

## Article

# The Reception of the Mantra of Light in Republican Period Chinese Buddhism

Saiping An

Institute of Philosophy, China Jiliang University, Hangzhou 310020, China; anssp@cjl.u.edu.cn

**Abstract:** This paper examines the utilization of the mantra of light and its associated maṇḍala practices by Wang Hongyuan 王弘願 (1876–1937), a Chinese Buddhist during the Republican Period, and his adherents, which has not yet been noticed by previous scholars. With the import of esoteric Buddhist doctrines and practices from Japan, the mantra of light, which was a rarely used mantra in pre-modern China, gained renewed significance. This led to the widespread adoption of the ritual practices of this mantra by Wang Hongyuan and his surrounding Buddhist groups in early modern China. The rituals of this mantra were used as a supplement or substitute for near-death Pure Land practices. This paper presents Pure Land Buddhist practices intertwined with esoteric Buddhist elements or “esoteric” approaches to Pure Land rebirth in modern Chinese Buddhism which have been overlooked by previous scholars.

**Keywords:** mantra; Chinese Buddhism; esoteric Buddhism; Pure Land

## 1. Introduction

The mantra of light (guangming zhenyan 光明真言) was mainly derived from a Chinese Buddhist text *The Mantra of Light of the Empowerment of Vairocana of the Unfailing Rope Snare* (Bukong juansuo piluzhenafu daguangdingguang zhenyan 不空罽索毘盧遮那佛大灌頂光真言) translated by the Indian esoteric monk Amoghavajra (705–774) during the Tang period in China. The primary focus of this text is on the divine powers of the mantra of light instructed by the cosmic Buddha, Vairocana. One of the functions of this mantra is to deliver sentient beings who have committed various sins and are destined for, or are already on, evil paths of rebirth in accordance with their karmic consequences:

One should empower the sand with the mystic power of the mantra by repeating it one hundred and eight times, and the sand should be sprinkled on the corpses in the charnel grounds or on the graves of the deceased one should sprinkle the sand wherever one encounters them. The deceased may be in hell, in the realm of hungry ghosts, of angry gods, or of beasts. However, they will attain the body of light according to the needs of time and circumstance by means of the mystic power of the sand of the divine power of the Mantra of Light . . . The karmic retribution of their sins will be eliminated, they will discard their suffering bodies, and they will go to the Western Land of Bliss. They will be re born in the lotus blossom of Amida and will not fall back until they attain bodhi. (Unno 2004, pp. 21–22)

The given text suggests that the mantra of light has the power to transcend sentient beings to the Pure Land of Bliss (Sukhāvātī). As noted by Chün-fang Yü, two methods of devotion to Amitābha and Sukhāvātī existed by the Tang Dynasty: Mindfulness of Amitābha and the invocation of Amitābha’s name (Yü 2020, pp. 198–99). Thus, this passage presents an innovative approach to Amitābha worship, specifically through the practice of mantra.

Furthermore, this mantra also serves to alleviate hardships such as illness.

After many years and many moons come to pass, sentient beings may be stricken with frailty, illness, and myriad other hardships . . . If one sits before the stricken



**Citation:** An, Saiping. 2023. The Reception of the Mantra of Light in Republican Period Chinese Buddhism. *Religions* 14: 818. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14070818>

Academic Editors: David B. Gray and Jason Schwartz

Received: 8 May 2023

Revised: 8 June 2023

Accepted: 20 June 2023

Published: 21 June 2023



**Copyright:** © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

for one, two, or three days and intones this mantra one thousand and eighty times every day with a full voice, then the hindrance of illnesses from past karma will be destroyed. Suppose one is tortured by a demonic spirit and loses one's voice. Although one does not say a word, if one holds the hand of someone who maintains the mantra and rubs her face one hundred and eight times . . . then one can get rid of the spirit . . . (Unno 2004, p. 22)

Mark Unno states that the early practice of this mantra in India remains unknown, but a Sanskrit version of this text did exist (Unno 2004, p. 22). Unno speculates that the text expanding this mantra was a part of the history of devotion to Amitābha and Sukhāvātī in India. The practice of seeking reborn in Amitābha's Sukhāvātī once became a popular substantial cult, so much so that traditions worshipping other Buddhist deities may have sensed a need to recognize and institute practices leading to the realm of Amitābha even for their own followers (Unno 2004, pp. 24–25). After the introduction of the text to China, it remains unclear when, where, and why it was translated as there is no preface in this text that provides such information, which is also the case with many other Chinese versions of Buddhist scriptures. Simply stated, the translator Amoghavajra is identified. As the Pure Land movement, which emphasizes devotion to Amitābha and Sukhāvātī, had significant popularity and even gained the support of emperors during the Tang Dynasty (Hay 2009, p. 256), it is possible that Amoghavajra, an esoteric Buddhist master, translated this text because he noticed a need to promote an esoteric method of achieving rebirth in Sukhāvātī. This approach may have been intended to appeal to followers of the Pure Land tradition and encourage them to explore esoteric teachings. The practice of this mantra was popular in pre-modern Japanese Buddhism after Kūkai (774–835) brought this sutra to Japan in the 9th century. The intellectual and cultural history of the mantra of light in Japan has received attention from scholars (Unno 2004; Hatsuzaki 1973; Kim 2014).

