

# The Sinicization of the “Faith” Concept in the Pure Land Dharma and Its Contemporary Significance

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**Abstract:** The Pure Land Dharma emphasizes “faith, aspiration, and practice” as its guiding principles for cultivation. Among these, “faith” not only serves as the cognitive foundation for affirming Amitabha’s original vow, the Western Pure Land, and the truths of cause and effect, but also acts as the pivotal force that inspires the aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss and facilitates the practical implementation of reciting the Buddha’s name. This article, from the perspective of the Sinicization of Buddhism, analyzes the concept of “faith” by examining its conceptual construction, practical transformation, and ethical integration. The article argues that the founding masters of the Chinese Pure Land School, through their synthesis of “Pure Land of the Mind Alone” and “Western Pure Land,” their integration of self-power and other-power, and their seamless connection between phenomenal appearances and ultimate reality, have made “faith” a key category upon which Pure Land thought rests. Moreover, by simplifying, normalizing, and communalizing the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name, they have enabled Pure Land cultivation to deeply permeate lay society. At the same time, through interpretive approaches such as the Three Blessings of Pure Conduct, the view of great filial piety, and the emphasis on fulfilling one’s social roles and responsibilities, they have ensured that Pure Land faith achieves an intrinsic harmony with Chinese ethical and cultural traditions. The “faith” of the Pure Land is not merely a psychological attitude; rather, it constitutes a complex structure endowed with doctrinal, meditative, and cultural integrative functions, and continues to hold significant implications for contemporary Buddhist educational institutions, Pure Land studies, and the practice of the Sinicization of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Pure Land Dharma; Faith; Sinicization of Buddhism; Faith, Vow, and Recitation of the Name; Popularization

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## 1. Problem Statement: A Research Perspective on the Sinicization of “Faith” and the Pure Land Dharma Door

After Buddhism was introduced to China, it underwent a long and complex process of localization, institutionalization, and popularization. Different Buddhist schools followed their own unique paths of Chinese adaptation in areas such as scripture translation, doctrinal interpretation, practice methods, and social organization. Compared with traditions like Tiantai, Huayan, and Faxiang—which placed great emphasis on the systematic interpretation of doctrines and the construction of theoretical frameworks—Pure Land Buddhism stands out for its distinctive approach: centering on the three key elements of “faith, aspiration, and practice,” grounding its belief in Amitabha Buddha’s original vow and the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, and taking reciting the Buddha’s name as its primary practice method. This has created a path of cultivation that is easily accessible and suitable for both monks and laypeople alike.

In the Pure Land practice, “faith” is not merely a psychological attitude that comes after cultivation; rather, it is the central category that permeates doctrine, vows, practice, and ethical living. Without faith in Amitabha Buddha’s original vow, the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, the karmic consequences of reciting the Buddha’s name, and the inherent Buddhahood of all sentient beings, one’s vows cannot become genuine. Without genuine vows, reciting the Buddha’s name easily becomes mere verbal repetition. And without sustained practice, faith and vows cannot be transformed into a stable direction for one’s life. Thus, in Pure Land cultivation, “faith” is both the starting point and the driving force that sustains one throughout the entire path.

From the perspective of the Sinicization of Buddhism, the Pure Land practice’s emphasis on “faith” carries a deeper significance. On the one hand, it addresses the theoretical questions raised in Mahayana Buddhist doctrines of mind-nature, Yogacara thought, and the Prajnaparamita emptiness teachings—namely, “How can the Pure Land be established?” On the other hand, it responds to the practical needs of ordinary Chinese society regarding simple practices, peaceful end-of-life arrangements, family ethics, and daily spiritual guidance. The reason why the Pure Land practice has achieved widespread dissemination in Chinese society is closely linked to its ability to transform profound doctrines into a form of faith that is approachable, practicable, and easily passed down through generations.

