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The making of a goddess: rethinking the history of the cult of Zhunti (Cundī) in China

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Abstract

The cult of Zhunti 准提/準提 (Sanskrit: Cundī) is a unique religious and cultural phenomenon in China. However, the scholarship devoted to its history has long been dominated by two problematic models—the model of ‘Sinification’, according to which the goddess Zhunti is a Chinese Buddhist deity borrowed from an Indian source, and the ‘evolution’ model that depicts the persistence of the Zhunti cult as a continuous and gradual process. I challenge these views and instead argue that, far from being a foreign transplant, Zhunti is a deity ‘made in China’ and there is no evidence of continuity in the development of the cult from the Liao to Ming–Qing times. To justify these assertions, I re-examine the development of the cult of Zhunti by exploring its vicissitudes throughout history and highlighting the ‘Chinese creations’ that were produced during the process of the making of the goddess Zhunti.

Keywords: The cult of Zhunti; *Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji*; *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*; *literati*

Although the goddess Zhunti was one of the most popular deities in late imperial China, the first scholar who undertook a serious study of her cult was the British Sinologist Samuel Beal (1825–1889), who visited China on one occasion as a naval chaplain.¹ In his *The Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese*, Beal portrayed Zhunti as a popular Chinese Buddhist deity borrowed from a foreign source.² His influence on subsequent

¹ But the encounter between Europeans and the goddess Zhunti happened much earlier. *China Illustrata*, a book compiled by the Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) and published in 1667, representing seventeenth-century European knowledge on the Chinese empire and its neighbouring countries, includes an illustration of Zhunti sitting on a lotus supported by two dragon kings. See A. Kircher, *China Illustrata*, (trans.) C. D. Van Tuyl (Muskogee, 1987), p. 128.

² S. Beal, *The Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese* (London, 1871), pp. 411–412. However, Beal’s account is very problematic. For example, his understanding of Zhunti is actually as a mixture of the general form of Guanyin and the white-robed Guanyin. Also, as Jacob Kinnard points out, Beal’s use of ‘mother’ to describe Zhunti has remained a source of misapprehension and confusion. Finally, his translation of the so-called ‘Recitation of the Dhāraṇī of Zhunti’ is, in fact, an excerpt from *Cundī Method of Purifying One’s Karma* (Zhunti jingye 準提淨業), a lengthy ritual text compiled by the seventeenth-century Buddhist layman Xie Yujiao 謝于教 (1565–1635), featuring charts and elaborate details on the ritual proceedings for the worship of Zhunti. See J. Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (London and New York, 2013), p. 125; H. Sørensen, ‘Textual material relating to esoteric Buddhism in China outside the Taishō, vol. 18–21’, in *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia*, (eds.) C. Orzech, R. Payne, and H. Sørensen (Leiden and Boston, 2011), p. 100; S. D. Singhal, ‘Iconography of Cundā’, in *The Art and Culture of South-East Asia*, (ed.) L. Chandra (New Delhi, 1991), p. 385; R. Gimello, ‘Icon and incantation: the Goddess Zhunti and the role of images

research on this topic is so persistent that even the author of a recent master's thesis still struggled to prove that the Indian goddess Durgā is the prototype of Chinese Zhunti and Japanese Juntei.³ The long-lasting dominance of this erroneous perspective is rooted in one of the dominant models employed when researching the history of Chinese Buddhism—that of 'Chinese transformation' or 'Sinification'. Proponents of this model favour a paradigm that, once transmitted into China, irrespective of the form, the imagined Indian Buddhism (and especially Buddhist cults or deities) would be transformed by indigenous culture and would over time experience a transition from 'Buddhism in China' to 'Buddhism of China'.⁴

However, scholars are increasingly arguing that it is historically and hermeneutically misleading to conceive of the Sinification of Buddhism in terms of a dialogue between two discrete cultural traditions,⁵ positing instead that the real history of Chinese Buddhism consists of a series of new visions about what Buddhism is and new methods of practising it.⁶ This is certainly true for the Zhunti cult in question: although she was believed to be a powerful *yakṣiṇī* whose cult flourished first in Bengal and Orissa under the grateful patronage of the Pāla Dynasty (circa 750–circa 1200) before her integration into Buddhism,⁷ Cundī's origins in India are still cloaked in mystery.⁸ Besides, the earliest Indian reference to her is found in *Śikṣā-samuccaya*⁹—an anthology of quotations from the Mahāyāna sūtras with a commentary by Śāntideva (685–763), which is predated by some of the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) translations.¹⁰ Therefore, as Robert

in the Occult Buddhism of China', in *Images in Asian Religions: Texts and Contexts*, (eds.) P. Granoff and K. Shinohara (Vancouver, 2004), p. 249.

³ R. Sayer, 'From Cundi-Devi to Juntei, or How Durga Became Japanese but Her Song Remained the Same' (unpublished MA dissertation, School of Oriental And African Studies, University of London, 2008), pp. 1–7. Another influential work on the Zhunti cult in this model is K. P. K. Whitaker, 'A Buddhist spell', *Asia Major* 10 (1963), pp. 9–22.

⁴ K. Chen, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton, 1973).

⁵ R. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu, 2005), p. 21.

⁶ Chün-fang Yü, *The Renewal of Buddhism in China: Zhuhong and the Late Ming Synthesis* (New York, 2020), p. 2.

⁷ Gimello, 'Icon and incantation', p. 249; Singhal, 'Iconography of Cundā', p. 386.

⁸ P. Niyogi, 'Cundā—a popular Buddhist goddess', *East and West* 27 (1977), p. 300.

⁹ Singhal, 'Iconography of Cundā', p. 386.

¹⁰ In the late 560s or early 570s, an Indian missionary monk named Jinagupta (She'najueduo 闍那崛多, 523–600) compiled and translated an anthology of *dhāraṇī* entitled *Zhongzhong zazhou jing* 種種雜咒經 within which there is an incantation entitled 'Holy Spell of the Seventy Million Buddhas' (Qifo juzhi shenzhou 七佛俱胝神咒). Later, a slightly different transliteration of the same *dhāraṇī* appeared in a very short text attributed to Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) with the title 'Spell of the Seventy Million Buddhas' (Qijuzhifo zhou 七俱胝佛咒). In the year 685 or 686, the Cundī *dhāraṇī* was again offered in Chinese: Divākara (Dipoheluo 地婆訶羅, 613–688) translated an entire scripture dedicated to the Cundī spell—the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Enunciation of the Great Cundī Dhāraṇī, Essence of the Buddha-Goddess of the Seventy Million [Buddhas]* (Foshuo qijuzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni jing 佛說七俱胝佛母心大準提陀羅尼經). Within decades of the appearance of Divākara's rendition, there appeared another two translations of essentially the same text, albeit in expanded and supplemented form: Vajrabodhi's (Jin'gang zhi 金剛智, 669–741) *Foshuo qijuzhi fomu zhunti daming tuoluoni jing* 佛說七俱胝佛母準提大明陀羅尼經 and Amoghavajra's (Bukong 不空, 705–774) *Qijuzhi fomu suoshuo zhunti tuoluoni jing* 七俱胝佛母所說準提陀羅尼經, both of which appended to their translations of the *dhāraṇī* scripture itself detailed ritual manuals of the sort usually labelled *vidhi* (yigui 儀規). The last one, attracting the least attention from both academia and the Buddhist community, is *Qijushi zhunti dashen tuoluoni* 七俱胝準提大身陀羅尼, which appeared in the late ninth century (898) and was included in an anthology of *dhāraṇī*, the *Shijiao zuishangcheng mimizang tuoluoni ji* 釋教最上乘祕藏陀羅尼集, compiled by the monk Xinglin 行琳 (n.d.) of the Anguo Temple 安國寺. This valuable but little-studied work survives only in the *Fangshan Lithic Canon* (Fangshan shijing 房山石經). Among all the above renditions, judging from the Dunhuang manuscripts (BD.7689, P.3916d, P.2289a, Q.0479, S.0083, S.2007), the most popular one in the Tang Dynasty should be Divākara's translation. See R. Gimello, 'Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism', paper presented at the symposium 'Understanding Guan Yin', Poh Ming Tse Temple, Singapore, 5 April 2015, pp. 11–37.

Gimello described, in the beginning, Cundī was spread into China with minimal information about her background, as no stories were told about her, no accounts were given of her history, and no specific geographical or cosmographical domains were assigned to her. She was placed in no particular ‘family’ or array of buddhas and bodhisattvas, and was accorded no particular doctrinal significance, nor was she associated with any particular system of Buddhist thought.¹¹ For her subsequent development, even a glimpse at the Zhunti corpus would reveal that the importance of those Tang translations was vastly overestimated. As will be demonstrated later in this article, the Ming–Qing (1368–1912) Zhunti cult was founded upon two indigenous works—the famous *Collection of Essentials for Realization of Buddhahood in the Perfect: Penetration of the Exoteric and the Occult Teachings* (*Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji* 顯密圓通成佛心要集, hereafter *Xianmi*) written by a Liao (907–1125) monk called Daoshen 道詮 (1056–1128), and an original Chinese composition inspired by the authentic Zhunti corpus fictitiously attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha (*Shanwuwei* 善無畏, 637–735). Moreover, the constantly changing creative portrayals of the goddess Zhunti in China are inconsistent with her imagined Indian prototypes.¹² Lastly, its widely performed ritual, which took form in *Xianmi* and was improved by Ming–Qing compilers, lacks a precedent in Indian Buddhism.

Another tendency observed in current scholarship on the Zhunti cult is that most authors are inclined to envision a linear progression of time through various stages of history during which the Zhunti cult gradually rose to prominence.¹³ However, this is an evolutionist and ahistorical view countered by the fact that the persistence and development of the Zhunti cult over the course of the last nine centuries was not a steady and gradual process: although her cult was disseminated into China with an obscure background in the Sui Dynasty, it was not given its classical exposition until the late eleventh century, in the Buddhism of the Liao Dynasty.¹⁴ In the subsequent period, there was silence, with only slight traces left in some inscriptions.¹⁵ During the seventeenth century, however, there was an intriguingly rapid acceleration in its growth, particularly in southern China, coinciding with what Chinese historians term the ‘Ming–Qing transition’. Her popularity during this period is documented in the *Jiaxing Canon* (*Jiaxing zang* 嘉興藏) and *Manji Newly Compiled Great Japanese Supplementary Canon* (*Manji shinsan zokuzōkyō* 卍新纂續藏經). (See also [Figures 7](#) and [8](#) in the Appendix.)

