

Article

Poon Chung-kwong's (b. 1940) Apologetic Discourse Towards the Compatibility Between Pure Land Buddhism and Natural Science

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Abstract: This study delves into the apologetic discourse put forward by Poon Chung-kwong 潘宗光 (b. 1940), who is both a scientist and a lay Buddhist of contemporary Hong Kong, concerning the compatibility of Pure Land Buddhism and natural science. It centers on an analysis of his application of diverse physical knowledge to elucidate the description of Sukhāvātī, an ideal and enigmatic world, within Buddhist texts. Poon endeavors to demonstrate that multiple facets of Sukhāvātī, including its establishment and the rebirth of believers within this domain, are congruent with scientific principles. This is in an effort to counter the public's perception of Buddhism as “unscientific” or even “superstitious”, notwithstanding that some physical theories he employed are still in the inferential stage and, furthermore, are enmeshed in controversy, which substantially undermines the cogency of his apologetic discourses. This study presents a case of the interaction between Pure Land Buddhism and natural science, which has hitherto been overlooked by the academic community.

Keywords: Sukhāvātī; Pure Land Buddhism; science; Poon Chung-kwong



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1. Introduction

To date, the academic community has carried out a considerable amount of research on the interaction between Buddhism and science. Nevertheless, this typically involves a interaction between physics and one of the philosophical schools such as Madhyamaka, Huayan, and Yogacara, or a interaction between cognitive sciences and some practice-oriented Buddhist sects like Zen and Tantra (Balasubramaniam 1992; Young-Eisendrath and Muramoto 2002; Mansfield 1990; Ames 2003; Pacey 2014; Chen 2019; Finkelstein 2003; Laberge 2003). Pure Land Buddhism, which is mainly associated with the practice of nāfo 念佛, or “buddha-recitation/contemplation”, a practice wherein, at its simplest, the devotee recites the name of the Buddha Amitābha (Amitufo 阿彌陀佛) in the expectation of gaining rebirth in the western Pure Land (xifang jingtu 西方淨土) called Sukhāvātī upon their death (Jones 2019, p. 1), may have been interpreted as being the most “mythological” Buddhist school. Therefore, it has been overlooked in the study of the interaction between Buddhism and science. In fact, the aforementioned view of Pure Land Buddhism is largely attributed to the insufficient and one-sided comprehension of it.

In an attempt to address the lacuna in this particular field of study, my previous article (An 2024) undertakes an in-depth exploration of the apologetic discourse surrounding the convergence of Pure Land Buddhism and theoretical physics as presented by the contemporary Chinese Buddhist monk, Da An (b. 1959). This article investigates the manner in which Da An sought to utilize specific physical knowledge, encompassing the theory

of relativity, quantum mechanics, and superstring theory, to provide explanations for certain enigmatic phenomena delineated within the Pure Land Buddhist texts in relation to Sukhāvatī, the Buddhist ideal world. Illustrative of these phenomena are the capabilities attributed to the deities, such as their ability to instantaneously migrate to far-off worlds, conjure objects out of nothing in accordance with their intentions, and predict future events (An 2024).

It is worth noting that, in addition to the contemporary Mainland Chinese monk Da An, Poon Chung-kwong 潘宗光 (b. 1940), who is both a scientist and a lay Buddhist of Hong Kong, has proposed a similar apologetic discourse concerning the compatibility between Pure Land Buddhism and natural science. Nevertheless, his approach to explicating the Pure Land Buddhist narratives of Sukhāvatī through natural science diverges from that of Da An. In contrast to Da An, who focuses more on the mysterious phenomena within Sukhāvatī, Poon Chung-kwong devotes less attention to these aspects. Instead, he applies specific physical principles to address questions such as how the Sukhāvatī was established, why this world can accommodate an infinite number of inhabitants, and why believers can be reborn in this world. Poon employs various physical theories—some of which are broadly accepted, while others remain speculative or contentious—to bolster his argument regarding the compatibility of Pure Land Buddhism with scientific principles.

In the subsequent sections of this article, a detailed elaboration will be provided on Poon's apologetic discourse in this regard. The apologetic discourses put forward by him may possess insufficient cogency to firmly persuade the audience. Nevertheless, it presents an additional case of the interaction between Pure Land Buddhism and natural science.

