

**buddha in a box:  
the materiality  
of recitation in  
contemporary  
chinese buddhism  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Buddha-recitation devices (*nianfo ji* 念佛機) use modern technology to reproduce the name of the Buddha endlessly, offering this function in the form of portable plastic boxes akin to small radios or iPods. These devices raise key questions for our understanding of contemporary Buddhism: Why is a specialized device necessary? How is the device shaped by earlier traditions of recitation and sound? The Buddha-recitation device uses packaging and ornamentation to establish its status as a religious object, thereby sanctifying the ordinary function of producing sound. Although this mechanized recitation appears to replace that of human voice, analysis of miracle tales, personal testimonials, and doctrinal discussions shows that these devices more closely emulate the sacred sounds spontaneously produced in the environment of the western paradise where Buddhists aspire to be reborn.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Taiwan, China, recording, recitation, Pure Land, nianfo, device, sound

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**FIG 1**  
 Example of a Buddha-recitation device with molded Buddha ornamentation. (Photograph by author.)

Modern technology has allowed for innovation in religious paraphernalia that ranges from updating traditional items with modern materials, as in the case of glow-in-the-dark rosaries, to creating entirely new objects. Such new objects exist in dialogue with practices and doctrine, responding to contemporary needs but also prompting reflection on their appropriate use. The Buddha-recitation device (*nianfo ji* 念佛機) offers a case study of this process, as well as an opportunity to continue the role of sound in contemporary Buddhism. As Isaac Weiner has written, sound has only recently begun to attract attention among scholars of religion, as it has been seen as immaterial and difficult to represent in “visually dominated formats” (Weiner 2011: 114). These devices are simple plastic boxes that range in size from that of an iPod to a transistor radio. There is usually a simple button to control the choice of chant, and a volume dial. There may also be a place to plug in an A/C adapter or headphones. Ornamentation can be a simple printed image of the Buddha, molded plastic of lotus flowers or other religious images, or even screens with lighted and moving images of the Buddha (Figure 1). Buddha-recitation devices are easy to come by: throughout China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, they are given away by Buddhist organizations, and sold at many temple gift shops and religious bookstores. These devices typically include the invocation of Amitābha, and may include other invocations, dharanis, and so forth.

Buddha-recitation devices are contemporary objects, appearing roughly three decades ago, but not entirely modern. While they make use of digital sound files to provide users with different chants and invocations, these files are encased in something that disguises the digital aspect and mutes their manipulability. Although with ephemera of this type it is difficult to assess historical development, the devices seem to have grown in complexity over time, adding multiple audio tracks and the means to play them in different ways. Generally speaking, the different chants are accessed through pressing a single button, which rotates through them in sequence, and the user can alter the volume of the chanting as well. The form of the Buddha-recitation device provides less access to the sound files than a CD or sound files on a computer would. Thus these devices seem to use digital media in pre-digital ways. Further, the packaging of the devices often serves to downplay or conceal the digital, new, or modern aspects of the devices, especially apparent in those that are molded in such a way to suggest traditional styles of wood carving. The use of Buddha-recitation devices raises interesting questions about the role of

modern technology and how it relates to earlier efforts to engage the senses in religious practice.

Mechanically reproduced recitation is separated from ritual contexts and from the personal acts of the practitioner, and as a consequence could become nothing more than ambient sound. Yet the very existence of these devices—specially designed simply to play recorded chanting—points to the concern with retaining sacredness and spiritual efficacy. By distinguishing these devices from other sound-producing objects, they attempt to retain what makes recitation different from other sound and vocalization. In this way, they are akin to rosaries, which also sanctify what could be a mundane act by instantiating it in a particular material form.<sup>1</sup> Further, the framing of these devices (through packaging, instructions for use, and testimonials) is eager to assert genuine religious value, albeit different from that deriving from an individual practitioner's own vocalization. Indeed, Buddha-recitation devices are not cast as a substitute for individual recitation but as a means to create an environment that is spiritually efficacious. To understand how Buddha-recitation devices function, this article will consider how they relate to premodern technologies such as prayer wheels and rosaries. Buddha-recitation devices are also part of a long discourse on sound and its power: There are sounds that are distinctly Buddhist, as in the sounds that emanate throughout Amitābha's Western Land of Bliss, and Buddhists themselves produce sounds, in the form of chants, songs, and recitations that must be done in the proper way so as to be effective. By situating Buddha-recitation devices in the context of the Buddhist discourse on sound, we will be better able to understand how the machines are packaged and used. Testimonials from devout lay Buddhists as well doctrinal statements on the devices' use will show that these devices are best understood as equivalent to the sounds of the Pure Land—aiding the pious, but not replacing their own recitations.