In view of the issues noted above, I argue that, far from being an Indian transplant, Zhunti is a deity ‘made in China’, and the history of the Zhunti cult cannot be conceived of as a continuous process that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things, nor as a phenomenon

¹¹ Gimello, ‘Icon and incantation’, pp. 225–226.

¹² In fact, even in India, the morphology of Cundī was fluid. According to Singhal, the key to identification, which includes forms attested by texts or named in the illustrated pantheons, reveals that most of the forms of Cundī in India were hardly ever repeated. See Singhal, ‘Iconography of Cundā’, pp. 387–399; J. E. van Lohuizen-De Leeuw, ‘The Pattikera Chunda and variations of her image’, in *Nalini Kanta Bhattasali Commemoration Volume: Essays on Archaeology, Art, History, Literature and Philosophy of the Orient, Dedicated to the Memory of Dr. Nalini Kanta Bhattasali [1888–1947 AD]*, (ed.) A. B. M. Habibullah (Dacca, 1966), pp. 119–143; L. Chandra, *Dictionary of Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi, 2001), vol. 3, pp. 849–866.

¹³ In effect, the general notion of ‘persistence’ or ‘continuous development’ of a religion or a cult is questionable, because, according to J. Z. Smith, its (whatever ‘it’ is) persistence says nothing in itself. See J. Z. Smith, ‘Sacred persistence: toward a redescription of canon’, in *Imagining religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, 1982), p. 38.

¹⁴ Gimello, ‘Icon and incantation’, p. 234.

¹⁵ Liu Liming 劉黎明, *Zhongguo gudai minjian mizong xinyang yanjiu* 中國古代民間密宗信仰研究 (Chengdu, 2010), pp. 405, 425, 428, 435, 437, 440; Zhang Mingwu 張明悟, ‘Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji dui liaodai mijiao de yingxiang tanxi’ 《顯密圓通成佛心要集》對遼代密教的影響探析, *Foxue yanjiu* 佛學研究 (2020), pp. 188–199; Zhang Mingwu, *Liaojin jingchuang yanjiu* 遼金經幢研究 (Hefei, 2013), pp. 126–132.

that demonstrates that the past imposed a predetermined form on all its vicissitudes.¹⁶ Instead, I demonstrate that, after temporarily coming to public attention in Liao times, it was not until the Ming and Qing dynasties that the goddess's cult finally became popular and was incorporated into the local pantheon. Thus, the goal of this study is to re-examine the development of the cult of Zhunti by showcasing its vicissitudes throughout its history and highlighting the role of 'Chinese creations' in the process of the making of the goddess Zhunti.

Zhunti in Liao times

Taking into consideration the considerable gap between the cult's 'Indian origin' and its growth in China, I believe that the cult of Zhunti is an 'invented tradition', in the sense conveyed by Eric Hobsbawm:

'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.¹⁷

The impetus for this invention should be credited to the creation of the so-called 'Zhunti Esotericism' (*zhunti mijiao* 準提密教)¹⁸—that is, the tradition of popular ritual and contemplative practice. It was strongly allied in doctrinal terms to Huayan 華嚴, in *Xianmi*, by the genius monk Daoshen, a high-ranking ecclesiastical official under Daozong 道宗 (1032–1101) who spent most of his life in major temples in the Liao's eastern capital of Yanjing 燕京 (today's Beijing), or in retreat in mountains southwest of the city known as Little Wutai (Xiao wutai 小五臺). *Xianmi*'s great influence on the Zhunti cult, as amply demonstrated in previous research, cannot be overestimated.¹⁹ My aim here is

¹⁶ M. Foucault, 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', in *Hommage a Jean Hyppolite*, (ed.) S. Bachelard (Paris, 1971), p. 81.

¹⁷ E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition*, (eds.) E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge and New York, 1983), p. 1.

¹⁸ First, 'Zhunti Esotericism' or the Zhunti School (*zhunti jiao* 準提教(宗)) is not a notion coined by modern scholars; instead it occasionally appears in Ming–Qing documentation, with ambiguous connotations. Also, it is a highly controversial concept: scholars such as Lan Jifu 藍吉富 and Tang Xipeng 唐希鵬 spoke of this term in an institutional sense, and depicted it as an independent school with its own unique theories, distinctive ways of practice, and a large group of devoted followers; but, for Gimello and Xie Shiwei 謝世維, 'Zhunti Esotericism' actually is the equivalent of the proposition of 'separate practice comprising an autonomous family of deities' (*dubu biexing* 獨部別行). It is a turn away from systematic 'theology' and high priestcraft back to a more vernacular occultism. In this study, I tend to take the latter definition. See Jin Sheng 金聲, 'Jinshi jiaxun' 金氏家訓, in *Huizhou mingren jiaxun* 徽州名人家訓, (eds.) Yang Yongsheng 楊永生 and Wang Dabai 汪大白 (Hefei, 2018), p. 103; Lan Jifu, 'Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji chutan' 《顯密圓通成佛心要集》初探, in *Fojiao yu lishi wenhua* 佛教與歷史文化, (eds.) Yang Zengwen 楊曾文 and Fang Guangchang 方廣錫 (Beijing, 2001), pp. 470–480; Tang Xipeng 唐希鵬, 'Zhongguohua de mijiao—xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji sixiang yanjiu' 中國化的密教—《顯密圓通成佛心要集》思想研究 (unpublished MA dissertation, Sichuan University, 2004), p. 51; Gimello, 'Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism', p. 37; Xie Shiwei 謝世維, *Daomifayuan—daojiao yu mijiao zhi wenhua yanjiu* 道密法圓—道教與密教之文化研究 (Taipei, 2018), pp. 203–222.

¹⁹ Gimello, 'Icon and incantation', pp. 231–239; Lü Jianfu 呂建福, *Zhongguo mijiao shi* 中國密教史 (Beijing, 2011), pp. 547–548; Xie Shiwei, *Daomifayuan*, pp. 203–222; Tang Xipeng, 'Zhongguohua de mijiao—xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji sixiang yanjiu', pp. 46–51; Guo Youmeng 郭祐孟, 'Yindu fojiao mizong de hanhua—yi tangsong shiqi zhuntifa wei zhongxin de dansuo' 印度佛教密宗的漢化—以唐宋時期準提法為中心的探索, in *Mijiao de sixiang yu mifa* 密教的思想與密法, (ed.) Lü Jianfu (Beijing, 2012), pp. 282–287; T. Kosho 多田孝正, *Tendai Bukkyō to Higashi Ajia no Bukkyō girei* 天台仏教と東アジアの仏教儀礼 (Tokyo, 2014), pp. 275–405; Guan Jingxiao 關靜瀟, 'Zhunti fomu jiqi xinyang yanjiu' (unpublished MA dissertation, Shaanxi Normal University, 2011), pp. 27–34; Lan Jifu, 'Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji chutan', pp. 470–480.

to contribute to this body of knowledge by exploring three unsolved issues pertinent to *Xianmi*. First, since the creation of the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’ is the starting point of an ‘invented tradition’, it is essential to investigate the kind of ‘historic past’ it was connected to. Or, to be precise, among the Tang and Song Zhunti corpus,²⁰ which text(s) did Daoshen mainly draw upon? Secondly, why did Daoshen especially advocate for the goddess Zhunti and her mantrā, given the existence of so many, far more prevalent, deities and incantations in the Buddhist pantheon and corpus? Finally, what led the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’ to enjoy its subsequent popularity?

The answer to the first question seems to be relatively simple because the essential topics of the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’—the use of a bronze ‘mirror-altar’ (Jingtān 鏡壇),²¹ the concept of ‘separate practice comprising an autonomous family of deities’, and the manifold benefits for lay practitioners who drank wine, ate meat, had wives and children, and were heedless of the distinction between purity and impurity—are all derived from the two texts attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha, a missionary monk and translator whose work overlapped with the first 15 years of the Chinese careers of Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra.²² But the problem is that these two ‘translations’ survive only in the editions of the Buddhist canon that were printed in Japan (*Zokuzōkyō* and *Taishō* editions), and cannot be found in any of the traditional Chinese printed editions of the canon.²³ Hence, several scholars, including Yin Fu 尹富, purport that it is an apocryphon compiled by Japanese monks.²⁴

Therefore, it is reasonable to ask whether these two texts are Japanese concoctions fictitiously attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha. Another scripture from the *Fangshan Lithic Canon* might offer some clues, namely the *Great Cundī Dhāraṇī: Essence of the Buddha-Mother of the Seventy Million [Buddhas]* (Qijuzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni zhenyan 七俱胝佛母心大準提陀羅尼真言, the tablet was carved in 1146) which is also

²⁰ In the early Song, *Kāraṇḍavyūha* (Dacheng zhuangyan baowang jing 大乘莊嚴寶王經), in which the name of Cundī was mentioned, was translated into Chinese. Meanwhile, a fully fledged *Cundā Tantra* (Foshuo chimingzang yuqiedajiao zunna pusa daming chengjiu yigui jing 佛說持明藏瑜伽大教尊那菩薩大明成就儀軌經) was also translated into Chinese, offering the goddess’s Chinese devotees a much more populous Cundī ‘family’ and an even more elaborate liturgical system. The early Song translation of *Māyājāla Tantra* (Foshuo yuqie dajiaowang jing 佛說瑜伽大教王經) did much the same thing, enumerating a number of tantric deities (Vidyārāja, Mingwang 明王) as members of the goddess’s retinue. See Gimello, ‘Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism’, p. 37. However, the contemporary translations of these Song texts, especially the latter two, attracted little attention from the Buddhist community because of linguistic and stylistic problems, and also due to the fact that they had become totally irrelevant to the trajectory that Chinese Buddhism had taken since the mid-Tang period. See Tansen Sen, ‘The revival and failure of Buddhist translations during the Song Dynasty’, *T’oung Pao* 2 (2002), pp. 27–80.

²¹ On the ‘mirror-altar’, see Hattori Hosho 服部法照, ‘Tyuugokukagami ni mirareru juntei shinkō’ 中国鏡にみられる准提信仰, *Inndogakubutu kyougaku kennkyū* 印度學佛教學研究44 (1995), pp. 88–91; Gimello, ‘Icon and incantation’, pp. 231–239; Whitaker, ‘Buddhist spell’, pp. 20–22; Liu Guowei 劉國威, ‘Yuancang yuanmingshiqi-suo-zao zhuntizhou fanwen jing’ 院藏元明時期所造準提咒梵文鏡, *The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art* 385 (2015), pp. 48–57; Lei Tianyu 雷天宇, ‘Qianxi yuanmingqing zhuntijing zhi gongyong’ 淺析元明清準提鏡之功用, *The National Palace Museum Monthly of Chinese Art* 473 (2022), pp. 110–117.