Existing studies on the Pure Land School have largely focused on aspects such as the thoughts of its founding masters, interpretations of classic texts, the history of the school, ideas about rebirth, or the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name. The resulting body of scholarship is already quite substantial. However, if we examine “faith” within the broader context of the Sinicization of Buddhism, there still remains considerable room for further exploration. This article aims to analyze the Sinicized construction of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma from three perspectives: First, at the conceptual level, it will elucidate how “faith” harmoniously integrates the doctrine of mind-only Pure Land with the Western Pure Land, thereby laying a solid doctrinal foundation for Pure Land belief; second, at the practical level, it will demonstrate how “faith” promotes the simplification, integration into daily life, and popularization of the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name; third, at the cultural level, it will show how “faith” is integrated with Chinese ethical culture through interpretive pathways such as filial piety, the Three Blessings of Pure Deeds, and the principle of fulfilling one’s duties in social relationships.

As can be seen from this, the “faith” discussed in this article is neither a mere emotional belief nor a blind faith that stands in opposition to reason. Rather, it is a complex structure encompassing cognitive conviction, emotional orientation, and practical commitment. It concerns not only “what to believe,” but also “how to believe” and “how to live after believing.” It is precisely in this sense that “faith” serves as a crucial pivot for understanding the Sinicization and popularization of the Pure Land Dharma.

## **2. Conceptual Construction: The Philosophical Foundations of Idealistic Pure Land, Western Pure Land, and “Faith”**

### **2.1 The Three Dimensions of “Trust”**

The “faith” spoken of in the Pure Land Dharma has, first and foremost, a cognitive dimension. By cognitive faith we mean that the practitioner develops a firm understanding and heartfelt conviction regarding the key teachings of the Pure Land doctrine: believing that the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss and the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha are not mere fabrications; believing that the causal relationship—“reciting the Buddha’s name as the cause, rebirth in the Pure Land as the result”—is genuinely true and unerring; and believing that although sentient beings dwell in an age of five defilements and evil conditions, they still have the potential to be reborn in the Pure Land through the Buddha’s vow-power and thereby attain Buddhahood. This level of “faith” provides a stable doctrinal foundation for Pure Land practice.

Second, “faith” has an emotional dimension. The Pure Land practice is not merely a cold, conceptual exercise; rather, it is grounded in sentient beings’ profound awareness of the suffering of birth and death, their trust in Amitabha’s compassionate vow, and their yearning for the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. As practitioners place their own limited, scattered, and powerless life experiences into the embrace of Amitabha Buddha’s vow to gather all beings, this trust is not passive waiting but rather gives rise to aspiration from faith and spurs action through aspiration, thereby transforming religious emotion into a sustained motivation for spiritual cultivation.

Once again, “faith” possesses an active dimension. The “faith, aspiration, and practice” advocated by the Pure Land School are not three separate elements; rather, they form a layered, mutually reinforcing structure of cultivation, each element depending on and reflecting the others. If faith is genuine, it will inevitably give rise to a heartfelt aspiration to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss. And if aspiration is sincere, it will naturally manifest in concrete practices—such as reciting the Buddha’s name, performing virtuous deeds and dedicating their merit, and fulfilling one’s duties and responsibilities in daily life—all expressed through body, speech, and mind. Thus, the ultimate test of “faith” lies not in abstract declarations but in whether it can be translated into stable patterns of conduct and an ethical way of life.

These three dimensions together constitute the complete meaning of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma. Cognitive belief addresses the question of whether the Pure Land Dharma can be understood and accepted; emotional confidence addresses the question of whether the practitioner is willing to turn toward it; and practical faith addresses the question of how faith and aspiration can be put into practice in daily life. These three aspects mutually support each other, making “faith” the pivotal link through which Pure Land thought moves from doctrine into practice and from individual belief into social life.