### **Premodern Technologies**

Earlier technologies associated with recitation, namely prayer wheels and rosaries, provide context for Buddha-recitation devices. There are two kinds of traditional Tibetan prayer wheels, a large type that is rotated by those passing by, and a hand wheel, and although they seem to automate prayers as the Buddha-recitation device does, they differ from these modern objects in significant ways. First, practices using the prayer wheel are described as engaging body, speech, and mind simultaneously: one physically turns the wheel, recites

the mantra, and engages in contemplation (Ladner 2001: 6). A late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century text describes the connection between mental visualization and its instantiation in the prayer wheel: “Hence, if the contemplative visualization of an inward wheel of mantras lies at the origin of outward inscribed Wheels, then there can be no doubt that the teaching on turning a string of mantras [in visualizations] lie at the origin of the turning of external Wheels” (Martin 1987: 17). Further, the prayer wheel is also described as either emanating light that has salvific effects, or operating to attract and remove purities. Thus the functioning of the physical object is mirrored in non-visible, spiritual effects.

Prayer wheels are used within a specific practice that links it to mental contemplation; the prayer wheel is not an adjunct technology but is central to the practice. This leads to the second way in which the prayer wheel differs from the Buddha-recitation device: prayer wheels are explained as having a Buddhist origin. An early nineteenth-century text explains that the wheel was given to the Buddhist scholar Nāgārjuna by the nāga-king bodhisattva, who explained it as unifying body, speech, and mind (Martin 1987: 18). According to this text, the nāgas were not the first to have prayer wheels, having received the tradition from the past Buddha Dīpaṃkara, who also was not of the originator of the prayer wheel (Ladner 2001: 23). Again, this is depicted not as an adjunct, human technology developed to aid contemplation or recitation, but an inheritance passed from Buddha to bodhisattva for eons. Because of this, the prayer wheel would seem to be resistant to tinkering or modernization, and its legitimacy safeguarded.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the case, as we shall explore in more detail, with the Buddha-recitation device. The device’s relationship with traditional recitation is problematic, and there is no way to see the device as anything but a modern, human, invention—and one that is mass-produced, no less. Although on the surface prayer wheels and Buddha-recitation devices would seem to share the automated repetition of a phrase, I believe that the devices have more in common with the rosary. Rosaries were also connected with recitation, supporting the practice with simple technology in the form of prayer beads and charts to mark the number of recitations. One of the earliest accounts of counting recitations concerns Daochuo 道綽 (562–645), who devised various methods to track recitation. Although he initially used a method that moved seeds from one basket to another, he later began to string the counters: “One year he himself worked at stringing the seeds of the mulan tree to serve as a counting method.

He gave these to the four assemblies and instructed them to chant” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 50, no. 2060, p. 594a15). Rosaries subsequently developed into the most common way to track recitation, as well as an accessory for clergy and lay alike. Rosaries could also be gifts and tokens of friendship, and worn as well (Kieschnick 2003: 124–38). Perhaps akin to the Christian tradition, the display of rosaries may have also served to remind others of the practice and the need for it (Winston-Allen 1997: 116). That is, the rosary has both display and practical functions, and more importantly it transforms a mundane task into one with special status. It is possible to mark recitation in any number of ways and use different objects to focus concentration. The rosary serves to distinguish the religious task of reciting the name of the Buddha from other tasks requiring counting or focus. As a physical instantiation of recitation, the rosary elevates the activity beyond its more mundane aspects. Hence when it is used as an accessory or gift, it signals the practice itself. It is a religiously delimited use of a common technology.