However, little attention has been paid to the dissemination and practice of this mantra in other regions. Even its acceptance in its “second hometown” China after the emergence of Chinese-translated sutras related to it remains insufficiently explored. One reason why the practice of this mantra in the Chinese Buddhist community has been overlooked is that it may not have developed into a major practice in pre-modern China. Although Pure Land and Amitābha practices enjoyed wide popularity in post-Tang China, the historical records of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism (Chen 2008; Jones 2019) suggest that this type of “esoteric” Pure Land practice was uncommon among the Buddhist community in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

In pre-modern Chinese Buddhist texts after the Tang dynasty, a solitary instance of the application of the mantra of light was referenced. *Anthology of the Blissful Country* (*Lebang wenlei* 樂邦文類) compiled by Zongxiao 宗曉 (1151–1214) mentioned a Tiantai monk Zhiyuan 智圓 (976–1022) in the Song Dynasty. Zhiyuan was said to have empowered the sand with the mystic power of the mantra of light and sprinkled it on the corpse of his deceased mother. This was done in the hopes of leading his mother to rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha (Takakusu, Watanabe, et al. 1924–1934, p. 163). It is worth noting that some modern Chinese Buddhists advocate a revival of esoteric Buddhism, which was considered a lost tradition. They attempted to achieve this goal by importing esoteric Buddhism from Japan (Schickelanz 2014, p. 404). As a result, the mantra of light has regained importance and has been widely practiced in the modern Chinese Buddhist community, as will be revealed later in this article. This is mainly attributed to Wang Hongyuan 王弘願 (1876–1937), a follower of the esoteric Buddhism in modern China, who rediscovered and mastered the knowledge and practical methods of the mantra of light from Japanese Shin-gon monks. He compiled ritual procedures for this mantra and promoted them to his disciples and followers. Based on this, this study aims to examine the mantra of light rituals led by Wang Hongyuan and his Buddhist affiliates, which has not yet received adequate attention in academic circles.

This article will illustrate some modern Chinese Pure Land devotional practices blended with esoteric Buddhist elements that draw from *The Mantra of Light of the Empowerment*

of *Vairocana of the Unfailing Rope Snare* and its derivative Japanese esoteric teachings that have not been noticed by previous scholars. Current scholars are overly influenced by the sectarian framework of Japanese Buddhism in the study of modern Chinese Pure Land Buddhism and the broader history of this tradition in China. In particular, more emphasis is placed on the study of the teachings of the “patriarchs” of the Pure Land School. For modern Chinese, Pure Land Buddhism, great significance is placed on the study of a monk Yin Guang 印光 (1862–1940) who is regarded as the 13th patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism (Kiely 2017; Rowe 2018; Ji and Li 2019). Modern Chinese Pure Land Buddhism is often characterized by scholars as a “sect” that emphasizes the soteriological practice of reciting Amitābha’s name as a means of achieving rebirth in the Pure Land of Sukhāvati. As previous scholars have relied on such a narrow definition, some elements of devotion to Amitābha and Sukhāvati in other Buddhist traditions have been largely overlooked. For instance, the esoteric scriptures in the Tang Dynasty have already included elements and practices associated with Pure Land of Sukhāvati. *The Mantra of Light of the Empowerment of Vairocana of the Unfailing Rope Snare* translated by Amoghavajra, promotes the attainment of rebirth in the Sukhāvati of Amitābha through the practice of mantra, which serves as an alternative to chanting Amithaba’s name for rebirth in the Pure Land of Sukhāvati. These elements and practices were adopted by Japanese Buddhists and adapted to suit their cultural context. In modern times, they were also imported into China and widely practiced by Chinese Buddhists. However, for scholars who assume esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism are supposed to be mutually exclusive non-overlapping spheres of activity, the areas in which they overlap have become invisible and have gained limited attention. Since the rituals related to the mantra of light involve offering worship to Sukhāvati and Amitābha, the following section will investigate the intersection of esoteric Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism within an esoteric Buddhist community in early modern China.