## 2.2 The Theoretical Tension Between the Pure Land of Mind and the Western Pure Land

The Sinicization of the Pure Land Dharma first confronts the theoretical question of “Where exactly is the Pure Land?” In Mahayana Buddhism, the idea that “if the mind is pure, the Buddha-land is pure” is a quintessential expression of Pure Land thought. As stated in the Vimalakirti Sutra: “If a bodhisattva wishes to attain a pure land, he should purify his own mind; as his mind becomes pure, so too will the Buddha-land become pure.”<sup>[1]</sup> This statement underscores the intrinsic connection between the Buddha-land and the purity of one’s mind and nature, reflecting a strong emphasis on the doctrine of mind-nature. Traditional schools such as Huayan and Yogacara also explain from perspectives like “all phenomena arise from the mind” and “everything is merely consciousness,” emphasizing that realms are inseparable from mind and consciousness. Thus, the Pure Land should not be understood as an external space entirely separate from one’s mind and nature.

After this idea was introduced to China, it resonated with the Chinese cultural tradition of turning inward, cultivating one’s mind and nurturing one’s nature, and striving to fully understand and realize one’s true nature. For scholar-officials and Buddhist monks engaged in moral education, the Pure Land of Mind-only was more readily understood as an internalized, philosophical path of practice. It emphasized that as long as one’s own mind is pure, the Buddha-land itself becomes pure, thereby endowing the Pure Land doctrine with profound philosophical depth. Relevant studies point out that at the end of the Ming dynasty, eminent masters such as Han Shan Deqing often explained the Pure Land from the perspective of “Self-nature Amitabha” and “Mind-only Pure Land,” highlighting the unity of rebirth and non-birth.

However, if Pure Land is interpreted merely as a symbol of the purity of one’s own mind, ordinary believers may easily feel distant from it in practice. With sentient beings’ minds scattered and riddled with intense afflictions, relying solely on one’s own efforts to observe the mind and realize the truth not only sets a high threshold but also makes it difficult to find a clear and reliable foundation for spiritual cultivation. For the general public, a Western Pure Land that is clearly oriented, vividly depicted, and reliably endowed with sincere vows can more effectively serve as an object of faith—providing a sense of stability in life, inspiring heartfelt aspirations, and facilitating the practical implementation of spiritual practices.

Thus, a tension arises between the Pure Land of Mind and the Western Pure Land: the former emphasizes the inherent nature of mind and the unobstructedness of the ultimate reality, while the latter highlights Amitabha’s original vow and the actual existence of the Pure Land. The former tends to lead toward inner cultivation and realization, whereas the latter helps establish a clear direction of devotion. The contribution of the founding masters of the Chinese Pure Land School lies precisely in their refusal to simply negate either perspective; instead, through the harmonious integration of principle and practice and by recognizing the non-duality of self and other, they unified these two perspectives within the practice framework of “faith, aspiration, and recitation of the Buddha’s name.”

## 2.3 Master’s Interpretations: From Tanluan, Daochuo, and Shandao to Zengyi

Master Tanluan of the Northern Wei dynasty holds a pivotal, bridging role in the history of Pure Land thought. His Commentary on the Treatise on Rebirth offers an important interpretation of the relationship between “rebirth” and “non-birth,” emphasizing that rebirth in the Pure Land does not involve actual birth and death but rather entails attaining the

wisdom of non-birth within the pure realm perfected by the Buddha's vows. Modern scholarship frequently points out that through his explanation of "birth is indeed non-birth," Tanluan successfully harmonized the faith in the Western Pure Land with the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness.<sup>[2]</sup>

Master Daochuo, from the perspectives of both the era and the capacities of sentient beings, explained the necessity of the Pure Land practice. According to the teachings on the Dharma Age—namely, the Dharma of Righteousness, the Dharma of Image, and the Dharma of the Latter Day—his "Collection of Peace and Happiness" divides Buddhist practice into the "Path of the Sage" and the "Pure Land Path." He argued that in the Latter Day, sentient beings have become far removed from the sages and possess shallow capacities, making it extremely difficult for them to rely solely on their own efforts to eradicate afflictions and realize truth. Therefore, they should place their trust in the vow-power of Amitabha Buddha and aspire to rebirth in the Pure Land.<sup>[3]</sup> This classification does not belittle the Path of the Sage; rather, under specific historical conditions and given the capacities of sentient beings, it highlights the suitability and effectiveness of the Pure Land Path.