²² Gimello, ‘Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism’, p. 33.

²³ According to Gimello, these two very short texts form a pair, and are found as such in the modern Japanese canons because the editors of those canons copied them from a combined printed edition privately published at Nara’s Hasedera 長谷寺 in 1801. In turn, this printed edition was based on a 1746 manuscript copy of the same pair of texts. The two works so closely resemble each other that it is not unreasonable to treat them simply as two recensions of the same work, although it is also true that they are, in certain details, different enough from each other to support the hypothesis that they reflect disparate textual histories that simply happened to converge in 1746, or that they may be codifications of two different oral transmissions. See *ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁴ Yin Fu 尹富, ‘Shizhairi bushuo’ 十齋日補說, *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 (2007), p. 30.

attributed to Śubhakarasiṃha.²⁵ The following is a textual comparison between the three scriptures.

The detailed comparison provided in Table 1 reveals that the Fangshan rendition appears to be a forebear of the two works preserved in Japan, shorter than either of them but covering the same essential contents.²⁶ However, the ‘authenticity’ of this text as a translation and its attribution to Śubhakarasiṃha are still debatable. For instance, in addition to the problem of textual instability, there is the matter of its odd diction and its several non-standard locutions unattested elsewhere in Chinese Buddhism. Based on this evidence, Gimello convincingly argued that the work might well be an original Chinese composition inspired by the authentic Zhunti corpus.²⁷

The issue of ‘authenticity’ aside, this work was indeed incorporated in *Xianmi*, and contributed to the core of the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’. Yet, inexplicably, few compilers and preface writers of the Zhunti texts in Ming–Qing times made explicit reference to this rendition. It was even excluded from a long and detailed list of various editions of Zhunti scriptures and mantrās compiled by one of the most erudite Qing practitioners of the Zhunti ritual, Tan Zhenmo 譚貞默 (1590–1665).²⁸ One possible conjecture is that it was mainly circulated in North China during Daoshen’s time and was subsequently lost for an unknown reason.²⁹ Nevertheless, drawing on Serge Gavronsky’s notions of ‘pietistic’ and ‘cannibalistic’ translation,³⁰ my view is that, after incorporating this text into its corpus, *Xianmi* started to act as a ‘cannibalistic text’ that produced something unique and contemporary to ‘cannibalise’ the original text (in Gavronsky’s expression, the disappearance of the slightest trace of the ‘original’ *qua* origin). Put differently, as the Fangshan rendition was gradually replaced by *Xianmi*, it lost its value in circulation.

It is rarely noticed that Zhunti’s elevation as the protagonist of Daoshen’s theoretical and ritual innovation project is, if not an accident, very unusual because, unlike the white-robed Guanyin who enjoyed imperial patronage in the Liao Dynasty,³¹ Zhunti was a completely marginal deity at that time. If that was the case, why did Daoshen especially advocate for the goddess Zhunti and her mantrā, given the existence of so many far more prominent Buddhist deities and incantations? To answer this question, I will draw upon Jiang Wu’s theory of the ‘Rule of Marginality’ put forth in his study of the Mengshan Rite for Feeding the Hungry Ghosts (Mengshan shishi 蒙山施食), in which he states:

I would like to suggest that the transmission of the Mengshan Rite follows the rule of marginality, which means a line of transmission, which was often reconstructed during a time of Buddhist revival, must have had derived from a marginal locality or an ambiguous person whose origins were often difficult to trace.³²

²⁵ Zhongguo fojiao xiehui 中國佛教協會, *Fangshan shijing* 房山石經 (Beijing, 2000), pp. 406–407.

²⁶ Gimello, ‘Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism’, p. 33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁸ CBETA (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Tripitaka Association) (2021), Q3, X74, no. 1482, pp. 556a22–558a9. The list mentions a foreign version of the Zhunti mantrā (*fan zhuntizhou* 番準提咒) that Tada Kosho believed to be a Tibetan rendition. See ‘Minmatsu Shinsho no Fukuken no shūkyō jijō: Juntei shinyō o megutte’ 明末清初の福建の宗教事情: 准提信仰をめぐる, in *Kyūyō ronsō* 球陽論叢, (eds.) Shimajiri Katsutarō 島尻勝太郎, Kadena Sōtoku 嘉手納宗徳, and Toguchi Shinsei 度口真清 (Naha, 1986), p. 611.

²⁹ Zhou Bokan 周伯戡, ‘*Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji wenben yu jiaoyi tanyuan*’ 顯密圓通成佛心要集文本與教義探源, in *Shoujie liang’an hanzang foxue yantaohui* 首屆兩岸漢藏佛學研討會 (Wuxi, 2011), pp. 97–127.

³⁰ S. Gavronsky, ‘The translator: from piety to cannibalism’, *SubStance* 6 (1977), pp. 53–62.

³¹ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-Yin*, p. 253.

³² Jiang Wu, ‘The rule of marginality: hypothesizing the transmission of the Mengshan rite for feeding hungry ghosts in late Imperial China’, *Pacific World* 3 (2018), p. 166.

Table 1. A textual comparison between the *Qijuzhi dubufa* 七俱胝獨部法, *Qifo juzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni fa* 七佛俱胝佛母心大準提陀羅尼法, and *Qijuzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni zhenyan* 七俱胝佛母心大準提陀羅尼真言.

<i>Qijuzhi dubufa</i> (T1079:20.187a–188b)	<i>Qifo juzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni fa</i> (T1078:20.186b–178a)	<i>Qijuzhi fomuxin dazhunti tuoluoni zhenyan</i> (Fangshan Lithic Canon)
None	Cundī Mantrā	Cundī Mantrā
The first section is the Rite of Preparing the Altar, the second section is dedicated to the Recitation Rite, the third section is designated for the Rite of Attaining Proof of Efficacy, the fourth section relates to the Rite of Broad and Clear Mastery, and the fifth section focuses on the Rite of Divine Accomplishment of Magical Powers.		
On the morning of 1st, 8th, 14th, 15th, 18th, 23rd, 24th, 28th, 29th, and 30th of every month, brushing teeth with clean water while facing east, then reciting Cundī Mantrā 108 times, followed by drinking and eating. In this way, even if one has a spouse and offspring, one could achieve attainment.		On the morning of the ten fasting days, facing east, brushing teeth with clean water, then reciting Cundī Mantrā 108 times, followed by drinking and eating. In this way, even if one has a spouse and offspring, one could achieve attainment.
The same	The same	The same
If one knows of the existence of some treasures under the earth, after practising Cundī Mudrā and Cundī Mantrā seven times, the hidden treasures exceeding one's needs would arise. Trapped in the war or being robbed, raising Cundī Mudrā, one would be released Cundī Mudrā could also be used to extinguish the conflagration and pacify turbulent seas.		If one knows of the existence of some treasures under the earth, practising Cundī Mudrā and Cundī Mantrā seven times, the hidden treasures exceeding one's needs would arise. Trapped in the war or being robbed, raising Cundī Mudrā, one would be released Cundī Mudrā could also be used to extinguish the conflagration and pacify turbulent seas.
The same	The same	The same
The Separate Rite of Cundī	None	None

Here, I extend this argument and claim that ‘marginality’ not only refers to ‘a marginal locality’ or ‘an ambiguous person’, but could also include ‘a marginal cult’ or ‘an ambiguous text’. In addition, I posit that the ‘Rule of Marginality’ not only applies to the rejuvenation of a line of transmission, as it is of great explanatory power when observing some unique phenomena during the establishment of a new tradition such as the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’: its application allows those (that is, Daoshen and the practitioners of the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’) claiming to be legitimate heirs of this tradition to imagine a genuine continuity—that is, the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’ as a legacy of Esoteric Buddhism (Mijiao 密教) of the great Tang Dynasty—without further historical scrutiny

due to the scarcity of available sources. This inevitably conceals the true history and denies further investigation. I believe that this is what actually happened in the eleventh century when Daoshen conceived of his ‘Zhunti Esotericism’.

Scholarship exploring the reasons for its later prevalence mostly offers two explanations. One is guided by the premise that *Xianmi* depicted the Zhunti dhāraṇī alone as a panacea-like incantation that ‘subsumes all the mantrās from the twenty-five families’ (*zongshe er’shiwubu zhenyan* 總攝二十五部真言), ‘incorporates the merits and rewards of all mantrās’ (*yiqie zhenyan gongde jixi chengjiu* 一切真言功德皆悉成就), and ‘like a cintāmaṇi (Wish-fulfilling gem) is capable of fulfilling all one’s desires’ (*si ruyizhu yiqie suixin* 似如意珠一切隨心).³³ On the other hand, in practice, its popularity should perhaps be attributed to Daoshen’s advancement of the claim of ‘separate practice comprising an autonomous family of deities’ implying that the whole panoply of esotericism—its entire scriptural repertoire, its populous pantheon of powerful deities and their minions, the whole of its impossibly complex and very luxurious liturgical system, and the full measure of its professed efficacy regarding both worldly and otherworldly ends—was somehow condensed into a single practice to which the laity had direct and affordable access without the need for mediation or control by an elaborate, professional ecclesiastical hierarchy.³⁴

While these arguments are convincing and correct, I believe that it is worth understanding how Ming–Qing contemporaries perceived this ‘Zhunti Esotericism’. The following is a quotation from an inscription penned by late Ming local scholar and poet Zou Mei 鄒枚 (n.d.) from Tianmen 天門:

Zhunti occasionally loosens the prohibitions to facilitate her followers, which seems to be forbidden by Buddhism. However, the behaviors that are prohibited by Buddhism would be definitely forbidden by Zhunti. The reason why Zhunti loosens the prohibitions to facilitate her followers is that she promotes the strictest teaching with the most benevolent heart Meanwhile, Zhunti appears as a woman to promote her teaching, and sometimes loosens the prohibitions to facilitate her followers. In other words, Zhunti helps her followers with great benevolent heart but maintains the status of void, and finally enables them to achieve gradual enlightenment When it comes to Zhunti, she is the only one who could maintain the status of purity and void while attracting followers by sex and wine. Guanyin and other buddhas first respond to followers’ any prayers and then enlighten them about the purity of mind, and by following strict prohibitions, followers achieve enlightenment. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to see Zhunti’s void as to discover her tolerance and benevolence.³⁵

Just as Guanyin’s role as a saviour of sinners was imparted to people mainly through attending or practising rituals,³⁶ Zhunti’s image as a benevolent goddess was also, to a large extent, conveyed by engaging in the devotional practices of the Zhunti cult and by practising the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’ in particular. Yet, as this image was also highly contested, Zou Mei must have written this essay with a deliberately partisan or polemical intent. Indeed, his delicate metaphors and rhetoric conceal the real disputes on the iconoclastic teaching of the ‘Zhunti Esotericism’, especially those related to the proclamation that Zhunti would bring equal benefits to both observant and unobservant lay practitioners

³³ Lü Jianfu, *Zhongguo mijiao shi*, p. 554; Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, p. 274.