2. Poon Chung-kwong and His View on the Relation Between Buddhism and Science

Poon Chung-kwong was born in Hong Kong in 1940. He received his secondary education at St. Paul's Co-educational College, Hong Kong. Subsequently, he pursued his undergraduate studies in the Department of Physics and Chemistry at the University of Hong Kong. Later, he studied at University College London in the UK, and obtained a doctoral degree. Since 1968, he has been engaged in teaching in the Department of Chemistry at the University of Hong Kong. In 1982, he was elevated to the position of professor, and in 1983, he held the post of the Dean of the Faculty of Science at the University of Hong Kong. Since 1991, he served as the president of the Hong Kong Polytechnic (now the Hong Kong Polytechnic University) for a period of eighteen years (Poon 2009, pp. 22–143).

Poon, in addition to being a scientific researcher, is a devout adherent to Buddhism. During his second year in the presidency of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, he was inspired by a Buddhist sermon, and subsequently embraced the teachings of Buddhism (Poon 2009, p. 153). Subsequently, within the regions of Hong Kong and the Chinese Mainland, he organized numerous lectures and participated in a variety of TV and online programs, with the intent of disseminating his Buddhist ideas. In addition, he authored and released several academic publications related to Buddhist teachings.

One notable trait evident in his discourses and writings on Buddhism is his recurrent advocacy of the compatibility between Buddhism and science. He frequently endeavors to elucidate Buddhist tenets through the prism of scientific knowledge. On one hand, this could potentially be attributed to his prior status as a scientific researcher. Having dedicated numerous years to research and exploration within the realm of scientific inquiry, upon encountering Buddhism, it is inevitable that he would undertake an investigation into the relationship between Buddhism and science. On the other hand, this constitutes a missionary strategy that he utilized in consideration of the particular social and cultural milieu. Primarily, his audience is composed of individuals from Mainland China and Hong

Kong. In these two regions, since the onset of the modern era, Western science, along with other ideological and cultural imports from the West, has presented challenges to the acceptance of Buddhism among the general public.

In Mainland China, since the modern era, Western-imported science has often been regarded as omniscient, omnipotent, and a harbinger of human salvation. It has been consistently claimed to be a supreme authority over religion in the Chinese context. When juxtaposed with science, Chinese Buddhism has been criticized by certain intellectuals and parts of the general public. They contend that it falls within the realm of superstitious beliefs and practices that are at odds with modern lifestyles and societal developments. Even to the present day, a significant proportion of the Mainland Chinese population shows reverence for science and exhibits animosity towards religions, Buddhism included (Liu and An 2024).

Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China, though its social and cultural milieu diverges in certain aspects from that of mainland China, witnesses contemporary Buddhism grappling with challenges analogous to those on the Mainland. As remarked by Hin Hung 衍空, a Hong Kong monk who serves as an Honorary Assistant Professor at the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong, “Since the 1980s, Western cultural values have been avidly pursued in Hong Kong. As a result, Chinese culture and religion have often been regarded as archaic and superstitious” (Tang 2015, p. 287). Poon also articulated a similar standpoint, noting that:

In contemporary society, a significant segment of the population holds a common misapprehension regarding Buddhism. Upon observing practices such as the devout worship of Buddha for blessings or the act of fulfilling vows to deities after narrowly escaping peril, they tend to classify Buddhism as superstitious. Similarly, when encountering instances where individuals opt to embrace monastic life, be it as monks or nuns, due to personal adversities, they often perceive Buddhism as a religion advocating escapism and negativity. In recent times, some individuals have exhibited a proclivity towards an over-reliance on Western cultures. Given that Christianity and Catholicism are the preeminent religions in the West, these individuals unconsciously consider Buddhism, an Eastern religious heritage, to be lacking in scientific credibility. (Poon 2009, p. 155; self-translation)

In view of the prevalent perception within the general public, which frequently categorizes Buddhism as either “superstitious” or “unscientific”, Poon seeks to establish that Buddhism is neither superstitious nor antithetical to science. Instead, he posits that Buddhism is in harmony with scientific tenets. Poon utilizes this assertion as a strategic approach for the dissemination of Buddhism. He is convinced that this method is efficacious. Recalling his tenure as university president in 1992, he notes that the majority of people at that time considered Buddhism an unscientific and superstitious religion. As a result, they were perplexed as to why a scientist like him would adhere to Buddhism. He expounded on Buddhist doctrines from a scientific perspective to a person with this doubt, who, upon hearing, accepted his elucidation (Editorial Department 2022, p. 44).