Master Shandao further focused the practice of Pure Land Buddhism on faith, aspiration, and single-minded recitation of the Buddha's name. In his "Four Commentaries on the Contemplation Sutra," he emphasized "pointing to a direction and establishing an image," using the concrete Western Paradise of Ultimate Bliss as the object of focus toward which sentient beings can direct their minds and turn in devotion. The "pointing to a direction and establishing an image" advocated by Shandao is not a superficial attachment to external forms; rather, it provides scattered and distracted beings with a tangible, visualizable, and chantable object of practice, enabling them to move from external phenomena to the underlying truth and, through entrusting themselves fully to the Buddha's vows, attain pure karma.<sup>[4]</sup>

As exemplified by Zhiyi of Zhejiang, the "Essential Commentary on the Amitabha Sutra" elaborates the faith in the Pure Land practice through a systematic framework of "Six Beliefs": belief in oneself, belief in others, belief in causes, belief in consequences, belief in phenomena, and belief in principle. Among these, belief in oneself and belief in principle are grounded in the doctrine of mind-only Pure Land and the inherent nature of the mind itself; belief in others and belief in phenomena affirm the genuine reality and authenticity of Amitabha Buddha's vows and the realm of the Western Pure Land; while belief in causes and belief in consequences connect the causal structure between reciting the Buddha's name and attaining Buddhahood.<sup>[5]</sup> The doctrine of the Six Beliefs marks a significant shift: "faith" is no longer merely an initial stage of acceptance and belief, but rather has evolved into a comprehensive ideological system encompassing both principle and phenomena, self and others, cause and effect, and cultivation and realization.

Through the successive interpretations from Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao to Zengyi, the Pure Land Dharma has completed its crucial Sinicization: It neither reduces the Pure Land to a mere inner state nor conceives of the Western World as an external entity entirely separate from one's own mind; it neither denies self-power cultivation nor overlooks the Other-Power Vow. It is precisely within this harmonious structure that "faith" emerges as the central hub connecting reason and practice, self and others, and mind and land.

### **3. Practical Application: The Popularization of the Pure Land Dharma through Faith, Vow, and Recitation of the Name**

#### **3.1 The Simplicity and Inclusiveness of Mindful Recitation of the Buddha's Name**

The conceptual framework of the Pure Land Dharma ultimately must be translated into actionable, practical cultivation practices. Compared to complex contemplative practices, intricate scholarly analyses, and highly demanding meditative techniques, the practice of reciting the Buddha's name—centered on chanting "Namo Amitabha Buddha"—is simple in form and direct in application, thus possessing broad social adaptability. Its scriptural basis primarily derives from the Forty-Eight Vows of Amitabha Buddha as recorded in the Sutra of Immeasurable Life, especially the vow that assures rebirth even after just ten mindful recitations for those who sincerely trust and aspire to it.<sup>[6]</sup>

The simplicity of reciting the Buddha's name through mindfulness is evident in several aspects: First, its form is straightforward and uncomplex—no elaborate altars or intricate rituals are required; one can practice it whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down. Second, its content is focused and concentrated—just a single Buddha's name suffices to guide and purify the body, speech, and mind. Third, its application is flexible in time and space—whether in a temple, at

home, on the road, or during work, one can engage in this practice anytime and anywhere. Fourth, it appeals to all kinds of beings—regardless of intelligence, wisdom, social status, gender, or whether one is a monk, layperson, male, or female—anyone can enter the path of Pure Land practice simply by holding the Buddha’s name with faith and aspiration.