### The Sound of the Pure Land

Although not all Buddha-recitation devices are identified explicitly or exclusively as part of the Pure Land tradition, and although other chants are employed as well, the recitation of Amitābha’s name serves as the core inspiration and background to these devices. This reflects Chinese Buddhist tradition: while the names of other buddhas and bodhisattvas were chanted frequently, the recitation of Amitābha’s name had special status based on scriptural assurances that such recitation would facilitate rebirth in the paradise of Amitābha’s Western Land of Bliss. Further, although recitation of Amitābha’s name is for practitioners perhaps the most important sound, music and other sounds also feature prominently in descriptions of the Pure Land. In these descriptions, the sound produced therein is part of what makes Amitābha’s land especially conducive to practice. The *Contemplation Sūtra* (*Foshuo guan wuliangshou Fo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經) describes both recitation and other types of sound. In the instructions for practice for different levels of disciples at the end of the text, there are instructions for the lowest level of the lowest grade: “The good teacher then advises him, ‘If you cannot concentrate on the Buddha, then you should say instead, “Homage to Amitāyus Buddha.”’ In this way, he sincerely and continuously says, ‘Homage to Amitāyus Buddha’ [Na-mo-o-mi-t’o-fo] ten times. Because he calls the Buddha’s name, with each repetition, the evil karma which he has committed during eighty *koṭis*

of kalpas of samsara is extinguished” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 12, 346a17–20; Inagaki 1995: 116). This passage clearly indicates the repeated vocalization of the Buddha’s name that forms the core of the Pure Land practice.

Earlier in this scripture, the Pure Land is described as having “five hundred *koṭis* of jewelled pavilions in which innumerable devas play heavenly music. There are also musical instruments suspended in the sky, which, like those on the heavenly jewelled banners, spontaneously produce tones even without a player. Each tone proclaims the virtue of the mindfulness of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 12, 342c7–10; Inagaki 1995: 101). Later, the scripture describes the end result of the perfectly realized vision of the Pure Land as allowing the practitioner to maintain a fully immersive perception of the Pure Land even outside of meditation, including “perceiv[ing] the streams, rays of light, jewelled trees, ducks, geese, male and female mandarin ducks, and so forth, all expounding the wonderful Dharma. Whether in meditation or not, you will always hear the wonderful Dharma” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 12, 343b3; Inagaki 1995: 104). The *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* (*Foshuo wuliang jing* 佛說無量壽經) also contains descriptions that make clear the role of sound in the Pure Land. For example, the trees produce music: “When a gentle breeze wafts through its branches and leaves, innumerable exquisite Dharma-sounds arise, which spread far and wide, pervading all the other Buddha-lands in the ten directions. Those who hear the sounds attain penetrating insight into dharmas and dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression.” People, too, produce music: “A king of this world possesses a hundred thousand kinds of music” which are superior to lower kinds of music. Moreover, “in that land, there are thousands of varieties of spontaneous music, which are all, without exception, sounds of the Dharma. They are clear and serene, full of depth and resonance, delicate, and harmonious” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 12, 271a8–9, a18, a22–3; Inagaki, 1995: 47–8). There are thus two kinds of sound attested in the Pure Land scriptures: first, chants or non-instrumental recitation produced by the practitioner, and second, music that arises spontaneously in the Pure Land for the benefit and edification of its hearers.

These two forms of sound have an interlocking relationship in a vision received by a Tang dynasty monk. Fazhān (法旛, ca. 820) was famed for developing a “five-tempo Buddha-recitation” (*wuhui nianfo* 五會念佛), but the source of this technique the monk credited to the Buddha

Amitābha, who revealed it in a vision. Explaining the merits of this technique, the Buddha told him:

Whenever you use this technique of intoning the Buddha's name or chanting scripture according to the five tempos, the infinite melodies and song produced by the streams, birds, groves of trees, and myriad bodhisattvas in this land of mine will suffuse throughout space. Simultaneously it will harmonize with the sound of one's recitation of the Buddha's name, ensuring that you are protected from all disturbance—human as well as nonhuman—and personally effecting the conversion of each and every being that is present (Stevenson 1996: 222; Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 85, 1254a7–10).

Here recitation brings forth the sound of the Pure Land, creating an environment that is both protective and efficacious. The passage goes on to say that “those who see or hear, none will not produce the thought [of enlightenment], joyfully accept this teaching, and thereupon invoke the Buddha” (Takakusu and Watanabe 1924–32: 85, 1254a11). While it is likely that what is meant is that others see and hear the person reciting, it is left ambiguous in the original and could possibly refer to the sounds of the Pure Land. In either case, the hearing of sound inspires others to practice; recitation is effective both through active participation and passive reception.