The subsequent sections of this article will delve into a detailed exploration of how this apologetic discourse and missionary strategy are manifested in his interpretation of Buddhist narratives related to the Sukhāvātī from the perspective of physics.

3. Poon Chung-kwong’s Interpretation of Buddhist Narratives Concerning the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī Through Physics

Since the 20th century, some theories of physics (such as quantum mechanics) that harbor an air of mystery, and are even perceived as extraordinary, have increasingly emerged

as the favored tool for interpreting paranormal phenomena, while the veracity of these paranormal phenomena, however, has become a secondary concern (Gingras 2016, p. 270). Such a tendency is reflected in Poon as well. Being an ardent follower of Buddhism, he holds firm beliefs that the teachings of Pure Land Buddhism are absolutely authentic and precise without the slightest doubt (Poon 2017, p. 22), and he endeavors to elucidate them utilizing various theories of physics. Poon's attempt to illustrate that Pure Land Buddhism is not inherently contradictory with natural science is primarily underscored in his resolution of four anticipated queries from the general populace regarding Pure Land Buddhism.

Query One: Is the Pure Land genuinely established by Amitabha from scratch? Is it indeed so unique and superior?

Query Two: If the Pure Land ceaselessly receives beings from all directions of the cosmos, can it accommodate such an immense multitude of beings?

Query Three: Can one attain rebirth in the Pure Land merely through chanting of Amitabha's name?

Query Four: The Pure Land is located at a distance of ten million billion Buddha lands from us. Could we possibly reach there? (Poon 2016, p. 49; self-translation)

Poon not only alludes to these four inquiries and related responses in his works, but also frequently mentions them during his lectures and web programs he participates in (Poon 2018, 2023).

Poon attempts to address the first query by utilizing certain modern and contemporary theoretical physics theories to establish the proposition that "human consciousness can influence the universe". The process through which Poon argues for this assertion is considerably convoluted. He has selected various physics theories, some of which are still at the inferential stage, have not been fully verified, and are even highly controversial. Firstly, he pointed out that in quantum mechanics, the state of elementary particles can be influenced by the consciousness of the observer, providing compelling evidence of human consciousness's capacity to influence external objects.

Quantum mechanics asserts that any fundamental particle within the realm of space can concurrently coexist in diverse states and locations. However, when observed, the fundamental particle devolves into a fixed state, or appear at a singular location. For instance, assume an electron exists in a hypothetical box; the electron could concurrently exist on both sides; however, subsequent to being observed via the act of opening the box, the electron is confined to a single location on either side; similarly, prior to observation, the dual states of particle and wave exist simultaneously, yet upon observation, it manifests as a single particle state (Kagaku zasshi nyūton henshūbu 2019, pp. 54–61). Poon staunchly believes that this property of elementary particles in quantum mechanics has elucidated the intrinsic connection between external entities and human consciousness:

In the microscopic world, the phenomena exhibited by particles are astounding and are inherently incapable of precise description. However, upon disturbance, such as when a particle is observed (an action precipitated by human consciousness), it will only manifest in a specific state (such as appearing in a certain form at a particular location). Post-disturbance, everything reverts to a free state. This resonates with Buddha's cosmic perspective, wherein all things are impermanent, without origin or destination, and inconceivable. Quantum mechanics enlightens us on the significance of human consciousness (the observer), where consciousness and fact cannot be severed arbitrarily, akin to the Model-Dependent Realism articulated by the eminent physicist Stephen Hawking, revealing the state manifested by things hinges on the consciousness of the observer. (Poon 2017, p. 23; self-translation)