Master Shandao’s emphasis on the exclusive practice of reciting the Buddha’s name further solidified the central role of nianfo—recitation of the Buddha’s name—as the core practice in Pure Land cultivation. Later Pure Land patriarchs often explained from the perspective of sentient beings’ capacities that, in the Dharma-ending Age, visualization practices are difficult to master and realization of the true nature is hard to attain. In contrast, the practice of nianfo—simply reciting the Buddha’s name—is both simple and profoundly comprehensive; it provides beginners with a tangible entry point, while enabling long-time practitioners to progress from mere external practice toward deeper, more profound realization. Scholars such as Shi Yanjue have pointed out in their research on Shandao’s Pure Land thought that Shandao’s remarkable emphasis on nianfo—recitation of the Buddha’s name—is a crucial turning point in the movement toward the popularization of Pure Land Buddhist practice.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **3.2 From the practice of cultivation to faith and aspiration-oriented guidance**

The practical transformation of the Pure Land Dharma not only manifests in the simplification of methods but also in a shift in the focus of practice. In traditional self-power cultivation, achieving high levels of spiritual attainment often hinges on one’s mastery of precepts, concentration, and wisdom, as well as the degree to which delusions are eradicated and the level of realization attained. For most ordinary practitioners, this path is both arduous and lengthy. In contrast, the Pure Land Dharma places the key to rebirth entirely on the genuineness of one’s faith and aspiration, shifting the practitioner’s life orientation from solely relying on self-power efforts toward attaining purity through faith and aspiration that resonate with the Buddha’s vows, and through reciting the Buddha’s name to fulfill the pure karma.

The statement by Master Zengyi—that “whether one is reborn or not depends entirely on whether one possesses faith and aspiration; the level of one’s rebirth depends entirely on the depth of one’s recitation of the Buddha’s name”—precisely reveals this structural principle. In her study of Zengyi’s Pure Land thought, Zhai Jiangling points out that Zengyi placed faith and aspiration at the very heart of the judgment concerning rebirth, shifting the focus of Pure Land practice away from mere mastery of cultivation techniques and toward the authenticity and completeness of one’s faith and aspiration.<sup>[8]</sup> This interpretation not only underscores the salvific power of Amitabha Buddha’s vows but also prevents practitioners from mistakenly believing that they can attain rebirth simply by verbally reciting the Buddha’s name without genuinely harboring sincere aspirations.

Thus, it is evident that the Pure Land practice does not negate the importance of conduct; rather, it redefines the meaning of such conduct. Reciting the Buddha’s name with mindfulness is not merely a mechanical act performed alongside faith and aspiration—it is, in fact, the external manifestation of faith and aspiration. And faith and aspiration are not mere abstract mental states; they must be continually nurtured through the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name, performing good deeds, making dedications, and upholding everyday ethical principles. The practical logic of Pure Land cultivation lies precisely in using faith to inspire aspiration, using aspiration to guide conduct, and using conduct to strengthen faith—thereby enabling practitioners, through repeated recitation of the Buddha’s name, to steadily reinforce their life’s orientation toward the Pure Land.

### **3.3 Life-oriented, community-based, and popularized**

The widespread adoption of the practice of reciting the Buddha’s name with sincere faith and aspiration has propelled the Pure Land Dharma from monastic practice into homes, communities, and civil society. Since Huiyuǎn of the Eastern Jin Dynasty established the Lúshān Association, communal practice in the Pure Land tradition has inherently possessed a community-oriented character. After the Song Dynasty, organizations such as the Nianfo Associations, Jingye Societies, and Lotus Societies continued to flourish, transforming Pure Land faith into a form of practice shared by both monks and laypeople. Through regular activities—including reciting the Buddha’s name, giving Dharma talks, making vows, dedicating merit, and offering mutual support—devotees are able to strengthen their faith and aspirations within a collective community, thereby establishing a stable network of spiritual practice.

The integration of Pure Land faith into daily life is particularly striking. Practices such as reciting the Buddha's name at dawn and dusk, offering assistance in the dying moments, setting up altars for Buddha at home, participating in joint practice during festivals, and performing memorial services for the deceased deeply embed the Pure Land teachings into everyday life. These practices do not require believers to completely detach themselves from their social responsibilities; rather, they create space for ongoing spiritual cultivation within the context of their existing lives. Farmers, merchants, women, the elderly—even those who have not received formal education—can all establish a connection with the Dharma through chanting the Buddha's name.