Although both these dimensions of sound figure in scriptures and later Pure Land writings, active recitation took prominence in practice.<sup>3</sup> On first glance, the Buddha-recitation device would seem to automate this practice of recitation. More careful analysis, however, suggests that it may better understood as replicating the self-sounding environment of the Pure Land. Packaged so that the sound files can do nothing but perform this task, a mundane plastic box is given something of the sheen of the jeweled trees of the Pure Land.

### **Packaging the Buddha-Recitation Device**

Framing the Buddha-recitation device as special is accomplished in part through the boxes and leaflets that accompany it. The packaging of these devices serves both to laud the benefits of the recitation of the name of Amitābha or other buddhas, and also to highlight the special qualities of the device itself. The benefits associated with recitation include rebirth in the Pure Land, enlightenment, the compassionate response of Guanyin, protection from supernatural beings, and this-worldly benefits such as longevity and a peaceful life, extending the use of the device beyond the Pure Land aim of rebirth in the western paradise. Further the device



FIG 2

Packaging highlighting the choice of invocations. (Photograph by author.)



must offer something beyond recitation alone, and the packaging makes note of these advantages. The choice of chant, tune, tempo, and volume is touted on several packages, although these options do not do much to distinguish one device from another, or even from other types of recordings (Figure 2). More interesting is the claim on devices produced in mainland China that the sounds contained are proper Taiwanese sounds, termed “orthodox edition” (*zhengban* 正版), which seems to reflect a belief that some sounds are more authentic or legitimate than others (Figure 3). *Zhengban* may also be opposed to *daoban* 盜版 meaning “pirated.”<sup>3</sup> Whether indicating “not pirated” or “orthodox edition,” the intent is to indicate the authenticity of the object. One package states that a dharma teacher has already “opened the eye” (*kaiguang* 開光) of this series of devices, thereby guaranteeing its auspiciousness (Figure 4). Although this term often refers to the animation of a statue, here it means that the device has been imbued with spiritual potency. Another box features calligraphy and a seal that appear to be from the hand of a prominent dharma-master (Figure 5). Highlighting the type of music and asserting a connection

FIG 3

Packaging indicating that the device is an “orthodox edition.” (Photograph by author.)



FIG 4a-b

Package touting that a dharma-master has "opened the eye" (kaiguang 開光) of the device. (Photograph by author.)

(a)



(b)



FIG 5

A box featuring a seal and calligraphy. (Photograph by author.)



with a dharma-master are both ways of asserting authenticity, and a real connection with religion. This concern may arise from the commercial nature of these products: to sell they have to be genuine, even though their sounds in some sense cannot truly be authentic.

Of the Buddha-recitation devices I have collected in Shanghai and Hangzhou, those produced by the Qinyuan company had the largest variety of offerings (Figures 6 and 7). As a company they emphasize the variety of devices produced, and their reliability: the comment section of their website includes feedback from a retailer who notes that their product is the best quality and least often returned among Buddha-recitation devices.<sup>5</sup> Although many or even most Buddha-recitation devices are sold in temple gift shops or religious book stores, the packaging reflects what appears to be a widely held view that these devices are not merely consumer products. The instructions for use often include a line indicating the device should be passed on rather than thrown away. For example, “If you yourself do not [wish to] use it, please to not cast it away, but give it to someone else: the merit will

FIG 6

Packaging from the Qin Yuan company. (Photograph by author.)



FIG 7

A box from the Qin Yuan company. (Photograph by author.)





(a)



(b)

FIG 8a-b

Packaging for the recitation device distributed by [redacted] charity. (Photograph by author.)

be immeasurable” (Figure 4). Buddha-recitation devices are also given away as an act of charity. One freely distributed device, made in Hong Kong but acquired at the Greater Boston Buddhist Cultural Center in Cambridge, MA, links the “universal benefit” of the gift of the device to the boons to be gained from the hearing the recitation of the Buddha’s name. A series of bullet points on the back describe the this-worldly and post-mortem benefits of hearing, receiving, and upholding the Buddha’s name. As a variation of the theme of the quality of the product, the second bullet point notes that the names are “clear and distinct,” and will purify wherever they reach. Next, the user is advised to change the batteries so that “the Buddha’s sound will be able to continue without end,” something that can also be achieved by using an electrical converter. Finally, the user is advised to pass the device along when they are finished with it, and, because it was “gift to universally benefit all realms” the owner is asked “not to resell it for private ends” (Figure 8). In keeping with the desire to prevent the device from being discarded and the charitable aims of its distribution, the pamphlet inside the box offers free repairs for five years for malfunctions not caused by humans, if the device is sent to the repair center.