## 2. The Cult of the Mantra of Light of Wang Hongyuan

Wang Hongyuan 王弘願 (1876–1937) played a crucial role in promoting the mantra of light in Chinese Buddhist groups during the Republican period. His interest in esoteric Buddhism was piqued after reading some books related to esoteric Buddhism from Kaiyuan Temple 開元寺 in Chaozhou 潮州. He came to realize that esoteric Buddhism was a tradition that had been lost in China but flourished in Japan. It led him to get in touch with a Japanese Shingon master Gonda Raifu 權田雷斧 (1846–1934). Later, he translated Gonda’s book entitled *The Essentials of Esoteric Buddhism* (Mikyo Koyo 密教綱要) into Chinese. He also invited Gonda to Chaozhou in 1924 and received esoteric initiation (guanding 灌頂) from Gonda. After initiation he founded the Society for the Restoration of Esoteric Teachings of China (Zhendan mijiao chongxinghui 震旦密教重興會) for the promotion of esoteric Buddhism in China. He journeyed to Japan to receive instruction from Gonda at Negoroji 根來寺 in 1925 (Schickelanz 2014, pp. 407–8). In terms of Wang’s personal experience, his implementation of the practical method of the mantra of light was mainly based on his knowledge of Japanese esoteric Buddhism.

As part of his efforts to promote the mantra of light, Wang authored a book entitled *A Study on the Mantra of Light* (guangming zhenyan zhi yanjiu 光明真言之研究) for his followers. This is a ritual manual which offers a comprehensive doctrinal explanation of this mantra. This book can be divided into several parts. In the first part of the main text, Wang introduced the functions of the mantra of light and the meaning of its Sanskrit characters. For the section of explanation of Sanskrit characters, it is likely to be Wang’s response to some of the believers’ doubts regarding what it mentioned at the beginning of this book. The Buddhist literature he cited is very extensive, including Chinese-translated sutras in the Tang Dynasty, like *The Mantra of Light of the Empowerment of Vairocana of the Unfailing Rope Snare* translated by Amoghavajra, *The Vairocanābhīṣambodhi Sūtra* (Da piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachijing 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經) translated by Śubhakarasiṃha 善無畏 (637–735) and Yixing 一行 (683–727), etc. In addition, it also includes works by pre-modern Japanese monks, like *Recommending Faith in the Sand of the Mantra*

*of Light* (Kōmyō shingon dosha kanjinki 光明真言土砂勸信記)) by Myōe 明恵 (1172–1232), *Collected writings of fourfold secret explanation in kana* (Shijū hissaku kanashō 四重秘釋假名鈔) by Dōhan 道範 (1179–1252), *Principle of Transformation from this Existence to Buddhahood* (Sokushin jōbutsu gi 即身成仏義) and *Meaning of the Word Hūm* (Unji gi 吽字義) by Kukai 空海 (Yu 2009a, pp. 341–55).

The subsequent segment of this book is focused on the pragmatic applications of the mantra of light. These primarily involve common practices of Shingon Buddhism such as chanting mantras, usage of mudras, and contemplation. Wang drew upon numerous Buddhist scriptures and the writings of pre-modern Japanese esoteric monks as the foundational sources for implementing specific ritual procedures. Some of the ritual practices were orally transmitted by some Shingon monks during his travel to Japan. The final part is about the ritual of empowering the sand with the mystic power of the mantra of light (guangming zhenyan tusha jiachi 光明真言土砂加持). The ritual procedure described in this book is derived from the customary ceremonial process carried out at Nagayama-ji 長谷寺 which is associated with the Buzan lineage of Japanese Shingon Buddhism. The rituals conducted at Nagayama-ji involve the chanting of devotional hymns and empowerment of sands (Yu 2009a, pp. 355–71). This book contains references to a diverse array of sources, encompassing both doctrinal interpretations and ritual practices. It is a compilation of Chinese-translated Buddhist scriptures, pre-modern Japanese Buddhist works, and Wang's own knowledge on the mantra of light attained from the modern Japanese Shingon Buddhist community.

