo-fa*, but there is no such reference that I was able to find in these recordings. This further strengthens the suggestion that the *mo-fa* doctrine or outlook may not have played as great a role as normally thought even among the Pure Land practitioners associated with Tao-ch'ō.

### *Reassessment*

This absence of arguments based on *mo-fa* applies to other Pure Land writings through the T'ang period, forcing us, in my view, to reassess the commonly held notion that the arrival of *mo-fa* was the *primary* factor for the emergence of Pure Land Buddhism in China.

I should qualify that statement by noting that I would not deny the importance of *mo-fa* when considering Tao-ch'ō and Shan-tao, as we have seen. However, it was just one strand, albeit an important one, within a much broader Pure Land development in China. It was the Tao-ch'ō and Shan-tao line of Pure Land proponents who were elevated to patriarchal status within Japanese Pure Land schools of the Kamakura period initiated by Hōnen and his disciples such as Shinran, for whom *mo-fa* or *mappō* played a far more critical role.

If you recall, at the beginning of this paper, Jan Nattier in her work treated Tao-ch'ō and Hōnen together as examples of Pure Land Buddhist proponents who were spurred on by the *mo-fa* doctrine. In treating them together as is often done, there is a tendency, I believe, to give a greater role to the *mo-fa* doctrine than it deserves in the rise of Pure Land Buddhism in China. I believe it is correct to say that the *mo-fa* or *mappō* doctrine played an undeniably

<sup>20</sup> For more details of this genre of literature in Chinese Buddhism, see Lai 1996.

significant role in the Kamakura Pure Land movement in Japan, but the same cannot be easily said in regard to China.

While not denying the importance of the *mo-fa* argument for a particular lineage of Pure Land Buddhism represented by Tao-ch'o and Shan-tao, we must be much more careful in applying that assessment to a much broader stream of Pure Land Buddhism in China as evidenced by the commentarial tradition represented by Hui-yüan as well as the apologetic writings of the early T'ang period represented by Chia-ts'ai's *Ching-t'u lun*, in which the *mo-fa* argument was absent.

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