Moreover, Poon amalgamates the concept of quantum entanglement from quantum mechanics with Roger Penrose's theory of quantum consciousness, further substantiating the capacity of human consciousness to influence the universe. Quantum theory has delineated that the dynamics of subatomic particles are governed by entanglement. It commences when they interact; thus, they forfeit their independent existence. Irrespective of the distance they traverse apart, if one is tweaked, measured, or observed, the other appears to instantaneously react, even if the entire cosmos now lies between them (Gilder 2009, p. 3). Quantum consciousness is a proposition advanced by Roger Penrose and his associate Stuart Hameroff. The fundamental tenet of this theory is that each elementary manifestation of consciousness stems from the "reduction of the quantum wave function". This occurs within specific microstructures of the brain, which Penrose and Hameroff designate as "microtubules" (Berezin 2018, p. 36).

The quantum consciousness hypothesis has been mysticized, even utilized to argue for the existence of souls posthumously (Hameroff and Chopra 2012). Of course, Roger Penrose's theory is entrenched in the realm of speculation and controversy. Nevertheless, Poon flagrantly ignores the questionable reliability of this highly debated theory. Conversely, he contends that precisely this theory can be employed to fortify his defense. This theory, in conjunction with the quantum entanglement concept, has been employed by Poon to substantiate his enigmatic assertion that consciousness can influence external entities, and even the cosmos as a whole:

Presently, numerous eminent scientists, such as Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, believe that the human brain contains an infinite number of entangled electrons. They were initially in a free state, but upon interaction with external entities, such as sight, hearing, or contact with certain external phenomena, pertinent cerebral electrons are perturbed to a particular state, and these states evolve according to changes in disturbances, other neurons that are entangled (such as those responsible for processing memory systems) also instantaneously adopt corresponding determined states, transmitting information to each other. This constitutes human consciousness or cognition... The electrons of the brain may also be entangled with many electrons outside the body, and even in the universe, as they all originate from the same origin—the "Big Bang" of the universe. Therefore, once the cerebral electrons generate consciousness, this information is immediately disseminated to various parts of the universe, completely unrestricted by time and space. (Poon 2017, p. 23; self-translation)

The proposition positing that all subatomic particles are in an entangled state attributable to their shared origin preceding the universe's "Big Bang" represents, ultimately, but one of several hypotheses advanced to elucidate the fundamental tenets of quantum entanglement. Nonetheless, Poon does not appear to interrogate the veracity of this hypothesis; rather, he directly incorporates it into his deductive reasoning. Poon amalgamates this with Roger Penrose's theoretical framework, which postulates that the operation of human consciousness is predicated on entangled electrons within the cerebral cortex. From this synthesis, Poon surmises that particles within the brain may be entangled with those in the external environment. Through further logical extension, he argues that consciousness can, via this entanglement mechanism, exert an influence on external entities.

Poon attempts to enhance the credibility of his perspective by incorporating theories proposed by some physicists regarding the peculiar characteristics of the quantum that suggest consciousness influences external objects. During the inception phase of quantum physics, the notion of wave function collapse upon execution of a "measurement" engendered confusion and compelled certain scientists to adopt the perspective that the involvement of consciousness of observers influenced quantum systems (Clegg 2019, p. 92). John

Wheeler discerns the influence of conscious observers on quantum systems, and therefore proposes the concept that the universe is a “participatory universe”, asserting that human beings are “participants” rather than “observers” in the universe (Capra 1975, p. 141). Similarly, Andrei Linde posits that consciousness plays an extraordinarily pivotal role in quantum cosmology (Smetham 2017, p. 241). Analogously, these theories, much like Roger Penrose’s, remain in the conjectural phase. They have not been comprehensively validated, and their reliability is a subject of ongoing debate within the relevant academic and scientific communities. Poon seemingly disregards this aspect, simply holding the belief that these theories are highly beneficial for bolstering his defense. Poon maintains that these scientists’ theories validate his assertions: “renowned physicists John Wheeler and Andrei Linde both propose that human consciousness influences the reality we perceive and experience. Human consciousness serves as an integral element in shaping the physical world. Consciousness profoundly impacts every aspect of our existence, consistently redefining our destiny and the world in which we reside” (Poon 2017, p. 23).