Based on its packaging, the need to distinguish the Buddha-recitation device manifests itself in a concern for the sacred content of the device and in the special nature of its technology. The former is indicated through assertions of “orthodox” music, eye-opening, and other expressions of authenticity and efficacy. The latter is conveyed through repeated injunctions not to discard of the device and thereby treat it as another disposable consumer product. At work here is a desire to separate the Buddha-recitation device from radios and electronic novelties, machines that have no claim to sacred status.<sup>6</sup> Although commercial competitiveness may stimulate part

of the interest in religious authenticity, the importance of the non-disposability of the device is emphasized in both commercial and charitable versions. In short, I believe the Buddha-recitation devices represent a religious iteration of common technology similar to the rosary. Both resemble objects with quotidian functions, but like the rosary, the Buddha-recitation device is distinguished from such everyday objects. This is accomplished through ornament and supplemented by packaging that frames the device's use and treatment.

This use is detailed in the pamphlet included with the charitably distributed recitation device. First, the device may be used in "ordinary times," when it helps in recitation in ritual spaces (*daochang* 道場), temples, and households. It is also suggested that the device be used "during services" (*zuoke* 作課), indicating morning and evening devotions, and here serving as a "dharma companion" (*falü* 法侶). According to the pamphlet, the third context for its use is "rebirth" (*wangsheng* 往生), when it supplies "assisted recitation" (*zhunian* 助念) in hospitals, mortuaries, and crematoriums. In these situations, the device supports practice, but also may replace human recitation intended to help those at the end of life.

### Testimonials

As to how the Buddha-recitation device functions during every day life, a testimonial by a lay Buddhist appears on the website "Learning from the Buddha Net" (Xue Fo wang 学佛网), and elsewhere online.<sup>7</sup> Although this testimonial has circulated online, it is in the tradition of Buddhist miracle tales or accounts of efficacy. Such tales were passed among believers almost from the time of Buddhism's introduction to China, attesting to the efficacy of religious practices and thereby promoting them. As we see here, testimonials and miracle tales continue to be an important part of lay Buddhist culture. This account is unusually detailed about the subjective experience of the practitioner. The author treats the device as an encouragement to practice and regards its sounds as miraculous in and of themselves. This layperson begins by noting that technological development has led to the introduction of a number of products to aid in Buddha-recitation, and that the range of products allows one to select that which best matches one's own preferences for the sound. This layperson then offers a first-hand account:

When I'm at home, I often like to take my Buddha-recitation machine and turn it on, reciting along with it. A few years ago, there was a period of time when I suffered from insomnia. I

would turn on the Buddha-recitation device very softly, and place it next to my ear. My mind would silently follow the Buddha-recitation device in reciting the name of the Buddha, listening and reciting “Amitufo, Amitufo, Amitufo ...” [This was] just like a mother singing her child a lullaby, and it made me relaxed, quieted, and calm. Listening and reciting, unawares I would fall asleep. Waking up in the middle of the night, I would very naturally follow the sounds of the Buddha-recitation device. This made my mind usually attach to Amitābha, and so every thought would be of Amitābha, never losing this Buddha’s name. The Buddha-recitation device also cured my insomnia. Therefore I frequently turned on the Buddha-recitation device, listening, reciting. No matter if I was on the road to work, or in my office, I unconsciously would begin to recite the Buddha’s name, even to the point that when my mind was calm, even without turning on the Buddha-recitation machine the sounds of its recitation would echo in my ears, as if Buddha-recitation device had been implanted in my brain. The marvelousness of the Buddha-recitation device is really inexpressible!

The description of the device as used to cure insomnia points to the way in which the chant functions as a calming device. But we also notice here the overlap between listening and recitation: listening leads to reciting, and repeated, long-term listening also results in the chant becoming one with the practitioner. This layperson describes it as a “device implanted in the brain,” evocatively pointing to the union between the chant and the practitioner. At this point it would seem difficult to separate listening from recitation, especially if the recitation is silent and mental. So in this way, the Buddha-recitation device serves to transform the person.<sup>8</sup>