Wang states the impetus for composing this book at the outset. He points out that individuals who become members of the Society for the Restoration of Esoteric Teachings of China will receive an article entitled “Treatise on Attaining Enlightenment through the Mantra of Light” (*Guangming zhenyan zhengzhang* 光明真言證章). It is apparent that Wang's organization placed considerable emphasis on the practice of the mantra of light from the outset, mandating that all members acquire proficient knowledge of its practical techniques. Upon reading the aforementioned material, some members frequently composed written correspondence to seek clarification regarding the precise pronunciation and significance of the sentences of this mantra. Additionally, Wang stated at the beginning of this book that he once presented a lay Buddhist named Huang Dadu 黃大度 who was interested in this mantra, a book entitled *Collected Writings on the Mantra of Light* (Kōmyō shingonshō 光明真言鈔) written by an Edo monk Raikei 賴慶 (1562–1610) (Yu 2009a, p. 341). It indicates that the members demonstrated a strong inclination towards the cultivation technique of this mantra. Nonetheless, initially, Wang's group may have lacked a comprehensive theoretical and practical manual pertaining to this specific mantra. Or, as an esoteric collective, the initial ritualistic implementation of this mantra may have relied on secret oral transmission, which may not have been widespread among Wang's adherents. As a result, Wang made the decision to compile a publication with the purpose of promoting it (Yu 2009a, p. 341). The specific content of the article “Treatise on Attaining Enlightenment through the Mantra of Light”, mentioned above, remains unclear. Nonetheless, it can be inferred from the doubts expressed by members regarding the pronunciation and meaning of the mantra that this article was likely a concise ritual manual associated with this mantra, possibly with some obscure points. *A Study on the Mantra of Light* may be a further explanation of this article. This book may be the first original Buddhist text composed in modern China to offer both a rigorous and systematic exposition of doctrine, as well as a practical guidance on the mantra of light.

Another piece of writing by Wang on the mantra of light is his article “The Mantra of Light Mandala of the Nonduality of two Maṇḍalas” (*liangbu buer guangming zhenyan mantuluo* 兩部不二光明真言曼荼羅) (Yu 2009b, p. 639). As will be mentioned below, Wang and his adherents frequently employed maṇḍala during their performance of the rituals associated with the mantra of light. Wang might have obtained this image from Japan. This maṇḍala is a square-shaped figure with a circular symbol representing the outline of a round moon depicted inside. In the middle of the circular symbol, there is a lotus plat-



form, surrounded by eight leaves of the lotus flower. The circular symbol contains all of the Sanskrit characters comprising the mantra of light. According to Wang, the maṇḍala is named “the nonduality of two Maṇḍalamāṇḍalas” because it symbolizes the fusion of the Dharma in Garbhakoṣadhātu (taizangjie 胎藏界; Womb World) Maṇḍala and the Dharma in the Vajradhātu (jingangjie 金剛界; Diamond World) Maṇḍala. Wang noted that the eight leaves of lotus found in the Maṇḍalamāṇḍala represent a component of Garbhakoṣadhātu Maṇḍala. Additionally, the syllable situated in the center of the lotus platform corresponds to the seed syllable (zhongzi zi 種子字) of Mahāvairocana in the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala. As these components occur simultaneously in the same maṇḍala, Wang contends this illustrates the syncretism of two maṇḍalas. Furthermore, the Sanskrit syllables comprising the mantra of light have been meticulously arranged within the painting, hence it is referred to as “the Mantra of Light Maṇḍala of the nonduality of two Maṇḍalas” (Yu 2009b, pp. 639–40). There is no scriptural foundation for the integration of the mantra of light with the maṇḍala. It may have been initiated by Japanese Shingon followers. Based on Mark Unno’s examination of the evolution of the cult of the mantra of light in Japan, the foremost Buddhist monk who amalgamated the mantra of light with maṇḍala was Hanjun 範俊 (1038–1112) in the Kamakura period (Unno 2004, p. 28). While the precise depiction of this maṇḍala remains uncertain, it is probable that the maṇḍala Wang obtained from Japan originated from this prototype. This maṇḍala has been employed in the religious practices of the modern Japanese Shingon Buddhist community.

Along with authoring books and articles to promote the mantra of light, Wang frequently encouraged his followers to personally or collectively practice this mantra during significant Buddhist events. For instance, in his translated work *The Law of Diligent Cultivation at Home* (zaijia qingxing fagui 在家勤行法則) which is intended to guide lay believers in practicing esoteric teachings, there is a section pertaining to recitation of the mantra of light (Yu 2009c, p. 10). On 11 August 1932, Wang transmitted the ritual of the mantra of light to 111 male and 110 female believers in Guangzhou. During his Dharma talk, Wang highlighted that the practice of the mantra of light aligned with the Mahayana Buddhist principle of self-interest (zili 自利) and altruism (lita 利他). In his perspective, the so-called self-interest pertains to receiving esoteric initiation from Buddhas in a meditative state, being reborn in the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī after the end of this earthly existence or attaining the goal of achieving Buddhahood in this very body (jishen chengfo 即身成佛) of esoteric Buddhism. The term altruism refers to the miraculous abilities that can be achieved through the divine power of this mantra, as mentioned in the Tang Chinese esoteric scriptures. These abilities include leading the deceased to rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha by sprinkling the sand empowered with the mystic power of the mantra of light on the graves or corpses of the deceased, curing diseases and purifying karma for others. Towards the end of his talk, Wang advised all attendees to use his work *A Study on the Mantra of Light* as a resource when performing ritual practices (Yu 2009d, p. 285). After two days, a ceremony was held by him to liberate departed souls, which included President Sun Yat-sen and those who lost their lives in wars and disasters. The ceremony involved inscribing the mantra of light onto a suspended banner and reciting it (Yu 2009d, p. 286).