³⁴ Gimello, ‘Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism’, p. 37.

³⁵ Lin Xiangyuan 林祥瑗, (Tongzhi 同治) *Hanchuan xianzhi* 漢川縣志 (Nanjing, 2013), pp. 204–205.

³⁶ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-Yin*, p. 325.

(for example, those drinking wine, eating meat, having wives and children, and heedless of the distinction between purity and impurity). This view was criticised even by Ouyi Zhixu 藕益智旭 (1599–1655), one of the ‘four eminent monks of the late Ming Dynasty’ (*mingmo sida gaoseng* 明末四大高僧), because he believed that this bold assertion is far-fetched (*fuhui jiaza* 附會夾雜) and not in keeping with orthodox teachings (*fei jin’gang zhengyin* 非金剛正印).³⁷ However, in Zou’s eyes, occasionally loosening the prohibitions to facilitate her followers is exactly the manifestation of Zhunti’s benevolence and purity that prompted her popularity and distinguished her from the countless other deities.

Zhunti in the Ming–Qing period

Previous studies on this topic not only considered the emergence of *Xianmi* as a landmark of the development of the Zhunti cult, but also firmly argued for the continuity of this line of transmission from the Liao to the Ming–Qing periods. However, whether or not Zhunti enjoyed her cult without any interruptions or fluctuations should not be determined only by modern scholars who are like detectives attempting to uncover the truth by piecing together fragmentary clues. Testimonies of Ming–Qing contemporaries are thus highly valuable in this regard, one of which was provided by an eminent ‘Ming loyalist’, Jin Bao 金堡 (1614–1680, *jinshi* 1640), who was a high-ranking scholar-official esteemed in his own day. After finally conceding the hopelessness of his cause, he exchanged his court vestment and badge of office for the robe of a monk, taking ordination in the Caodong 曹洞 lineage of Chan Buddhism and assuming the monastic name of Dangui 澹歸. Later, Dangui became an enthusiastic promoter of the Zhunti cult and even raised funds to help build a tower near the Biechuan Temple (Biechuan si 別傳寺) in the vicinity of the Danxia Mountain (Danxia shan 丹霞山) to house a magnificent sculpted image of Zhunti. In 1668, Dangui wrote an essay to commemorate the completion of this Zhunti Tower (Zhunti ge 準提閣) within which he shared his observations on the situation of the Zhunti cult:

Although it is the recent a little more than one hundred years that witnessed the development of the cult of Zhunti Bodhisattva, nowadays the whole world is celebrating her divine power, which enables her to be nearly as popular as Guanyin.³⁸

Given Dangui’s experience and knowledge, this testimony should be considered highly reliable. Therefore, we can conclude that, at least in the eyes of a learned monk who lived during the late Ming to early Qing periods, the worship of Zhunti was a novelty rather than a heritage that was passed down from the Tang or Liao.

Another valuable account comes from Wu Qizhen 吳其貞 (1607–circa 1677), an illustrious and knowledgeable art dealer/collector/connoisseur who was a member of one of the richest Huizhou salt merchant families and was well connected in the seventeenth-century art-collecting world.³⁹ When he was invited to appreciate a Southern Song painting and happened to find a statue of Zhunti in the painting owner’s attic, he admiringly commented:

³⁷ CBETA (2021), Q3, J36, no. B348, p. 319a2–9.

³⁸ Dangui 澹歸, *Bianxingtang ji* 遍行堂集, in *Chanmen yishu xubian* 禪門逸書續編, (ed.) Mingfu 明復 (Taipei, 1987), vol. 4, p. 267.

³⁹ M. J. Powers and K. R. Tsiang, *A Companion to Chinese Art* (Hoboken, 2015), p. 62.

In the attic, there is a variety of antique gilded statues in the style of Tibetan Buddhism. The only exception is a new Zhunti statue. The secular world didn't have access to the image of Zhunti until it was retrieved from the Buddhist Canon during the Wanli period.⁴⁰

Obviously, even an erudite connoisseur such as Wu Qizhen would seldom have had an opportunity to encounter statues or paintings of Zhunti that predated the late Ming period. This would therefore weaken the argument for the continuity of the transmission of the cult of Zhunti.

Thus, an overestimation of the influence of a single text or a scholarly obsession with the textual transmission is noticeable. If we regard the 'Zhunti Esotericism'—a unique system of knowledge centring on the cult of Zhunti created by Daoshen in *Xianmi*—as the objective knowledge of World 3 proposed by Karl Popper, before it could be instantiated in the physical World 1 environment and could lead to human actions (that is, religious products and devotional practices), this systematic knowledge must be subjected to a deliberate 'thought process' (World 2), which, in our case, includes reading, learning about, and understanding *Xianmi*.⁴¹ However, for such a 'thought process' to occur, circulation and prevalence of the work are necessary. These criteria are certainly not met in the case of *Xianmi*, as, with the exception of a few extant inscriptions of the Zhunti mantrā and Zhunti bronze mirrors that might have been created under the influence of *Xianmi*,⁴² little is known about the way in which it was received in China from its emergence until the Ming Dynasty.⁴³ Therefore, as Gimello noticed, even though, from the late Ming to early Qing dynasties, we have no fewer than six substantial Zhunti practice manuals that are all heavily indebted to Daoshen, drawing a conclusion that there is a direct line that links Daoshen's work and the prevalence of the cult of Zhunti in Ming–Qing China is erroneous.⁴⁴ In other words, while acknowledging *Xianmi*'s great impact, the facts noted above would suggest that the popularisation of the Zhunti cult was likely to have been stimulated by the contemporary elements of the Ming–Qing period.

The story starts with the popularity of the *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit* (Gongguo ge 功過格) which began in the sixteenth century, reaching its zenith in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁵ One man in particular came to be inextricably associated with the new popularity of the texts—Yuan Huang 袁黃 or Yuan Liaofan 袁了凡 (1533–1606), a scholar-official from Jiashan 嘉善 county, Zhejiang. Yuan was well

⁴⁰ Wu Qizhen 吳其貞, *Shuhua ji* 書畫記 (Shanghai, 1962), p. 27.

⁴¹ K. Popper, 'Three worlds', in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, (ed.) S. M. McMurrin (Salt Lake City, 1980), vol. 1, p. 164.

⁴² Liu Liming, *Zhongguo gudai minjian mizong xinyang yanjiu*, pp. 405, 425, 428, 435, 437, 440; Zhang Mingwu, 'Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji dui liaodai mijiao de yingxiang tanxi', pp. 188–199; Zhang Mingwu, *Liaojin jing-chuang yanjiu*, pp. 126–132; Liu Tizhi 劉體智, *Xiao jiaojingge jinshiwenzhi yindeben* 小校經閣金石文字引得本 (Taipei, 1979), vol. 6, pp. 3604–3608; Liu Guowei, 'Yuancang yuanmingshiqisuozaozhuntuizhou fanwen jing', pp. 48–57; Lei Tianyu, 'Qianxi yuanmingqing zhuntijing zhi gongyong', pp. 110–117.

⁴³ But the route of the transnational spread of *Xianmi* is relatively explicit; according to Gimello, very soon after it was finished, it was transmitted to Korea, where the established royal monk and bibliographer Ŭich'ŏn (의천 義天, 1055–1101) incorporated it into his famous supplement to the Buddhist canon. The Korean printing blocks for the text were carved in 1095; sometime shortly thereafter, a copy printed from those blocks was taken to Japan and was acquired by the Japanese monk Myōe (明恵, 1087–1185), who included it in his library at Kōzanji (高山寺). See Gimello, 'Icon and incantation', pp. 253–254. *Xianmi* was also discovered in Khara-Khoto, indicating that this text was once circulated in the Tangut state. See K. J. Solonin, 'Sinitic Buddhism in the Tangut state', *Central Asiatic Journal* 57 (2014), p. 175.

⁴⁴ Gimello, 'Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism', p. 38.

⁴⁵ C. Brokaw, *The Ledgers of Merit and Demerit: Social Change and Moral Order in Late Imperial China* (Princeton, 2014), p. 61.

positioned to speak for the combination of the ledger system and the cult of Zhunti, for he attributed his own considerable success in life to this combined practice. Still, before delving into his contributions, the innovations of Yuan's spiritual teacher and practice guide, Chan Master Yungu 雲谷禪師 (1500–1575), should be mentioned. As Cynthia Brokaw pointed out, Yungu's system of merit accumulation clearly differed from the system as it existed in the twelfth century and before. For example, Yungu significantly altered the basic terms of ledger use, shifting the goals of the system away from the attainment of distant spiritual rewards (such as immortality or a superior reincarnation) to the achievement of this-worldly material rewards, especially official appointments or the birth of sons.⁴⁶ Besides, of particular relevance to the cult of Zhunti was that, in order to minimise the Buddhist and Daoist elements of the earlier system, particularly those requiring belief in a bureaucracy of gods,⁴⁷ he centralised Zhunti, a marginal goddess (here again, my recourse to the 'Rule of Marginality') who did not belong to any of the celestial bureaucracies,⁴⁸ in a special wish-fulfilment ritual involving confession and an appeal to Buddha and Zhunti, which accompanied the proper use of the ledgers. The multitude of bureaucratic gods concerned with overseeing human behaviour and the variety of methods used to record human acts in the earlier system made it hard for a practitioner to believe that he had real control over his fate, so a fresh new conviction emerged that a man was the master of his own fate. This belief was reinforced by the credo of the Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) School that everyone could become a sage.⁴⁹

Although Yungu is said to have established a de facto new line of Zhunti ritual transmission (see Figure 1), he did not leave any material records expounding his teachings. In fact, we owe our knowledge of his merit–demerit system to one of his most influential disciples, Yuan Huang (as well as the eminent monk Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546–1623), as we will see). In his autobiographical essay, 'Determining Your Own Fate' (Liming pian 立命篇), which was later incorporated into a better-known collection entitled *Liaofan's Four Lessons* (Liaofan sixun 了凡四訓),⁵⁰ Yuan vividly narrated the process of becoming Yungu's follower and converting to the ledger system, motivated by the hope of the moral regeneration and material reward offered by Yungu.⁵¹

As one of the major vehicles for disseminating the ledger system in the late Ming period, 'Determining Your Own Fate' not only reflects Yungu's ideas, but also provides some additional innovations. First, it further consolidates the faith in a quantitative retribution mediated by (largely Buddhist) gods and spirits, which champions a belief associated in the minds of the strictest Neo-Confucians with 'heterodox' Buddhist and Daoist doctrines and popular superstitions. According to this system, moral behaviour could be measured and counted off in points and, by accumulating merit points and appealing to Buddha and Zhunti Bodhisattva, one could fulfil wishes commensurate with the number of points one had earned. With the impact of this quantitative merit-accumulation system, a new fashion of the practice of the Zhunti ritual emerged: from the Qing Dynasty to the Republican period (1912–1949), a Zhunti mantrā sheet (*danzhang zhuntizhou* 單張準提咒, see Figure 2) a part of ordinary family life.⁵² Although its formats vary in different editions,

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

⁴⁸ M. Shahar and R. Weller, 'Gods and society in China', in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, (eds.) M. Shahar and R. Weller (Honolulu, 1996), p. 9.