The layperson goes on to relate an anecdote from the collected works of Yinguang 印光 (1861–1940), a prominent monk at the turn of the previous century. The story concerns a man who was skilled at cooking, and therefore often employed at weeklong retreats for Pure Land recitation. Although he himself was not a participant, he listened to the chanting all day. His son later became ill to the point of death and said to his father, “I want to die, but I cannot go to a good place. Give me your Buddha and I will be able to go to a good place.” Confused, the father denied having any Buddhas because he did not engage in recitation, but when his son asserted that he had multiple Buddhas, the father offered him as many as he wanted. The son then died peacefully. The conclusion Yinguang drew from this story is that the merit from even inattentive listening to the recitation of the Buddha’s name is very great, and that focused listening is even more meritorious (Yinguang 2004: 513–14). Yinguang wrote well before the Buddha-recitation device was technologically

possible, but this contemporary lay Buddhist easily makes the connection between hearing live recitation and that mechanically produced. The anonymous author concludes by exhorting his fellow Buddhists: “I suggest that all co-practitioners give this a try, and frequently turn on the Buddha-recitation machine, so that one’s ears can always be filled with the Buddha’s names, and that in one’s eight consciousnesses one will only have stored the names of the Buddhas, and from this there will be rebirth in an inconceivable realm. And the benefit of this merit will be inconceivable.”<sup>9</sup> As with the device as implant, these final lines suggest a progression from physical hearing to mental absorption. And although the device may prompt one to recite, the merit from hearing recitations of the Buddha’s name is emphasized.

### **At the End of Life and After Death**

Although this testimonial speaks to the effectiveness of the Buddha-recitation device as part of a general Pure Land practice, the device is perhaps most important for the terminally ill and the recently deceased. Modern collections of Pure Land miracle tales attest to this practice. For those who were still conscious, the Buddha-recitation device could guide their own recitation, and provide an aural accompaniment when they were no longer able to give voice themselves. The devices are often used in situations in which religious volunteers called “lotus friends” (*lianyou* 蓮友) were chanting on behalf of those near death as well. The miraculous aspect of these tales focuses centers on the ability of the dying to withstand pain and to go calmly into death. Many accounts focus on the elderly, but other examples include using the Buddha-recitation device at the deathbed of a toddler and for a dying squirrel. Although these tales are not concerned with the doctrinal implications of the device’s use—attesting, instead, to its effectiveness—it seems that they are used most often for those who are incapacitated or otherwise unable to recite for themselves (Jingzong 2006: vol. 2, 146, 171, 180, 240, 262; vol. 3, 199, 297).

A review of scholarship on funeral rites, end-of-life care, and the role of religion in the lives of those with long-term illnesses yields many examples that suggest that the device is widely used under such circumstances and can substitute for human presence or chanting. A study of lepers cited an example of a woman who spent her days with both the Buddha-recitation device and the television turned on; although the woman was absorbing the sound of the chanting, it seems that the device also functioned as something of an electronic companion, as did the television (Lin 2007: 114). The device is also used

in intensive care units, placed by the patient's head with the doctor's permission. In the ICU it may be undesirable or impractical to have people present chanting, and so the recitation device takes over this function. In some cases, family and volunteers may be in another room chanting on behalf of the patient; the device then serves as a token for recitations elsewhere (Yang 2009: 46–7, 56). A study conducted of Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation volunteers in Shanghai during the 1990s indicated that those who chanted for the deceased included a Buddha-recitation device among the items brought to the home or hospital as a kind of deathbed kit, along with a “rebirth blanket” (*wangsheng bei* 往生被) and an image of the Amitābha triad or the Buddha. These items were sufficient to prepare the deceased for the afterlife in the case that a proper mourning hall (*lingtang* 靈堂) could not be set up. Sometimes the Buddha-recitation device became so closely associated with the last days of the deceased that families wished to have it cremated with the body (Yang 2009: 58 n. 45, 63, 79). A study of funeral directors in Taiwan shows a similar usage: among the first actions of the funeral director is to put in place the Buddha-recitation device and the rebirth blanket, even in case of accidents. The recitation device then helps guide the family in chanting (Chen Jicheng 2003: 70, 72). Finally, I have personally observed the Buddha-recitation device used in a memorial hall, chanting even when no one is present (Figure 9). In these examples, the recitation device is used in situations when human chanting cannot be carried out for a variety of reasons.