In summary, Wang utilized several ways to promote the mystic power of the mantra of light, which has encouraged his adherents and surrounding communities to engage in its practice, as will be elucidated below.

### 3. The Cult of the Mantra of Light of Wang Hongyuan’s Followers

As a result of Wang Hongyuan’s extensive dissemination of the teachings and practices related to the mantra of light, his adherents and affiliated communities have consistently utilized this mantra to achieve religious goals.

The mantra of light has primarily served as a supplementary practice to the recitation of Amitābha’s name for Pure Land devotees. This was demonstrated in tales resembling “Pure Land miracle tales” as identified by some scholars. These tales commonly centered on episodes near death that could affirm someone’s postmortem destiny—whether

one has been born in the Pure Land of Amitābha or not (Heller 2019, p. 478). Recitation of Amitābha's name, which is practiced by followers of Pure Land Buddhism, was the most widely embraced lay Buddhist movement during the Republican Period (Welch 1968, p. 76). These Pure Land practitioners likely interacted with esoteric believers given the widespread dissemination of esoteric teachings. It has resulted in some Pure Land miracle tales with "esoteric features". Similar to typical "Pure Land miracle tales" in modern China, the individuals referred to in certain spiritual narratives recounted by Wang Hongyuan and his adherents of that period were Pure Land practitioners who were facing serious illness and impending death. A remarkable characteristic is that these practitioners faced difficulty in reciting Amitābha's name or practicing Buddhist rituals due to their illness, but with the assistance of the mystic power of the mantra of light, they were eventually able to be reborn in the Sukhāvati of Amitābha.

As an auxiliary method for Pure Land practitioners, the ritual practices of this mantra extend beyond mere recitation and incorporate the utilization of a maṇḍala. The spiritual stories written by Wang Fuhui 王福慧 (no dates), a disciple and son of Wang Hongyuan, demonstrate the implementation of the mantra of light in this manner. One of the stories pertains to a devout lay Buddhist Wusun 梧孙 who is afflicted with a debilitating terminal ailment. Wang expounds on the mystical potency of the mantra of light to Wusun's offspring, Mr. Hong. Mr. Hong accepts it as true and requests Wang Fuhui's father Wang Hongyuan to perform a ceremony of the mantra of light to bestow blessings upon Wusun. In addition, he instructs his family members to recite Amitābha's name for him. A few days later, Wusun accurately predicts the timing of being reborn in the Sukhāvati of Amitābha before passing away peacefully. Another story tells of Wang Fuhui's cousin, who is gravely ill, experiencing delirium and frequently uttering nonsensical phrases, including the name of his deceased mother or the family's livestock. His family strongly advise him to recite Amitābha's name and recite the Buddha's name on his behalf. Two nights prior to his demise, his respiration becomes increasingly weak. Wang presents the maṇḍala of the mantra of light in front of him and recites the mantra of light aloud. Simultaneously, he abruptly recites the Great Compassion Mantra (*dabei zhou* 大悲咒) which he occasionally learned during his youth, while still in his slumber. His vocal volume is considerably high, which was not manifested when he was in a state of severe illness. Later, his facial expression also improves, and he can accurately predict the exact timing of death beforehand. His forehead retains warmth for an extended period after the cessation of vital signs. The individuals in the vicinity expressed the uncommon nature of this event and maintained the belief that he has been reborn in the Pure Land of Amitābha. Additionally, there is a tale of a man who, due to his severe illness, was found to be delirious and speaking nonsensically. Wang placed the maṇḍala empowered with mystic power on his chest, he ceased uttering nonsensical words and passed away tranquilly, subsequently being reborn in the pure land of Amitābha (Yu 2009d, pp. 263–64).

Furthermore, some miracle tales also mention that some believers witness mysterious manifestations during their performances of rituals of the mantra of light prior to their death. Wang refers to a devout Buddhist named Cai Yueying 蔡月英. In 1927, she fell ill and was completely bedridden. She placed the maṇḍala of the mantra of light on her head and claimed to witness a luminous circular halo. Even after an extended period following her death, there is still a residual warmth present on her forehead, and her facial features remained unaltered (Yu 2009d, p. 386). Feng Baojin and Feng Baoying, devoted followers of Wang Hongyuan, mention their mother has witnessed various miraculous scenes during her recitation of the mantra of light prior to her death. These visual sightings included a white-clad Guanyin Bodhisattva, Dharmapalas, Vajra pestles, a large lotus, and so forth. Eventually, she passes away peacefully and has been reborn in the Pure Land of Amitābha (Yu 2009d, p. 385).