⁴⁹ Chün-fang Yü, *Renewal of Buddhism in China*, p. 119.

⁵⁰ O. Hiroshi 奥崎裕司, *Chūgoku kyōshin jinushi no kenkyū* 中國鄉紳地主の研究 (Tokyo, 1978), pp. 249–254.

⁵¹ Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, p. 81.

⁵² M. Topley, *Cantonese Society in Hong Kong and Singapore: Gender, Religion, Medicine and Money* (Hong Kong, 2011), p. 88.

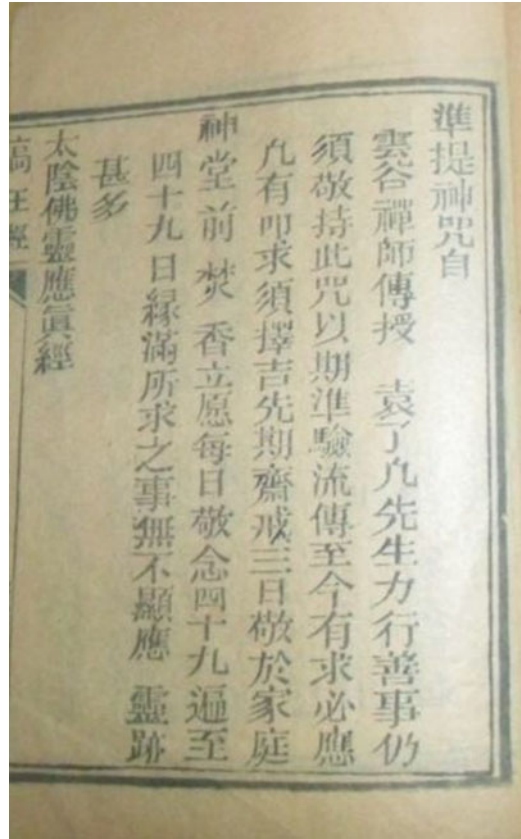


Figure 1. A collection of various Guanyin scriptures alleging that the Zhunti mantrā was imparted by Yungu, Qing Dynasty. Source: Author's collection.



Figure 2. A Zhunti mantrā sheet, twentieth century. Source: Author's collection.

the sheet typically contains a Chinese transliteration of the Zhunti mantrā, an image of Zhunti, a calendar of the Zhunti fasting days (*zhunti zhaiqi* 準提齋期), and 100 or 108 hollow dots (usually forming the shape of a pagoda). When using this sheet, before reciting the Zhunti mantrā, one should first make a wish in front of Zhunti Bodhisattva. On

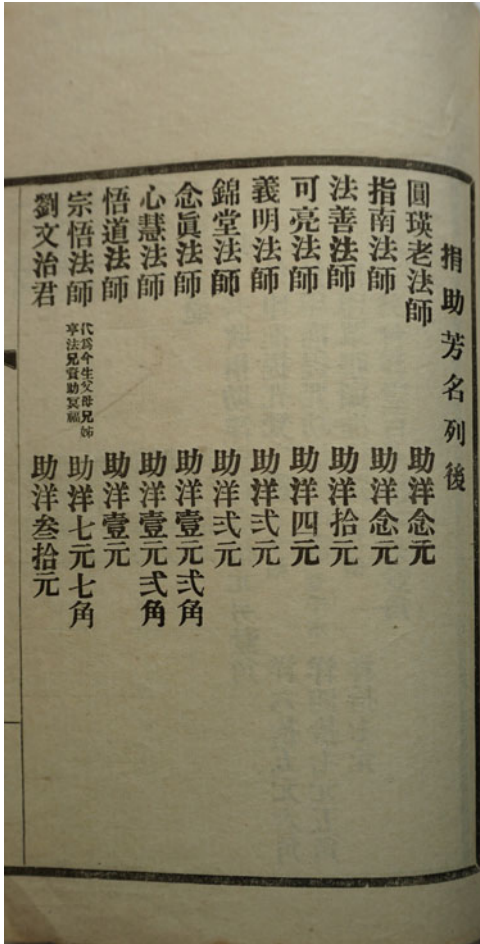


Figure 3. A list of donors, twentieth century. Source: Author's collection.

completing the recitation of the incantation 108 times, the practitioner could fill one hollow dot, so that once all dots are filled, one's wish is granted, and the sheet can be burned or kept as a talisman. As the sheet is sometimes accompanied by a detailed instruction manual (*Zhuntizhou gongde shuomingshu* 準提咒功德說明書), donating towards the publication of the Zhunti mantrā sheet and the instruction manual was a prevalent devotional practice with broad participation. In a copy of the instruction manual collected by the author, the name of Yuanying 圓瑛 (1878–1953), the first president of the Buddhist Association of China, is found on its list of donors (see [Figure 3](#)).

It is also worth noting that, as one of the best storytellers in the late Ming, Yuan Huang's vivid narration of his life-changing miracle in 'Determining Your Own Fate' was very attractive to people, especially literati, who yearned for real control over their fate. As a result, Zhunti rose to prominence as a goddess in charge of examination degrees and fertility, and was even juxtaposed with the God of Learning (Wenchang 文昌), who enjoyed veneration among elites and non-elites long before the emergence of the Zhunti cult.⁵³ When one of Yunqi Zhuhong's 雲棲株宏 (1535–1615) elite male precept-

⁵³ About the cult of Wenchang, see T. Kleeman, *A God's Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang* (Albany, 1994).

disciples, Huang Ruheng 黃汝亨 (1558–1626), was invited to write an inscription for a newly built Wenchang Pavilion (Wenchang ge 文昌閣) on the Yucen Mountain (Yucen shan 玉岑山, in today's Hangzhou), he wrote as follows:

Wenchang (the God of Learning) is from Daoism which has divergent doctrines with those of Buddhism. He is believed to have three types of power: to bestow military authority, to endow prayers with offspring, and to control the imperial examination, enabling the devotee to stand out among all the literati in the world. Nobody is unwilling to have a son, and none of those who do have a son don't expect him to be literate and pass the imperial examination.... Besides, the practitioners of the Zhunti ritual claim that one will be endowed with a son if he prayed for a son and will be endowed with an official position if he prayed for an official position. In this sense, Zhunti has the same functions with those of Wenchang. Because there is no difference between Buddhism and Daoism, donors should not distinguish Zhunti and Wenchang.⁵⁴

Still, compared with a goddess of learning, Yuan seemed to primarily consider Zhunti as a bringer of offspring.⁵⁵ In his *Guide to Praying for an Heir* (Qisi zhenquan 祈嗣真詮), a manual for the production of sons that was published in 1591, while heavily reliant on allusions to the Classics, he provided a section listing the incantations or mantrās, including his own version of the Zhunti ritual.⁵⁶

This set of the Zhunti ritual, albeit an apparent simplified rendition excerpted from *Xianmi*, signifies an early, if not the earliest, attempt to adapt the devotional practices of the Zhunti cult to a household setting in response to so-called 'domesticated religiosity'.⁵⁷ This is likely to have contributed to its popularity as, in late imperial times, the family home literally became the physical arena for performing religious activities, and devotees believed that they could achieve religious sanctification by fulfilling their domestic obligations to the fullest extent.⁵⁸ In contrast to this trend, the previous Zhunti ritual in *Xianmi*, loaded with complex procedures of visualisation and doctrinal commentaries (despite the fact that, compared with the Tang esoteric rituals, they could be called a 'condensed version'), was neither practical nor attractive to ordinary followers. In view of this issue, based on his own understanding, Yuan Huang extracted the most important mantrās and mudrās from *Xianmi* in order to compile this new ritual that was much better suited for everyday practice. His efforts yielded the desired results, as the long-lasting influence of this ritual extended well beyond the realm of religious practice and was even recorded in two novels.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Huang Ruheng 黃汝亨, *Yulin ji* 寓林集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai, 2002), vol. 1369, pp. 560–561.

⁵⁵ This might be partly because male generativity was a major concern for men during the Ming–Qing period. See C. Furth, *The Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 187–223. The role had gained ground whereby, in the Puxian drama 莆仙戲 *Fu Tiandou* 傅天斗, a prequel to the well-known Mulian dramas 目連戲, the goddess Zhunti bestowed a son upon Mulian's mother. See Ye Mingsheng 葉明生, *Puxian xiju wenhua shengtai yanjiu* 莆仙戲劇文化生態研究 (Xiamen, 2007), pp. 362–365.

⁵⁶ Yuan Huang 袁黃, *Qisi zhenquan* 祈嗣真詮 (Beijing, 1985), p. 28.

⁵⁷ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, p. 336.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 336–337.

⁵⁹ They are *The Second Collection of West Lake stories* (Xihu er'ji 西湖二集) by Zhou Qingyuan 周清源 (n.d.) and *Silent Operas* (Wusheng xi 無聲戲) by Li Yu 李漁 (1611–1680). See Gimello, 'Zhunti, Guanyin and the Worldly Benefits of Esoteric Buddhism', pp. 1–11; Lei Tianyu, 'A Study of the Cult of Zhunti in the Ming–Qing Literature' (unpublished MA dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2016), pp. 15–27.