A wealth of biographies of those who have attained rebirth in the Pure Land, records of miraculous experiences related to the Pure Land, and teachings from patriarchs further promoted the spread of Pure Land faith. These texts often illustrate the equality and accessibility of the Pure Land practice through accounts of individuals from various backgrounds and with different capacities who have achieved rebirth in the Pure Land. Although their narratives bear the characteristics of devotional literature, from a social communication perspective they reinforce a central idea: as long as one possesses sincere faith and earnest aspiration, the Pure Land practice is not exclusive to a select few elites but is instead a path of cultivation open to all beings.

Therefore, the popularization of the Pure Land practice does not mean simply lowering the standards of Buddhist teachings. Rather, while maintaining the goal of rebirth and the structural integrity of the doctrine, it makes the practice methods more closely aligned with people's daily lives. This further brings Buddhism from purely academic study and monastic rituals into the grassroots of society, transforming the cultural landscape of “every household venerates Guanyin, every home recites Amitabha” into a significant manifestation of the Sinicization of Han Chinese Buddhism.

## **4. Ethical Integration: The Convergence of Pure Land Faith and Confucian Ethics**

### **4.1 The Tension Between Worldly Practice and Filial Piety Ethics**

After Buddhism was introduced to China, one of the earliest cultural challenges it faced was the conflict between monastic practice and Confucian filial piety. Confucianism emphasizes that one's body and hair are gifts from one's parents and should never be harmed; it also places great importance on the continuation of the family lineage and the inheritance of ancestral rites. Buddhist monks, who shave their heads and renounce worldly life, refrain from marriage and official careers, making them vulnerable to criticism for allegedly betraying human relationships.<sup>[9]</sup> During the Northern and Southern Dynasties period, Gu Huan's “Discourse on Barbarians and Han” criticized Buddhism from the perspectives of barbarian-Han distinctions, ritual customs, and familial ethics. The relevant text is preserved in the “Hongming Collection.”

Buddhism did not simply sidestep this issue; rather, in the course of its long-term Sinicization, it developed a variety of responses. Relevant research points out that Chinese Buddhism, on the one hand, emphasizes filial piety from perspectives such as repaying kindness, cultivating compassion, and guiding loved ones toward liberation. On the other hand, it elevates filial piety beyond the confines of immediate familial obligations to encompass the realms of karmic causality across three lifetimes and ultimate liberation. It is precisely within this process that the Pure Land tradition has formulated its own uniquely characterized ethical interpretation.

### **4.2 The Three Blessings of Pure Practice and Great Filial Piety Through Recitation of the Buddha's Name**

The “Contemplation Sutra on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life” introduces the “Three Blessings of Pure Conduct,” the first of which is: “To honor and care for one's parents, to serve teachers with reverence, to cultivate a compassionate heart free from killing, and to practice the Ten Good Deeds.” This classic teaching demonstrates that Pure Land practice does not exclude worldly good deeds; rather, it takes basic ethical conduct as the foundation and sustenance for pure practice. Honoring and respecting one's parents and elders, cultivating a compassionate heart free from killing, and practicing the Ten Good Deeds are not only worldly virtues but also the essential foundations for Pure Land cultivation.<sup>[10]</sup>

In Wang Rixiu's “Longshu Zengguang Jingtutu Wen” from the Song Dynasty, the idea that “reciting the Buddha's name is the ultimate expression of filial piety” was further elaborated. It was argued that while worldly acts of filial piety can only ensure the present-day well-being and comfort of one's parents, they cannot truly put an end to the suffering of the cycle of birth and

death. Only by encouraging one's parents to recite the Buddha's name and dedicating the merits of one's practice to relatives and loved ones—thereby helping them escape suffering, attain happiness, and be reborn together in the Pure Land—can one achieve a deeper, more profound form of filial piety. This interpretation establishes a positive connection between Pure Land practice and Chinese filial piety.<sup>[11]</sup>

From the perspective of cultural integration, “Filial Piety Through Recitation of the Buddha's Name” is not merely an attempt to superimpose Buddhism onto Confucian ethics. Rather, it reinterprets the ultimate concern of filial piety through a fresh lens informed by views on life and death, causality, and rebirth. It acknowledges the necessity of providing for one's parents in this life while also pointing out that mere material support cannot address the fundamental issues of existence. While respecting familial ethics, it extends the responsibilities of kinship into the Bodhisattva path of guiding and nurturing loved ones, repaying their kindness, and benefiting all sentient beings.