Some of the ways in which the Buddha-recitation device is used suggest that it may automate the chanting

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**FIG 9**

Buddha-recitation device playing in an empty memorial hall. (Photograph by author.)



of monks who were hired by the family of the deceased. In late imperial and early twentieth-century China, funeral services were an important means of support for monks, as they chanted sūtras and mantras and performed rituals on behalf of the dead or those on their deathbeds (Yü 1992: 14). Although this connection is not explicit in any of the writings on the recitation device, it seems likely that it is replacing not just the family members who might attend the dying or deceased but also the employment of monks to do the same.<sup>10</sup> Although these practices have been altered by modernizing forces, the need for a spiritual environment at the transition from this life is clearly felt.

### Doctrine

Listening to a Buddha-recitation device may be effective, but there is ambivalence about its use as a replacement for the human act of recitation. Dharma Drum Foundation (法鼓) has published a series of questions and answers about assisting in the recitation of the Buddha's name for those who are approaching death, based on the teachings of Shengyan 聖嚴 (1930–2009). The proper preparation for the moment of death has been of signal importance from the beginning of the Pure Land tradition. For contemporary Buddhists, hospice care and tending those in the last moments of their lives is important part of compassionate work. The other questions in this magazine series take up the function of deathbed recitations and the status of those volunteering—need one be vegetarian? Can one help without experience? Will it make one ill? This particular question focuses on the use of technology, and was featured in *Dharma Drum Magazine* (*Fagu zazhi* 法鼓雜誌) in 2000 with the title “Can One Use Electronic Buddha-Recitation Devices to Substitute for Aided Recitation?” The query has two parts: “When engaged in Buddha-work, can one use the electronic Buddha-recitation device as aided recitation for the deceased? Does it have an effect for those approaching death or the deceased?” The answer begins by recognizing the popularity of these devices and of tape recordings, and then proceeds to distinguish their efficacy based on circumstances. Although recorded recitation is frequently used in mortuary settings, this is where it is least effective: “As for the deceased who have already stopped breathing, if one relies on tape-recorded aided recitation, salvation is not possible. This is because the Buddha-names transmitted by electronic products lack mind, and lacking the power of the mind, the departed souls will not respond. It is still best to have the relatives and friends of the family piously show the loving care of aided recitation, which alone is able to cause response

in departed soul, and has the power to obtain salvation for the departed soul" (*Dharma Drum Magazine* 2000). What empowers the recitation is not only that it is the name of the Buddha, but also the "mind" or intent behind the recitation. This follows the stimulus-response model prevalent in Chinese religious thinking, in which things of like kind resonate with each other. Recorded recitation lacks that which would resonate with the departed person's soul.

The answer goes on to discuss when the use of recorded recitation is appropriate, chief among them situations in which no one is able to attend the patient: "But if the person has not ceased breathing, and the soul is still here, then if the family has no means to be by his side reciting the name of the Buddha, chanting scriptures, and aiding recitation, and it so happens that there is no aided recitation and care by 'lotus friends,' then in this case if there is a Buddha-recitation device or a tape-recorded broadcast of the Buddha-names and chanted scriptures, the person approaching death can listen and receive the Buddha-names and the meaning of the scriptures." In this case, the use of the Buddha-recitation device reflects the changing nature of families and end-of-life care. No longer are multi-generational families the norm, and the terminally ill may often be cared for in hospitals or hospices. These changes are reflected in the comments that follow on the use of the device for the deceased. It is deemed acceptable when the family cannot maintain recitation around the clock, likely a fairly frequent occurrence with smaller and more dispersed families. While the answer has already asserted that such recorded chanting cannot positively affect the deceased's soul, this kind of recording can create a spiritual environment. Recorded recitation "will increase the atmosphere of peace, solemnity, dignity, and good fortune," the answer notes, going on to conclude that "the deceased will also be able to perceive the power of this peace" (*Dharma Drum Magazine* 2000). Here we find echoes of the calming function the recitation device had for the insomniac layperson, but with different conclusions about the efficacy of recorded recitation. Overall, this answer represents the device as a substitute for recitation, capable of altering the atmosphere of the home or room, but unlike human recitation in that it is ineffective at altering the afterlife course of the deceased. Mechanical recitation lacks "mind" and is therefore fundamentally different, to be used only when alternatives are not available. This answer contrasts the Buddha-recitation with human recitation, deeming it inferior but still beneficial in a limited way.