The reason why the ritual of the mantra of light is used among Pure Land believers may be attributed to the sutra translated by Amoghavajra, which illustrates its function of leading one to rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha. Therefore, Wang Hongyuan and his

followers believe that there is no contradiction between reciting Buddha's name in Pure Land Buddhism and the use of this mantra. Furthermore, for Wang's group, the introduction of the ritual of the mantra of light may provide greater assurance for Pure Land practitioners to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. As Wang Fuhui once pointed out:

Of the profound teachings of the Buddha, the Pure Land doctrine stands as the most widely embraced and expedient path towards enlightenment. For an individual to align their fate appropriately in this present existence, it is imperative to retain an undistracted state of mind for at least one day. Despite the existence of a highly efficacious method of chanting Amitābha's name ten times during the final moments of life, how many individuals through the ages have been capable of even a single recitation of the Buddha's name on their deathbed? Not to mention reciting the Buddha's name ten times. 我佛大教, 以淨土為最普且捷, 願欲一生取辦, 最少亦須一日一心不亂。雖有臨終十念之最妙法門, 但古今來於生死之際, 能把定一念者, 寧有幾人? 況十念乎! (Yu 2009d, p. 264)

It implies that individuals may experience difficulty engaging in basic rituals during the dying process, such as reciting the Buddha's name. Consequently, it was deemed essential to provide support through the utilization of the mantra of light. It is worth noting that the scripture states that this mantra functions by rescuing those who have already passed away, yet in the modern Chinese Buddhist community, it has been used to rescue those on the brink of death.

Wang's group frequently engaged in the implementation of the mantra of light rituals not explicitly prescribed in the scriptures. The usage of the maṇḍala mentioned in the aforementioned narratives serves as a typical example. In addition, some adherents would inscribe or depict the mantra of light or its maṇḍala onto textiles such as quilts or clothes to facilitate the reincarnation of the deceased in the Pure Land. Wang Hongyuan's work *Secret Methods for Ensuring Rebirth in the Pure Land* (jueding wangsheng mifa 決定往生秘法) provides a detailed description for such practices:

Sanskrit spells can be inscribed on the quilt that envelops the deceased, but this ritual requires a virtuous Ācārya (esoteric priest) to perform it. Someone in Chaozhou once requested Ācārya to inscribe a mantra onto the quilt and to perform consecration rituals for the images. There were individuals who had no prior experience with Buddhism but witnessed auspicious miracles towards the end of their lives as a result of its practice, exemplified by multiple cases. These tales are dispersed throughout *The Record of Discussion and Practice of Esoteric Teachings* published by the Society for the Restoration of Esoteric Teachings of China. If one inscribes the mantra of light maṇḍala onto the quilt, it is likely to become more efficacious. 蓋屍之被, 可書陀羅尼梵文, 唯作法須請大阿闍黎行之。潮州曾有人請阿闍黎書此被, 並開眼作法, 有平素全未行持, 臨終以是而感瑞應者, 不一而足。其事蹟頗散見於震旦密教重興會刊行之《密教講習錄》中。而書光明真言曼荼羅覆之, 亦感應良佳。 (Yu 2009b, p. 634)

As Wang asserts that some practices are required to be performed by an Ācārya (esoteric priest), it is likely that this ritual practice was transmitted by a Japanese esoteric priest to Wang. This technique may have originated from the practice of sprinkling sand empowered with the mystic power of the mantra of light, as mentioned in *The Mantra of Light of the Empowerment of Vairocana of the Unfailing Rope Snare*. It is probable that the medium capable of being empowered with the mystic power of the mantra of light has been expanded by Japanese Esoteric Buddhist followers, from sand to any object, such as clothes and blankets.

Some stories from those close to Wang Hongyuan mention the usage of quilts or clothing adorned with the mantra of light or its maṇḍala. Wang once mentioned that a layman named Liu Shaoliang 劉紹亮 requested a few blankets from the Society for the Restoration of Esoteric Teachings of China, with the mantra of light inscribed on them. When Liu's family members or neighbors approached the end of their lives, he covered them

with these blankets, and most of them experienced miracles (Yu 2009d, p. 268). According to Wang, his daughter Huifang 慧芳 recited the mantra of light while covered with a quilt inscribed with the same mantra before her passing. She was also clothed in garments adorned with the mantra of light mandala. Following her passing, it was believed by those around her that she had successfully undergone reincarnation and entered into the paradise of Amitābha (Yu 2009d, p. 319). Some adherents have also used a blanket with the mantra of light inscribed on them, onto which sand imbued with the power of the mantra of light was sprinkled. For example, a lay Buddhist named Feng Chongxi mentioned that a deceased woman was covered with a quilt inscribed with the mantra of light, which was donated by a believer. Additionally, some empowered sand was also sprinkled over the quilt (Yu 2009d, pp. 387–90).