### **4.3 The Social Value of Upholding Moral Norms and Fulfilling One's Duties in the Context of Pure Land Faith**

In modern times, Master Yinguang further elaborated on the relationship between Pure Land faith and worldly ethics. He advocated: “Cultivate proper conduct and fulfill one's duties; guard against evil and maintain sincerity; refrain from all evil deeds and diligently practice all good deeds; sincerely strive for liberation from birth and death, generate the Bodhi mind, and with deep faith and earnest aspiration, recite the Buddha's name.” The first four lines emphasize worldly ethics and personal cultivation, while the last four lines point to transcendent liberation and the correct practice of the Pure Land path.<sup>[12]</sup> In his study of Master Yinguang's Pure Land thought, Zhao Huayu notes that Yinguang integrated cause and effect, family education, proper conduct and fulfilling one's duties, and faith and aspiration in reciting the Buddha's name, thereby endowing Pure Land faith with a distinct ethical and educational function.<sup>[13]</sup>

This tradition illustrates that faith in the Pure Land does not lead to passive withdrawal from the world. Genuine faith and sincere aspiration should be translated into a sense of responsibility toward one's family, society, and all sentient beings. If a practitioner of Buddha-recitation fails to cultivate good deeds, uphold ethical principles, or fulfill one's proper duties, then even the most earnest faith and aspiration can easily become empty and superficial. On the other hand, if one takes faith and aspiration in Buddha-recitation as the core of one's practice and makes diligent fulfillment of one's responsibilities in daily life the very essence of one's conduct, then one can truly embody the spirit of Buddhism in the midst of worldly existence.

Thus, the Pure Land Dharma has achieved a harmonious integration of transcendence and engagement with the world. While rebirth in the Pure Land represents the transcendent goal, practicing the Pure Land teachings does not negate worldly ethics. Family responsibilities, social good deeds, compassionate care for all living beings, and sincere practice—all these can serve as nourishment for pure karma. This ethical integration has enabled the Pure Land Dharma to gradually transform from an imported religious tradition into a form of faith that Chinese society can understand, accept, and sustainably practice over the long term.

## **5. Contemporary Significance: Faith in Pure Land and the Practice of Sinicization of Buddhism**

### **5.1 Promoting the scholarly systematization of interpretations of Pure Land teachings**

In the context of the contemporary Sinicization of Buddhism, research on the “faith” concept in the Pure Land tradition should not remain at the level of mere intuitive belief; rather, it should further advance toward a more systematic and theoretical interpretation. By “theoretical,” we do not mean diluting the vitality of faith through academic discourse, but rather clarifying the core concepts of the Pure Land tradition—such as faith and aspiration, recitation of the Buddha's name, rebirth in the Pure Land, the notion of non-birth, reliance on other-power, and self-power—and elucidating their scriptural foundations, conceptual structures, and practical logic.

When teaching Pure Land Buddhism courses, Buddhist institutions should guide monastic students to understand the multifaceted nature of “faith”: they must avoid interpreting faith as blind belief, yet also refrain from reducing religious faith to a purely rationalized form. They should not only clarify the harmonious relationship between the Western Pure Land and the mind-only Pure Land, but also explain how faith, aspiration, and recitation of the Buddha's name can be concretely put

into practice in daily spiritual cultivation. Only in this way can Pure Land teachings both retain the warmth of religious faith and possess the depth of doctrinal exposition.

## **5.2 Serving Buddhist educational institutions in teaching and promoting the Dharma to the general public**

The Pure Land Dharma has strong advantages for mass communication, yet being widely accessible does not mean it should become superficial or trivial. If contemporary Dharma propagation merely stays at the level of anecdotal stories of spiritual responses, requests for blessings, and comfort at the time of death, it can easily undermine the profound doctrinal depth of the Pure Land Dharma. On the other hand, if it confines itself exclusively to highly esoteric interpretations of mind and nature, it may make the teachings difficult for ordinary practitioners to grasp. The Chinese experience of “faith” in the Pure Land precisely reminds us that we must strike a balance between doctrinal depth and clarity of expression.

