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The Pure Land in Nara Schools Workshop”  
at McGill University (September 29, 2017)

Shuyue He & Jingjing Li

McGill University

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# A Reflection on the “Pre-Modern Japanese Buddhism: The Pure Land in Nara Schools Workshop” at McGill University (September 29, 2017)

Shuyue He & Jingjing Li  
MCGILL UNIVERSITY

On the 29th of September 2017, McGill University’s School of Religious Studies (SRS) convened a whole-day workshop, “The Pure Land in the Nara Schools,” in the senior common room of Birks building. With the support of McGill’s Centre for Research on Religion (CREOR) and Numata Canada, SRS invited scholars from Japan, the United States, and Canada, to explore the gradual development of Pure Land thinking in Nara and Heian Japan (710-1185), a development that has long been obscured by the master narrative of the “Six Nara Schools” (*Nanto Rokushū* 南都六宗).

The book presentation of Robert Rhodes’s (Ōtani University) recently published book *Genshin’s Ōjōyōshū and the Construction of Pure Land Discourse in Heian Japan*, marked the beginning of this whole-day event. Aaron Proffitt (University at Albany, SUNY) and Christopher Callahan (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign) commented on how Professor Rhodes’s new book contributed to the English language scholarship of Pure Land thinking by expanding the horizon to the Heian Period. Subsequently, they expressed interests in delving deeper into Genshin’s 源信 (942-1017) conceptions of *ōjō* 往生 and *Nenbutsu* 念仏.

In his response, Professor Rhodes detailed how Genshin perceived *Ōjō* as a step in the practice of the Bodhisattvas, rather than the destination of the practice as such. *Nenbutsu*, be it recitative or contemplative, was set forth by Genshin as the path to the *samādhi* state of mind. This interpretation of *Ōjō*, quite different from that expressed by later clerics championed by Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212) and Shinran 親鸞 (1173-1263), allowed Genshin to legitimize the conception of Pure Land in his era.

Another eminent proponent of Pure Land thinking in early Japanese Buddhism was Yōkan 永観 (1033-1111), also known as Eikan. In his second presentation “Yōkan’s Interpretation of *Nenbutsu* in the *Ōjō jūin* (往生拾因, Ten Causes for Birth in the Pure Land),” Professor Rhodes introduced the audience to the life and thoughts of Yōkan. First studying Shingon and Sanron in his youth, Yōkan gradually shifted his focus to the teaching of the Pure Land. As a dedicated Pure Land practitioner, Yōkan depicted the single-minded recitation of *Nenbutsu* as the way for people in the time of later dharma (*mappō* 末法) to attain the state of *samādhi*. In his reading of Yōkan, Professor Rhodes contended that single-mindedness (一心) meant a state of intense concentration, rather than a devotional attitude. Through reciting *Nenbutsu*, practitioners could awaken this single-minded state, further become one with Amida Buddha, and thus be ensured rebirth in this Buddha’s Pure Land upon death.

Professor Rhodes’s interpretation of single-mindedness was applauded by Christopher Callahan in his presentation “Yōkan and the *Ōjō kōshiki* 往生講式 (Ceremonial Lecture on Rebirth in the Pure Land).” Similar to Professor Rhodes, Professor Callahan argued for viewing single-mindedness not as the attitude of being whole-hearted, but as the state of *samādhi* in which devotees would become one with Amida Buddha. After reviewing the composition, the circulation, the role in com-

munal building, and the seven-part structure of this ceremonial lecture known as *Ōjō kōshiki*, Professor Callahan clarified how Yōkan conceived of single-mindedness as the practitioners' guide to the rebirth in Amida's Land of Bliss.

Although the Pure Land is commonly envisaged as the heavenly realm of Amida Buddha where devotees would arrive upon death, Bryan Lowe (Vanderbilt University) argued otherwise. In his talk "Grounding Heavens: Pure Land Thought and Cosmology in Liturgical Texts from Ancient Japan," Professor Lowe utilized the term "ground" to capture the popular belief among the common lay followers of Buddhism, who resided outside the capital of Nara. Turning to the liturgy text known as *Tōdaiji Fujumonkō* 東大寺諷誦文稿 (Tōdai Temple Liturgical Manuscript), Professor Lowe elaborated how these lay Buddhists pictured Pure Land as a place on the ground right before their eyes, not as a transcendent realm of one specific Buddha called Amida.

Aside from ordained clerics and lay followers, there lived a distinct group called *Hinin* 非人 inside temple-complexes. Traditionally used to characterize deformed people, the term of *Hinin* was understood by Jesse Lefebvre (Harvard University) through a different perspective, in his talk "Mañjuśrī, *Hinin*, and Mount Wutai: Kasuga's Pure Land and the Development of Funerals in Medieval Japan." Inside monasteries, *Hinins* would conduct various kinds of rituals, regardless of the fact that they were not officially ordained and therefore did not obtain a license from the local government. Mr. Lefebvre accounted for how Buddhist followers viewed these unofficial Buddhists as manifestations of Mañjuśrī, who was said to find a home in the Kusaga of Japan.

To further reveal the eclectic character of early Japanese Buddhism, Aaron Proffitt inquired into the interconnection of esoteric teaching and Pure Land thinking. In his talk "Dhāraṇī, Spells, the Power of Speech, and Kōmitsu Approach to Pure Land Rebirth in the Nara Peri-

od,” Professor Proffitt examined the writings composed by several clerics who depicted esoteric practices as the methods for reaching the Pure Land. Considering how these clerics managed to incorporate both esoteric and exoteric elements into their expressions of Buddhism, Professor Proffitt spoke of their writings as those of Kōmitsu, namely, the proto-esoteric Buddhism.

In the Nara period, doctrinal debates inside monasteries were repeatedly reshaped and reconditioned by the dominant political discourse. In his talk “Dedicating the Pure Land to the Fujiwara Patriarch: Traces of the Pure Land Kofukuji and the Hōsso School,” Mikaël Bauer (McGill University) attempted to answer why a Hōsso monk Jōe 貞慧 (643-666) was depicted more as a Confucian than a Buddhist in his eighth-century biography. Professor Bauer traced the reason to the patronage of Buddhism at that time. The powerful Fujiwara clan contended that Buddhism should be promoted under state control. As such, Buddhist ideas, including those of the Pure Land, were appropriated to serve the Confucian ideology. This interaction between monastics and monarchs could also explain why the biography of this well-known monk was composed in a Confucian narrative.

In his concluding remarks, Professor Bauer pinpointed the ways in which the workshop provided a multidisciplinary approach to Pure Land thinking, bridged the gap between history and doctrinal philosophy, and reflected on the master narrative of the “Six Nara Schools” in the studies of early Japanese Buddhism. Professor Lara Braitstein from McGill’s School of Religious Studies and Professor Thomas Lamarre from McGill’s Department of East Asian Studies also participated in the discussion. “The Pure Land in the Nara Schools Workshop” is the first event of the “Buddha and the Other” CREOR lecture series hosted by McGill’s School of Religious Studies. The upcoming talks in this series will be de-

livered by Dr. Fleet Maull on October 5 and by Professor Arvin Sharma on October 19, respectively.