Under such circumstances, the goddess Zhunti was especially venerated in the circle of literati, and the devotional practices of the Zhunti cult—performing the whole Zhunti ritual, reciting the Zhunti mantrā,⁶⁰ keeping the Zhunti fast, and compiling Zhunti texts (ritual manuals and collections of scriptures)—became highly fashionable within this circle. The following Qing poem vividly describes this phenomenon:

Owning delicious vegetables and polished rice enough for my whole life
 Accompanied by amorous ladies to hang out in the alley
 Hearing even Confucian scholars would at times chant Buddhist sūtras
 Keeping the Zhunti fast at my leisure⁶¹

Two characteristics of their activities are observed, one of which is the formation of various locally rooted practice groups comprising participants living in close physical proximity to one other.⁶² Some of them were substantial societies with their members meeting regularly to practise the Zhunti ritual and discuss Buddhist doctrines (for example, the Zhunti Society (*zhunti hui* 準提會) in the late Ming Wuyuan 婺源),⁶³ whereas others were not real organisations *sensu stricto* but still occasionally gathered together devotees to perform the ritual (for example, the Xiang family's 項氏 case).⁶⁴ Besides the collective activities, their sense of community was sustained by the existence of central figures and ritual transmission.⁶⁵ For example, considering his direct link to the pioneering evangelist Yungu,⁶⁶ Hanshan was among the most active Buddhist priests promoting the practice of the Zhunti cult.⁶⁷ By tutoring his followers on the Zhunti ritual (focusing mainly on the pronunciation of the mantrās) and disabusing them of some practical problems, together with his disciples, Hanshan formed a loosely structured group (see Figure 4) in which two core members would be briefly introduced. Liu Yushou 劉玉受 (fl. circa 1607–1627), a Changzhou 長洲 (today's Suzhou) native, learned to accurately pronounce the Zhunti mantrā from Hanshan and then recited it every day. It is said that, before taking the civil service examination, he built an altar from which he chanted the mantrā for seven days, which allowed all his knowledge to gush forth like spring water during the exam and thus enabled him to become a *jìnshì* 進士 in 1607. After retiring, Liu acted as the main advocate for the Zhunti cult in his hometown and established a Zhunti society

⁶⁰ I must note that, in the context of the Ming–Qing Zhunti cult, even simply chanting (*song* 誦, *nian* 念, *chi* 持, *chisong* 持誦, and *niansong* 念誦) the Zhunti mantrā is highly ritualised. Although some scholars took these terms to refer to pure oral invocation, on most occasions, they denote the combined practice of visualisation, oral invocation, and hand gestures.

⁶¹ Yang Youhan 楊有涵, *Yuanxiangting shichao* 遠香亭詩鈔, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing, 2000), 10 Ji, vol. 15, p. 543.

⁶² Without doubt, this was very much to do with the sociocultural milieu of the organisation of society (*Jieshe* 結社) in the late Ming. See Xie Guozhen 謝國楨, *Mingqing zhiji dangshe yundong kao* 明清之際黨社運動考 (Beijing, 1982); W. Atwell, 'From education to politics: the Fu She', in *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, (eds.) W. Theodore de Bary and The Conference on Seventeenth-Century Chinese Thought (New York and London, 1975), pp. 333–367.

⁶³ Yu Shaozhi 余紹祉, *Wanwentang ji* 晚聞堂集, in *Siku weishoushu jikan* 四庫未收書輯刊 (Beijing, 2000), 6 Ji, vol. 28, p. 492.

⁶⁴ CBETA (2021), Q3, X74, no. 1482, pp. 557c23–558a6.

⁶⁵ Congregating around a few leading monks is also a feature of lay Buddhism (*Jushi fojiao* 居士佛教) in the late Ming Dynasty. See Chün-fang Yü, *Renewal of Buddhism in China*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Yuan Huang, *Liaofan sixun* 了凡四訓 (Guangxu shiwunian hubei guanshuchu kanben 光緒十五年湖北官書處刊本), pp. 32–37.

⁶⁷ Tada Kosho was surprised to find that in fact three of the four eminent monks (Hanshan, Zhuhong, and Zibo Zhenke 紫柏真可 (1543–1604)) in the late Ming Dynasty were involved in propagating the Zhunti cult. See Kosho, 'Minmatsu Shinsho no Fukuken no shūkyō jijō: Juntei shinyō o megutte', p. 614.



Figure 4. Hanshan’s Zhunti practice group. Source: *Jushi Zhuan*, *Hanshan Dashi Nianpu*, *Qing Qianmuzhai Xiansheng Qianyi Nianpu*, *Zhijiang Xianzhi*, *Hanshan Laoren Mengyouji*.

with his fellow practitioners.⁶⁸ Another noteworthy member of Hanshan’s group was Yao Ximeng 姚希孟 (1579–1636), one of the ‘Three Mengs of Suzhou’ (Wuzhong sanneng 吳中三孟).⁶⁹ Yao was also a *jinshi*-degree holder and the most enthusiastic promoter of the Zhunti cult in his day who spent his whole life practising the Zhunti ritual, circulating the devotional texts of the Zhunti cult (ritual manuals and scriptures), and building Zhunti statues.⁷⁰ He was also known for standardising the image of Zhunti (see Figure 5).⁷¹

Yet, the existence of a central figure and an actual line of ritual transmission within these groups does not imply that they were structured according to a simple top-down hierarchical model in which people gravitated toward one religious authority, institution,

⁶⁸ CBETA (2021), Q3, X88, no. 1646, p. 274a14–b24.

⁶⁹ The other two are Yao’s uncle, Wen Zhenmeng 文震孟 (1574–1636), and Gu Zongmeng 顧宗孟 (n.d.).

⁷⁰ CBETA (2021), Q3, B34, no. 193, pp. 483a9–486b10. Yao Ximeng 姚希孟, *Xuncang Ji* 徇滄集, in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu* 四庫全書存目叢書 (Ji’nan, 1997), vol. 2, pp. 49–54.

⁷¹ Li Suiqiu 黎遂球, *Lianxuge ji* 蓮鬚閣集, in *Ming bieji congkan* 明別集叢刊 (Hefei, 2013), vol. 76, pp. 598–599; Sun Chengze 孫承澤, *Chunming mengyu lu* 春明夢餘錄 (Beijing, 2018), p. 1273.



Figure 5. Yao's standardised image of Zhunti. Ming. Source: Image courtesy of the private collection of Danielle Ko.

or parish. As indicated by Tan Zhenmo in his preface to the *Precious Liturgy of the Buddha-Mother Cundi: A Manual for Successful Enactment of Her Fire Ritual* (Fomu zhunti fenxiu xidi yiwen baochan 佛母準提焚修悉地儀文寶懺), in which he narrated his journey of delving into the practice of the Zhunti ritual, Tan sought counsel from at least three mentors—Zhuhong, Hanshan, and Beilin 貝林 (n.d.; better known as Renchao 仁潮), who was the author of the *Establishment of the Dharma-Field with Illustrations* (Fajie anli tu 法界安立圖).⁷² Meanwhile, in these groups, there was no uniform elevation of monks over laymen. From the preface dedicated to the *Cundi [Method] of Purifying [One's] Karma* (Zhunti jingye 準提淨業), a network of mantrā transmission centring on Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588), who was a prominent member of the Taizhou branch of the Wang Yangming tradition of Confucian thought, is visible (see Figure 6). It is also known that Luo was initially a ledger user, but he eventually repudiated ledger keeping and destroyed his own copy because he was uneasy about the ‘heterodox’ Buddhist and Daoist origins of the ledgers.⁷³

Another noteworthy characteristic of the literati's practice stems from their special interest in the accurate pronunciation of the Sanskrit mantrās included in the Zhunti

⁷² CBETA (2021), Q3, X74, no. 1482, pp. 556a22–558a9.

⁷³ Brokaw, *Ledgers of Merit and Demerit*, p. 63.

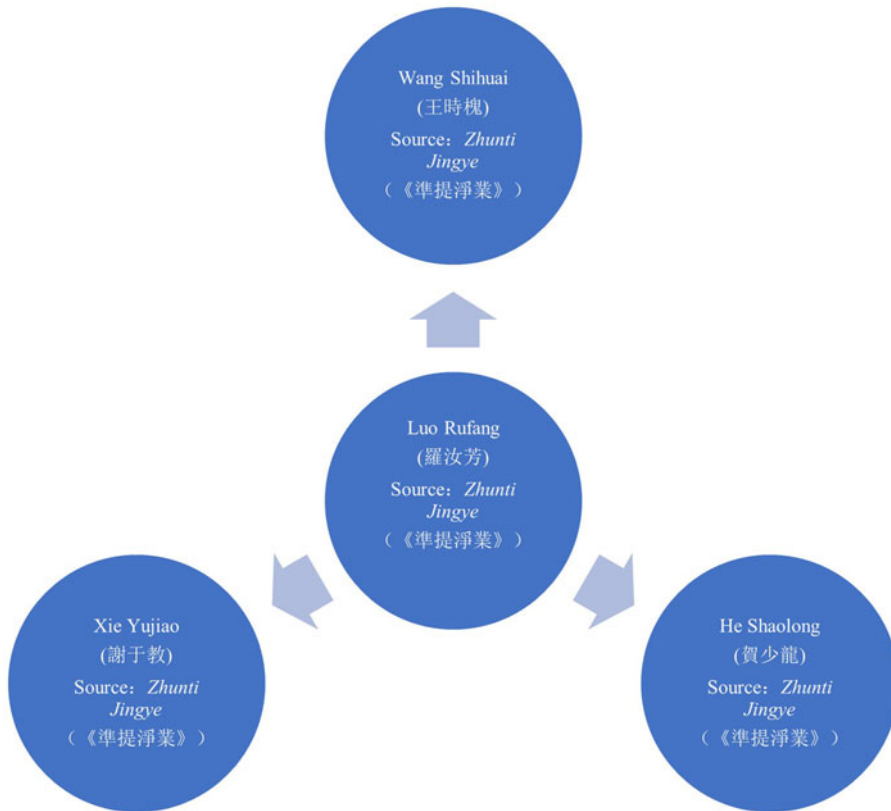


Figure 6. A network centring on Luo Rufang. Source: *Zhunti Jingye*.

ritual. They regarded this as a valuable skill and would turn to eminent monks or established lay Buddhists for tutoring.⁷⁴ Over time, mantrā recitation gradually became a unique art, as did writing poems, publishing books, building shrines, laying out gardens, and patronising painters, giving rise to a unique body of attitudes and pleasures that shaped the cultural world of late Ming gentry.⁷⁵ Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610), a leading literatus of the Gong’an School (Gong’an pai 公安派) and one of the ‘Three Yuans of Gong’an’ (Gong’an sanyuan 公安三袁) and regarded as a relatively temperate member among Taizhou thinkers,⁷⁶ once wrote the following poem to describe his daily pleasures:

Annotating *Zhuangzi* all day to ease my disappointment
 Making the tongue trill when reciting the Zhunti mantrā in the morning
 Owning a boundless forest and immeasurable wings
 I fearlessly fly on the branch like a bird⁷⁷

Here, ‘tongue trill’ refers to pronouncing the three-syllable Sanskrit mantrā for self-protection (Hushen zhenyan 護身真言) *om cchrīm*. Considering the Yuan brothers’ close relationship with Zhuhong, it is possible that Yuan Hongdao learned this skill

⁷⁴ CBETA (2021), Q3, X74, no. 1482, p. 557a5–b4.