For Buddhist institutions, Pure Land studies can be explored from four perspectives: the scriptural, the patriarchal, the practice-oriented, and the socio-cultural. At the scriptural level, the three Sutras and one Treatise are explained in detail. At the patriarchal level, the intellectual lineage of figures such as Tanluan, Daochuo, Shandao, Yongming Yanshou, Lianchi, Zhiyi, and Yin Guang is traced and analyzed. At the practice-oriented level, practical methods such as sincere faith, aspiration, recitation of the Buddha’s name, assisting in chanting, making vows, and dedicating merit are elucidated. At the socio-cultural level, the ways in which Pure Land belief has permeated family ethics, folk life, and the broader landscape of Chinese Buddhism are examined.

## **5.3 From Personal Liberation to Social Care**

The Pure Land faith takes liberation from birth and death as its fundamental goal, yet it should not be understood as being detached from real-world society. From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, rebirth in the Pure Land is not an escape from sentient beings; rather, it lays the foundation for drawing closer to the Buddha, listening to the Dharma, practicing diligently, perfecting bodhi, and returning to the Saha world to widely benefit all beings. Thus, belief in the Pure Land can, in contemporary times, also be transformed into cultural confidence, familial responsibility, charitable service, and social concern.

At the family level, Pure Land faith can fulfill ethical functions through practices such as filial piety toward parents and respect for the elderly, harmonious family relationships, and end-of-life care. At the societal level, Pure Land practice can embody the spirit of compassion through charitable assistance, ecological conservation and animal welfare, psychological care, and cultural dissemination. At the level of the Sinicization of Buddhism, the Pure Land teachings can showcase the gentle, stable, compassionate, and virtuous values of Han Chinese Buddhism to society via dharma talks and exchanges, curriculum development, and public cultural activities.

Thus, the contemporary significance of “faith” in Pure Land Buddhism lies not merely in sustaining individual religious practice, but also in transforming faith into a visible order of cultivation, ethical responsibility, and social good deeds. It can both bring peace and tranquility to individuals in their journey through life and death, and guide believers in their daily lives to safeguard their families, serve society, and cultivate virtuous practices.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma has a constructive and integrative significance in the process of Buddhism’s sinicization. It is not a singular psychological state but rather a complex structure encompassing cognitive conviction, emotional orientation, and practical commitment. It is not blind faith opposed to reason; rather, it is a fundamental trust that continually receives doctrinal support through the scriptures, the interpretations of patriarchs, and the practice of cultivation itself.

On the conceptual level, “faith” bridges the realms of the Pure Land of Yogacara’s mind-only and the Western Pure Land, enabling the Pure Land practice to maintain both the theoretical depth of Mahayana Buddhism’s doctrine of mind and nature and also to preserve a tangible, relatable, and practicable object of faith. On the practical level, “faith” promotes the practice of sincere aspiration, vow, and recitation of the Buddha’s name as an easily accessible path that can appeal to practitioners at all levels, thereby bringing Buddhist cultivation deeply into everyday life and local communities. On the cultural level,

“faith” fosters convergence with Chinese family ethics and social morality through such pathways as the Three Blessings of Pure Conduct, the great filial piety embodied in Buddha-recitation, and the commitment to fulfilling one’s social roles and responsibilities.

Precisely for this reason, the process of “faith” in the Pure Land Dharma as it was Sinicized represents a prime example of how imported Buddhist thought actively adapted to Chinese culture, underwent creative transformation, and became integrated into social life. This process not only helps us understand the historical pattern of Chinese Buddhism—where the Pure Land serves as the ultimate refuge—but also provides crucial intellectual resources for contemporary Buddhist institutions in conducting Pure Land studies, promoting a Sinicized interpretation of Buddhism, and guiding practitioners toward right belief and proper conduct.<sup>[14]</sup>

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