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Department for the Study of Religion's  
Buddhist Studies Numata Reading Group  
with Dr. Costantino Moretti

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# Thoughts on the University of Toronto's Department for the Study of Religion's Buddhist Studies Numata Reading Group with Dr. Costantino Moretti

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On February 11, 2016, the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto welcomed our second Numata Reading Group guest and scholar of the 2015/2016 year, Dr. Costantino Moretti of the École Pratique des Hautes Études, in a reading and discussion of his recent work: “*Preta* Categories in a 6th Century Buddhist *Summa Theologica*.”

In this paper, Dr. Moretti discusses the thirty-six categories of *preta*, or “hungry ghosts” in a sixth-century Chinese translation of the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra* (Sutra of the Foundation of Mindfulness of the True Law), or the *Zhengfa nianchu jing* 正法念處經, provided by Gautama Prajñaruci (Jutan boreliuzhi 瞿曇般若流支) (fl. ca. 538-543). Containing one of the most detailed descriptions of the rebirth path transmitted by the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the *Zhengfa nianchu jing*

not only provides a comprehensive list of *preta* categories, but is also one of the few texts that go into great detail on their specific nature and “karmic origin,” elements which often prove to be more complex and subtle than expected. Dr. Moretti reminds us that despite the integration into the Buddhist cosmological scheme, the concept of *preta* is in fact inherited from much older speculations linking this condition of existence to notions at times far removed from those found in Buddhist texts. Basically, before the “hungry ghosts” were assimilated into the systematizations of Buddhist scholastics, they were first and foremost “the one who proceeds,” as literally translated from the Sanskrit term *preta*, and as the “migrant” that travels between the material world and the world of the ancestors, or the *pitṛ*.

In the Pali Buddhist canon, the *Petavatthu*, one of the most important texts concerning the “hungry ghosts,” emphasized the role of monks as intermediaries between the lay believers and the *preta* in the transmission of merits. As pointed out by Dr. Moretti, the origins of this practice go back to the Hindu ritual of *śrāddha*, which facilitates the “transformation” of the *preta* into that of *pitṛ*. Interestingly, in this Chinese translation of the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*, any notion of “merit transfer” and the possibility of human intervention to better the conditions of the “hungry ghosts” are not mentioned. In fact, the *Zhengfa nianchu jing* cites practices or cults intended for “hungry ghosts” as negative and as “heretical” offerings made by “ignorant” men. On this matter Dr. Moretti writes that:

[T]he offerings some men made to the ‘hungry ghosts’ gave these beings a specific role in a religious world possibly uncoded or placed outside the ‘canonical’ channels of the religious estab-

ishment, with the term ‘canonical’ not referring exclusively to the Buddhist tradition.<sup>1</sup>

An invaluable addition to the growing momentum in the study of the Buddhist scriptural tradition, Dr. Moretti’s recent work on the *Zhengfa nianchu jing* provides an indepth analysis of the nuances of *preta* categories as presented in a sixth-century Chinese text and offers a resourceful point of departure for further studies of the *Zhengfa nianchu jing* and the existence of different versions or recensions of the text. The fact that there are various translations (in Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian) of the *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthānasūtra*, now known to us aside from the Sanskrit version, also leads us to the possibility of future studies into philological problems such as its transmission and localization.

Aside from looking into the “hellish realms” in Buddhist texts, Dr. Moretti is also working on and participating in a wide array of exciting projects in the field of Buddhist studies such as studies on Northern Wei apocryphal texts to look at the scriptural rebuilds that were produced following the persecution of Buddhism (fifth century) in order to reestablish the *sangha*. As one of the experts in the field of Buddhist manuscript studies, Dr. Moretti has collaborated with other leading scholars and with the Center for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at Hamburg University in the compilation of the *Encyclopedia of Manuscript Culture of Asia and Africa* (forthcoming). Moreover, Dr. Moretti has worked together with a team of scholars under Professor Jean-Pierre Drège, Professor Emeritus at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, in a codicological project on the various material aspects of Buddhist manuscript production. They have recently published a volume of their combined research efforts in 2014, titled *La fabrique du lisible* (The Factory of Readables), which serves as a sort of manual on medieval Chinese manuscripts.

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<sup>1</sup> Costantino Moretti, “Preta Categories in a 6th Century Buddhist Summa Theologica” (paper, Numata Reading Group, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, February 11, 2016)

In addition to these projects, Dr. Moretti is also interested in looking at the Buddhist economy in medieval Central Asia and at Dunhuang based on newly found materials.

A sincere thank you to Dr. Moretti and everybody who participated in this amazing Numata event.

### **Bibliography**

Moretti, Costantino. "Preta Categories in a 6th Century Buddhist Summa Theologica." Paper presented at Numata Reading Group at the University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, February 11, 2016.