⁷⁵ T. Brook, *Praying for Power: Buddhism and the Formation of Gentry Society in Late-Ming China* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁷⁷ Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道, *Yuanzhonglang shiji* 袁中郎詩集 (Shanghai, 1935), p. 170.

from him.⁷⁸ But, as noted by John Kieschnick and Meir Shahar, the extensive body of literature on lay interest in Buddhism provides limited evidence—if any—of Chinese literati learning Sanskrit.⁷⁹ Thus, given that Chinese lay Buddhists were not enthusiastic about Sanskrit learning, what motivated those late Ming literati to devote so much time and effort to pronouncing Sanskrit mantrās accurately? To answer this question, by recourse to what Pierre Bourdieu has termed ‘cultural capital’, I argue that, if joining the practice groups and being subsumed within the network of elite practitioners enabled the members to acquire social capital, the special skill of reciting mantrās (‘high culture’) acquired by undergoing training and practising them would win them cultural capital, allowing them to differentiate themselves from a burgeoning group of ordinary practitioners. Those who engaged in such activities could be conceived of as performers, not in the sense of actors on stage, but rather in reference to the interpersonal and public nature of their practice.

Attitudes towards the elite’s devotional practices generally have three axes: the first two are noticeable from the case of the fanatic Yang Tingshu 楊廷樞 (a.k.a Yang Weidou, 1595–1647). Yang Tingshu and his father Yang Darong 楊大滌 (fl. circa 1573–1620) are both paradoxical figures: despite being only a licentiate (Shengyuan 生員) for his whole life, Yang Darong, on the one hand, was a grand-disciple of Wei Xiao 魏校 (1483–1543)—a steadfast anti-Buddhist scholar-official who was famed for his persecution of Buddhist monasteries and village shamans in the Pearl River Delta.⁸⁰ On the other hand, as mentioned above, together with his two sons, Darong was the core member of Hanshan’s practice group, under whose patronage the previous Taohua Chapel (Taohua an 桃花庵, established by Tang Ying 唐寅 (1470–1523)) in Suzhou was renovated and changed into a shrine devoted to Zhunti (in many instances, the names of Zhunti shrines appear to conclude with the term ‘chapel’ (An 庵); see Figure 9 in the Appendix).⁸¹ In contrast to Darong’s obscurity, his son Yang Tingshu was a star in the late Ming literary circle. He won first place (Jieyuan 解元) in the provincial examination at the age of 35 and soon became a leader of the Revival Society (Fushe 復社), the largest and most reputable of all late Ming societies.⁸² A particularly significant characteristic of this society was that, to a great extent, it inherited the literary pursuits and political appeal of the Donglin 東林 partisans, including their denunciation of Buddhist and Daoist influences that had crept into Confucian philosophy.⁸³ But, in contrast to being anti-Buddhism, like his father, Tingshu harboured a deeply rooted faith in Zhunti’s godship as a deity in charge of the imperial examination and official appointments. According to a letter addressed to Tingshu from his close friend Zhang Zilie 張自烈 (1597–1673), Tingshu never stopped practising the Zhunti ritual even when feeling confused and disappointed because his fellow practitioner Xu Jiuyi (also a member of Hanshan’s practice group) passed the examination and was promoted to the position of compiler of the historiography institute

⁷⁸ J. Eichman, *A Late Sixteenth-Century Chinese Buddhist Fellowship: Spiritual Ambitions, Intellectual Debates, and Epistolary Connections* (Leiden, 2016), p. 30.

⁷⁹ J. Kieschnick and M. Shahar, ‘Introduction’, in *India in the Chinese Imagination: Myth, Religion, and Thought*, (eds.) J. Kieschnick and M. Shahar (Philadelphia, 2013), p. 4.

⁸⁰ D. Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford, 2007), pp. 103–107.

⁸¹ Yin Jishan 尹繼善 and Huang Zhijun 黃之雋 (eds), *Jiangnan tongzhi 江南通志* (Harvard-Yenching Library), vol. 44, p. 47. A native Suzhou scholar speculated that Darong’s conversion to Zhunti might have been related to his illness. See Hu Bocheng 胡伯誠, *Taohuawu renwu chunqiu 桃花塢人物春秋* (Ji’nan, 2012), pp. 107–108.

⁸² About the Revival Society, see Atwell, ‘From Education to Politics’, pp. 333–367; Xie Guozhen, *Mingqing zhiji dangshe yundong kao*, pp. 119–152.

⁸³ However, recently, Jennifer Eichman has cast doubt on earlier scholarly depictions of the Donglin as anti-Buddhist, suggesting a distinction between being critical and being anti-Buddhist. See J. Eichman, ‘Buddhist historiography: a tale of deception in a seminal Late Ming Buddhist letter’, *Journal of Chinese Religions* 46 (2018), pp. 123–165.

(Shiguan 史館) while he remained in situ. At the time, Zhang Zilie, as a representative of the critics, expressed his concern over Tingshu's obsession with Zhunti and warned him that it departed from the accepted repertoire of Confucian 'orthodox learning' (*zhengxue* 正學). Zhang also believed that Tingshu had just temporarily 'lost' himself due to his daughter's death, and issued a further reminder that there is no difference between the belief in Zhunti and the enthusiasm for superstition.⁸⁴

Compared with the Yang family, Zhuhong was a much more astute promotor of the Zhunti cult. In an essay entitled 'What Ignorant Confucians Should Do' (Rumei dangwu 儒味當務), he elaborated on the theory of motivation as follows:

The Exalted Sage is the hierarch of Confucianism, and who should be worshiped by Confucian scholars day and night. They abandoned him and instead worshiped Wenchang with full devotion. There is nothing wrong with worshipping Wenchang. The problem lies in their pursuit of wealth and fame. The *Six Classics*, the *Analects*, and the *Mencius* are what Confucian scholars should delve into day and night. They abandoned these classics and instead chanted the Zhunti mantrā with full devotion. There is nothing wrong with chanting the Zhunti mantrā. The problem lies in their pursuit of wealth and fame. It is the great sages' counsel that wealth and fame are preordained. If they are completely preordained, is there anything to do with the worship of Zhunti and Wenchang?⁸⁵

Zhuhong's words are layered with meaning. They first vividly describe the situation in which literati juxtaposed Zhunti and Wenchang and firmly believed in their great efficacy in assisting them in the imperial examination and official appointment. He further expressed not only critiques of Confucian scholars' abandonment of devotion to Confucius and Confucian Classics, but also the rationalisation of these cults because, in his opinion, the fault did not lie with the cults themselves, but rather with their adherents' pursuit of fame and wealth.

Still, between pro- and anti-Zhunti, there was also a centrist position on the issue. According to this accommodationist view, as long as one's principal loyalty was to Confucianism, interest in the cult of Zhunti did not distinguish bad Confucians from good nor undermine one's public vocation as a loyal follower of Confucius and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200). One who set forth such a view was Wang Hongzhan 王弘撰 (1622–1702), an influential figure in the regional intellectual circle of Guanzhong 關中 who came from a leading gentry lineage in Huayin 華陰 county.⁸⁶ He once responded to the gossip about his role model Tang Bin's 湯斌 (1627–1687) involvement in the practice of the Zhunti cult as follows:

Someone said that he (Tang Bin) kept the Zhunti fast, which is by no means true. When I first met him, he talked about study and warned me not to learn Buddhism or Daoism. Wouldn't he be engaged in them while warning me not to... Although it is indeed impossible to conjecture those sages' intentions, some of their deeds could not avoid suspicion. I regret not being able to inquire about this in front of him.⁸⁷

Tang Bin, praised by Emperor Kangxi 康熙 (1654–1722) as an 'illustrious Neo-Confucian official' (*lixue mingchen* 理學名臣),⁸⁸ was best known for launching an intensive campaign

⁸⁴ Zhang Zilie, *Qishan shiwen ji* 芑山詩文集 (Hangzhou, 1985), vol. 7, p. 92.

⁸⁵ CBETA (2021), Q3, J33, no. B277, p. 84a14–20.

⁸⁶ Brook, *Praying for Power*, p. 85.

⁸⁷ Wang Hongzhan, *Dizhai Ji* 砥齋集, in *Xuxiu siku quanshu* 續修四庫全書 (Shanghai, 2002), vol. 1404, p. 527.

⁸⁸ Huang Tao 黃濤, 'shilun qianlong zhi daoguang nianjian tangbin de xingxiang jiangou' 试论乾隆至道光年间汤斌的形象建构, *Guoxue xuekan* 國學學刊 (2018), pp. 134–143.

against the worship of Wutong 五通.⁸⁹ In Wang's eyes, he must have been an exemplar of the Confucian moralist and an implacable antagonist towards 'unorthodox' beliefs. Therefore, it must have been beyond his wildest imagination that Tang was also engaged in the practice of the Zhunti cult. However, just as Timothy Brook noticed, although conventionally disapproving of many aspects of Buddhism, Wang's attitude to Buddhism was not one of steadfast opposition. When he adopted a critical stance towards Buddhism, it was not so much a criticism of Buddhism as a philosophy—an objection to the gentry who were obsessed with Buddhist writings and claimed to be religious Buddhists while in fact living secular lives.⁹⁰ This predetermined his dilemma in compartmentalising between deeds and thoughts: for a Confucian loyalist such as Tang, keeping a Zhunti fast, of course, should be regarded as moral corruption, but, as a centrist of dualism, Wang dared not cast doubt on Tang's loyalty simply because he was alleged to have upheld the Zhunti fast. Thus, he could do nothing but lament the sages' unfathomable intentions.