For the Pure Land adherents mentioned above, the ritual of the mantra of light has been considered a supplementary component to their Pure Land spiritual practices. For individuals who do not adhere to any religious beliefs, Wang Hongyuan's followers similarly hold the belief that the rituals associated with the mantra of light serve as a substitute for the recitation of Amitābha's name, aiding individuals who do not identify as Buddhists in attaining rebirth in the Pure Land of Amitābha.

In his letter to Wang Hongyuan, Liu Shaoliang talked about two elderly women who relied on the divine power of the mantra of light to be reborn in the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī. When an elderly woman surnamed Ruan was nearing the end of her life, Liu gifted her with the mantra of light mandala and recited the Great Compassion Mantra on her behalf. There was also another elderly woman surnamed Huang who Liu encountered when she was already in an unconscious state. Liu placed the mandala on her chest and recited the mantra of light for her. Liu believed that both elderly women were reborn in the Pure Land of Amitābha. Wang Fuhui also heard about the stories of these two ladies, and he pointed out that they had shown no inclination towards Buddhism during their lifetime. There is no mention in Liu's letter that they expressed belief in Buddhism prior to their passing. In another letter to Wang Hongyuan, Liu stated that a lady surnamed Li appeared to have had no prior knowledge of the teachings of Pure Land. Liu placed the mandala on her chest on her deathbed, and subsequently, she was reborn in the Pure Land (Yu 2009d, pp. 132–33). It is evident that the rituals associated with the mantra of light were considered as a viable alternative for chanting Amithaba's name. Based on the aforementioned narratives, adherents of Wang Hongyuan subscribed to the notion that an individual can simply be reborn in Amitābha's Pure Land by being placed a mandala image in body or being covered by a quilt empowered with this mantra. With the aid of the divine power inherent in the mantra of light, there is no requirement for an individual to engage in any form of religious practice.

While Wang Hongyuan and his followers frequently employed the mantra of light rituals in their Pure Land practices, they may have integrated Pure Land Buddhism into the context of Esoteric Buddhism. For instance, Liu Shaoliang once mentioned that in 1912, while an old woman surnamed Lu was dying, he blessed her with the mantra of light mandala. Based on her "auspicious signs" (*ruixiang* 瑞相) following her passing, Liu concluded that she was reborn in the Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment (*miyan jingtu* 密嚴淨土) (Yu 2009d, p. 271). The Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment is regarded as the "Pure Land" of Mahāvairocana and it has been an influential idea in Japanese Shingon teachings. As Mahāvairocana is regarded by Shingon Buddhists as an anthropomorphized Dharmakāya—the Buddha of/as all of reality and the sum total of all Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and ultimately, all beings, Mahāvairocana's "Pure Land" is also seen as a totalizing construct, representing the sum total of all Pure Lands (Proffitt 2015, pp. 274–75). Based on this idea, some pre-modern Shingon followers have promoted an "Esoteric Pure Land" teaching which has proposed the non-duality of Mahāvairocana's Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment and Amitābha's Pure Land of Sukhāvātī (Sanford 2020, pp. 530–60; Saito 2017, p. 59). In Liu's narrative above, Liu also perceives the cosmology of Pure Land Buddhism from the perspective of Esoteric Buddhism and believes that the old woman has



been reborn in the Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment which is essentially identical to Amitābha's Land.

Drawing from an esoteric cosmology, those who subscribe to Wang Hongyuan's teachings may adopt an inclusivist approach towards Pure Land teachings. This standpoint is already evident in Wang Hongyuan's teachings. Wang stated in his reply to a letter from a layman named Liang Yeji 梁業基: "You should understand that Amitābha symbolizes the wisdom of profound insight (*miaoguan zhi* 妙觀察智) of Mahāvairocana, and the Pure Land of Sukhāvati is a small subsidiary department of the Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment." (Yu 2009d, p. 89) This indicates that Amitābha and Sukhāvati are considered integral parts of Mahāvairocana and the Pure Land of Mysterious Adornment, respectively. As adherents of Wang, it is customary to incorporate Pure Land doctrines into the cosmological framework of Esoteric Buddhism.