## Conclusions

From the discussions of its use by both practitioners and by religious authorities, Buddha-recitation devices are not a direct substitute for human recitation, even though at first they may appear to be. Rather, the use of the Buddha-recitation device more closely aligns with the second example of sound in the Pure Land scriptures, that of an environment which produces spiritually efficacious sounds. Chanting represents intentional activity on the part of the practitioner, and thus acts for the salvific benefit of that person or someone to whom they dedicate their merit. The Pure Land sutras, however, also describe the Pure Land as a place filled with edifying and spiritual sounds; these emerge of themselves, and are effective as they are passively absorbed, not requiring the action of individuals. The efficaciousness of hearing sounds is likewise emphasized in the testimony of the lay believer. There, the benefits to be gained from hearing living practitioners chant the names of the Buddha are likened to the benefits of using the electronic Buddha-recitation device. This type of hearing, as it does in the Pure Land itself, may prompt the listener to practice or greater engagement, but this functions secondarily to the effects of the sound. Using these devices as providers of sound offers them as an alternative to chanting rather than a substitute for it, and in some settings the two can be found side-by-side. Further, the packaging of the Buddha-recitation device tends to emphasize sound more so than recitation, and this too points to the way in which these objects are understood by producers and users. Yet for the sound of the Buddha-recitation device to be most effective, it must be distinguished from other sounds in the everyday world. In this regard, Buddha-recitation devices function in a way similar to the rosary. Like the rosary, the single function of the Buddha-recitation device sets it apart from iPods and CD players, and its physical form reinforces the object's special status through text and ornamentation, thereby sanctifying what might otherwise be a quotidian activity. Buddha-recitation devices create sound that has a special status, yet this sound is not intended to not replace recitation, but produce it in the way the trees and other elements of the Pure Land do. The sound of these devices creates an environment or an atmosphere conducive to religious development, without obviating the necessity and importance of human recitation. As to their mechanical nature, the aura of Pure Land sound has always been produced in the space of belief, and the Buddha-recitation device requires little more than belief—attested and reinforced through miracle tales—to replicate it.

# notes and references

<sup>1</sup> Fabio Rambelli notes a similar process at work with the many objects marked as Buddhist in contemporary Japan: one function of these objects, he writes, is to “sanctify tokens of modern life” (Rambelli 2007: 61).

<sup>2</sup> There are now electric prayer wheels, but how these are understood within the tradition awaits further research.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility. It is worth noting, however, that there does not appear to be a market for pirated Buddha-recitation devices, unlike the market for pirated CDs and DVDs.

<sup>4</sup> As has been documented, *nianfo* 念佛 initially referred also to the recollection of the Buddha, bringing him present to the practitioner’s mind. For a brief discussion of this, see Tanaka (1990: 10–11). Gradually, the term came to refer to recitation of the Buddha’s name, most typically Amitābha.

<sup>5</sup> Entry of April 20, 2011 on <http://www.qin-yuan.com/feedback.asp> (accessed March 31, 2014). I have no way of judging the authenticity of the commenter, but the feedback on this page varies, and is not merely praise.

<sup>6</sup> I have found one example of a combination radio and Buddha-recitation device, but it seems that this model did not catch on. The shopkeeper discouraged me from buying it, instead directing me to more modern versions.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, “The Advantages of Turning on the Buddha-Recitation Device and Listening to Recitation,” Buddhist Studies Net 学佛网, [http://www.xuefo.net/show1\\_5812.htm](http://www.xuefo.net/show1_5812.htm) (accessed March 31, 2014). The advisory director of this website is Dharma-master Jiecheng 戒成. This essay is also

reproduced on Buddhist blogs; I am not certain where it originated.

<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to compare Buddha-recitation devices to the use of prayers broadcast over the radio in American Pentecostalism. During the 1950s, Oral Roberts recommended that listeners touch the radio, allowing them to interact not just with the sound of prayers but also with the feel of the vibrations, which facilitated the healing power of the words. See Blanton (2013).

<sup>9</sup> According to Yogācāra Buddhist doctrine, and widely accepted, the mind is divided into eight layers of consciousness; the eighth of these stores the karmic potential that determines future rebirth.

<sup>10</sup> Excessive involvement in funeral rituals was one of the major critiques of Buddhist modernizers of the early twentieth century. Although present-day Buddhist organizations continue to offer funeral services and provide columbariums, there remains concern that a too-close association with death would discourage many from studying Buddhism. The extent of funeral services, which may include deathbed chanting, varies with the economic means of the family (Chandler 2004: 230–1).

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