Having said that, this is by no means intended to stress the distinction between the literati's or elites' practice and that of commoners. In my view, elements of unity and separation always coexisted between these opposing ends of the same sociocultural spectrum, and the Zhunti cult was capable of exerting its influence beyond the enormous differences in social position, levels of education, and personal wealth.⁹¹ For instance, when praying to Zhunti for heirs, elites from wealthy families could donate large amounts of money to Zhunti shrines,⁹² but those who could not afford to make financial contributions would instead recite the Zhunti mantrā and hold the Zhunti fast, just as commoners did.⁹³ Moreover, as there were few skilful practitioners who could perform the whole Zhunti ritual and chant the mantrās accurately, elites who did not have the opportunity to be trained or time to practise sufficiently would adopt practices similar to those of ordinary people.⁹⁴

Concluding remarks

The cult of Zhunti in China is a unique religious and cultural phenomenon. It is not predetermined, but path-dependent. The background of the goddess Zhunti was obscure when it was first brought into China: no stories were told about her, no accounts were given of her pre-history in India, and no specific geographical or cosmographical domains were assigned to her; she was placed in no particular 'family' or array of buddhas and bodhisattvas, was accorded no particular doctrinal significance, and was not associated with any particular system of Buddhist thought. Therefore, far from being a foreign transplant, the goddess Zhunti, along with the texts, rituals, and images related to her, was 'made in China'.

The process could be divided into two discontinuous phases: it began with the invention of the so-called 'Zhunti Esotericism' in Liao times—that is, the tradition of 'separate practice comprising an autonomous family of deities'⁹⁵ that laid solid theoretical and practical foundations for the subsequent development of the Zhunti cult. After fading

⁸⁹ R. Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: the Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley, 2004), pp. 236–256; Jiang Zhushan 蔣竹山, 'Cong daji yiduan dao suzao zhengtong—Qingdai guojia yu jiangnan cishen xinyang' 從打擊異端到塑造正統—清代國家與江南祠神信仰 (unpublished MA dissertation, National Taiwan Normal University, 1995).

⁹⁰ Brook, *Praying for Power*, p. 86.

⁹¹ C. Bell, 'Religion and Chinese culture: toward an assessment of "popular religion"', *History of Religions* 29 (1989), pp. 46–50; B. McDougall, 'Writers and performers, their works, and their audiences in the first three decades', in *Popular Chinese Literature and Performing Arts in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979*, (ed.) B. McDougall (Berkeley, 1984), p. 279.

⁹² Lao Qing 勞清, (Kangxi 康熙) *Xingning xianzhi 興寧縣志* (Xingning, 2018), p. 86.

⁹³ Gan Xi 甘熙, *Baixia suoyan 白下瑣言* (Nanjing, 2007), p. 6.

⁹⁴ Li Pingjun 李平君, *Shushi 術士* (Beijing, 2009), p. 206; Niu Xiu 鈕琇, *Gusheng 觚賸* (Shanghai, 1986), p. 40.

⁹⁵ See footnote 17.

from public attention for hundreds of years, the cult's turning point was stimulated by the evangelists of the merit–demerit system in the Ming Dynasty. Yuan Huang's innovations as well as the Ming–Qing literati's preference further elevated Zhunti to become one of the most popular deities at that time. As for the relationship between the two phases, they are indeed loosely connected but not situated in the chain of cause and effect. To be precise, while we recognise the profound impact of *Xianmi*, it was not a trigger or a decisive cause for the popularisation of the Zhunti cult in Ming–Qing times.

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Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.

Appendix

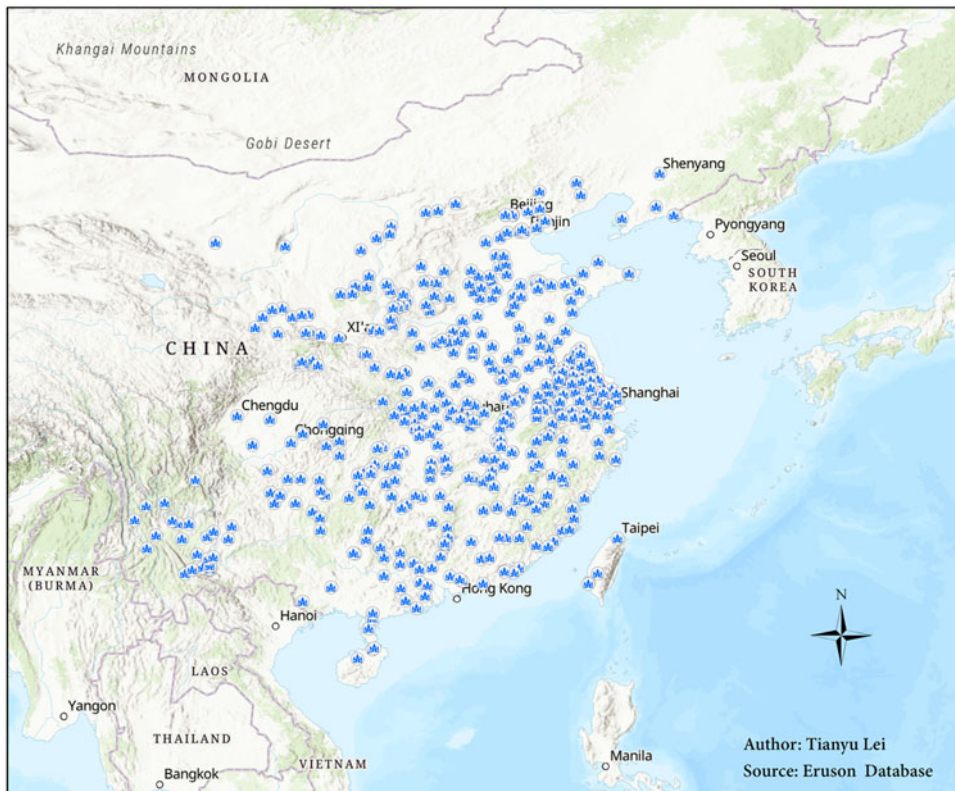


Figure 7. Distribution of Zhunti shrines in China during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Source: Eruson database.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ This spatial analysis provides an approximated representation of an actual situation within a range of probability and a set of assumptions. Improvement of data and analysis can enhance such an approximation but not replicate historical reality.

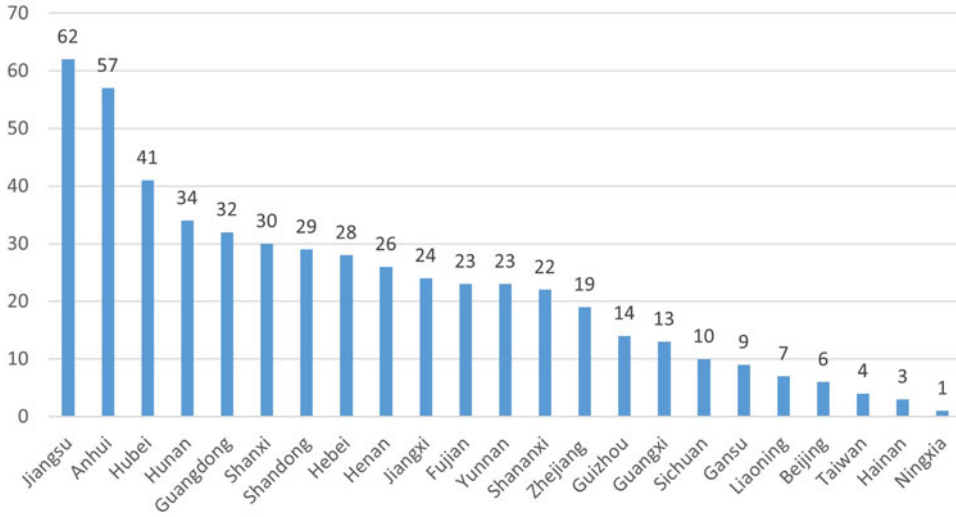


Figure 8. The number of Zhunti shrines in each province.⁹⁷

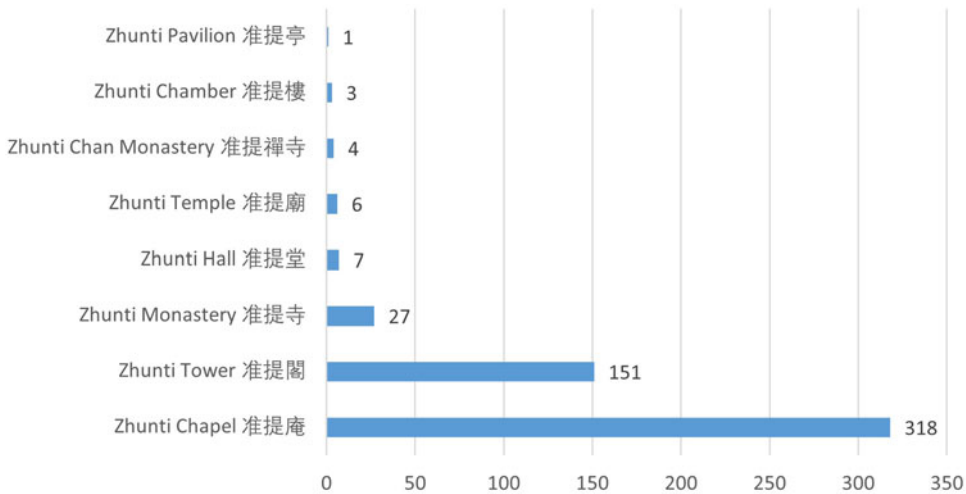


Figure 9. The number of Zhunti shrines of each title.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Yan Yaozhong 嚴耀中, Xinhao 心皓, and Tada Kosho once pointed out the geographically uneven distribution of the Zhunti shrines in the Ming–Qing period, with Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong being the most flourishing areas. See Yan Yaozhong, *Hanchuan mijiao 漢傳密教* (Shanghai, 1999), pp. 58–59; Xinhao, *Tiantai jiaozhi shi 天台教製史* (Xiamen, 2007), p. 468; Kosho, *Tendai Bukkyō to Higashi Ajia no Bukkyō girei*, p. 309.

⁹⁸ The overwhelming number of Zhunti chapels built during Ming–Qing times suggests that they were built for the religious use of private families and hence of dubious legality, echoing the foregoing milieu of ‘domesticated religiosity’. In addition, the chapels tended to be located outside the main nodes of a county’s religious topography, indicating the awkward actuality that, while prevailing, the Zhunti cult had not received official authorisation and thus did not have a right to expect the magistrate’s protection. See Brook, *Praying for Power*, p. 4.

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