#### 4. Conclusions

The practice of the mantra of light became prevalent in Japanese Buddhism following the transmission of related scriptures from China to Japan. This paper points out that the mantra of light was also widely practiced by Wang Hongyuan and his associates in Buddhist circles during the Republican Period in China, with the teachings and practical techniques of this mantra being introduced from the Shingon Buddhist community of Japan. The ritual procedure of this mantra was primarily grounded on Japanese Shingon texts but was restructured by Wang Hongyuan. The mantra of light rituals were considered supplementary to near-death Pure Land practices for Pure Land adherents, and offered an alternative approach to the recitation of Amitābha's name for non-Buddhist believers. It is evident that the Pure Land practices in modern China were not confined to some common practical techniques of Pure Land Buddhism, such as the recitation of Amitābha's name as espoused by certain modern Chinese Pure Land "charismatic leaders" like Yin Guang. Rather, Pure Land practices characterized by an "esoteric style" or embracing an "esoteric" approach to be reborn in Amitābha's Pure Land can also be discerned in religious practices of Wang Hongyuan and his adherents.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

### Primary Source

Takakusu, Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Watanabe, Kaigyoku 渡海旭, et al., eds. 1924–1934. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. Tōkyō: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō kankō kai. Vol. 47.

### Secondary Source

Chen, Yangtong 陳揚炯. 2008. *Zhongguo Jingtuzong Tongshi* 中國淨土宗通史. Nanjing: Fenghuang Chubanshe 鳳凰出版社.

Hatsuzaki, Shojun. 1973. Kōmyō shingon ni kansuru misshū hōyō no kenkyū 光明真言に関する密宗法要の研究. *Indogaku Bukkyogaku Kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 21: 764–67. [\[CrossRef\]](#)

Hay, Jeff. 2009. *World Religions*. New York: Greenhaven Publishing LLC.

Heller, Natasha. 2019. Contemporary Pure Land Miracle Tales. In *Pure Lands in Asian Texts and Contexts: An Anthology*. Edited by Georgios T. Halkias and Richard K. Payne. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 477–95.

Jones, Charles B. 2019. *Chinese Pure Land Buddhism: Understanding a Tradition of Practice*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Ji, Huazuan 紀華傳, and Jiwu Li 李繼武. 2019. Yinguang fashi yu jindai jingtuzong 印光法師與近代淨土宗. *Renwen zazhi* 人文雜誌 11: 108–14.

Kiely, Jan. 2017. The Charismatic Monk and the Chanting Masses: Master Yinguang and his Pure Land Revival Movement. In *Making Saints in Modern China*. Edited by David Ownby, Vincent Goossaert and Ji Zhe. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 30–77.

- Kim, Im-Jung 金任仲. 2014. Myōe ni okeru kōmyō shingon doshakaji no shinkō 明恵における光明真言土砂加持の信仰. *Journal of East Asian Studies* 5: 145–72.
- Proffitt, Aaron P. 2015. *Mysteries of Speech and Breath: Dohan's (1179–1252) Himitsu nenbutsu sho and Esoteric Pure Land Buddhism*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.
- Rowe, Chris. 2018. *A Twentieth-Century "Pure Land Patriarch": An Exploration of Master Yinguang's Buddhist World through Epistolary Connections*. Master's thesis, Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts, New Taipei City, Taiwan.
- Saito, Norio 齋藤紀夫. 2017. *Gendai ni ikiru kitai no kōsō "myōeshōnin" 現代に生きる稀代の高僧「明恵上人」*. Tokyo: Bun geisha 文芸社.
- Sanford, James H. 2020. Breath of Life: The Esoteric Nembutsu. In *Critical Readings on Pure Land Buddhism in Japan*. Edited by Galen Amstutz. Leiden: Brill, vol. 2.
- Schicketanz, Erik. 2014. Wang Hongyuan and the Import of Japanese Esoteric Buddhism to China during the Republican Period. In *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Cultural and Intellectual Exchange*. Edited by Tansen Sen. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 403–28.
- Unno, Mark. 2004. *Shingon Refractions: Myōe and the Mantra of Light*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Welch, Holmes. 1968. *The Buddhist Revival in China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Yu, Ruihua. 2009a. *Mijiao jiangxilu 密教講習録*. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 华夏出版社, vol. 1.
- Yu, Ruihua. 2009b. *Mijiao jiangxilu 密教講習録*. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 华夏出版社, vol. 3.
- Yu, Ruihua. 2009c. *Mijiao jiangxilu 密教講習録*. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 华夏出版社, vol. 4.
- Yu, Ruihua. 2009d. *Mijiao jiangxilu 密教講習録*. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 华夏出版社, vol. 5.
- Yü, Chün-fang 于君方. 2020. *Chinese Buddhism: A Thematic History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.