Poon asserts that consciousness can not only influence the external world, but it is also plausible for consciousness to create entities from nothing. First, he postulates based on quantum entanglement theory and quantum consciousness theory, suggesting that consciousness has the potential to affect entities which are entangled with particles in the human brain (Poon 2017, p. 24). Based on this, he further incorporates string theory to corroborate the proposition that consciousness possesses the capacity to create matter. According to string theory, the elementary ingredients of the universe are not point particles. Rather, they are tiny, one-dimensional filaments somewhat like infinitely thin rubber bands, vibrating to and fro (Greene 2000, p. 136). The energy and mass of a particle (which is actually a particular vibrational string pattern) depends on its amplitude and its wavelength. The greater the amplitude and the shorter the wavelength, the greater the energy and mass. All entities in the cosmos are constituted by innumerable vibrating strings, and the distinction between entities depends on the unique mode of vibration of the strings comprising each object (Greene 2000, pp. 144–46).

In an effort to validate the proposition that consciousness is capable of creating matter, Poon makes an attempt to integrate these theories and subsequently proposes a hypothesis. According to his perspective, founded on the quantum entanglement theory and the quantum consciousness theory, consciousness holds the potential to exert an influence on entities that are entangled with the particles in the human brain. Intriguingly, these particles are, in fact, strings. Thereafter, he deduces that consciousness could also impact the vibration patterns of the strings with which it is entangled. Since the vibration patterns of strings determine the mass, energy, and form of macroscopic objects, this process is essentially indistinguishable from the creation of matter by means of consciousness (Poon 2017, p. 24). Certainly, Poon’s inference appears to be rather tenuous. Firstly, currently, string theory, similar to the quantum consciousness theory, remains in the realm of speculation. Secondly, hitherto, there has been no prominent scientific theory that combines these two to derive the conclusion that quantum entanglement can impact the vibration patterns of the most fundamental units of entities, i.e., strings.

Poon also postulates that the ability to influence particles within the cosmos and thus create matter is beyond human capabilities. However, he asserts that Amitabha was capable of doing so, given that the power of his consciousness is immensely potent:

Amitabha has undergone an arduous spiritual cultivation journey and accumulated immeasurable merits, with his consciousness and willpower being unfathomably potent. Consequently, it is entirely feasible for him to construct an ideal world from scratch, which does not contradict contemporary scientific theories. The Amitabha Sutra states, “all birds are miraculously produced by Amitabha in

order to propagate the Dharma sounds". The fundamental teacher, Shakyamuni Buddha, has explicitly indicated that Amitābha can manifest various wondrous multicolored birds from scratch. (Poon 2017, p. 24; self-translation)

According to Pure Land scriptures, Amitābha's predecessor was a monk named Dharmākara. To facilitate all living beings in escaping all suffering, attaining peace, receiving teachings, and ensuring their eventual attainment of Buddhahood, he resolved to become a Buddha and establish a superior Buddha-land. To accomplish this objective, Dharmākara devoted five eons to contemplating an astonishingly vast array of existing Buddha-lands to ascertain the types of vows and practices he would necessitate to endow his future land with all their optimal attributes. Upon completion, he pronounced forty-eight vows that would delineate the nature of his Buddha-land and its inhabitants. These vows all adopted the same format: only if his land and its inhabitants exhibited such-and-such a trait would Dharmākara accept complete and perfect enlightenment. Post his vow declaration, Dharmākara embarked on a period of rigorous study and training that would span an infinite number of eons. During this interval, he refined his wisdom, his compassion, and his virtue as he transitioned from one lifetime to another. Ultimately, he attained perfect enlightenment, and became the Buddha known as Amitābha (Jones 2019, pp. 3–4). Presumably, Poon attributes Amitābha's predecessor Dharmākara's vow to liberate all sentient beings as the motivating force behind his vision and practice for establishing a pure land, which have transpired over an eon-long duration. Hence, his cognitive prowess could remarkably accumulate over such a considerable period of time, to an extent that it is unimaginable by ordinary individuals.

Concerning query two, it pertains to whether, given that the Pure Land is continually receiving beings from all directions of the cosmos, it has the capacity to accommodate such a vast multitude of beings. Poon primarily utilizes the concept of multi-dimensional space in superstring theory as a response. In accordance with superstring theory, in order to reconcile the established laws of physics in a coherent manner, it is mandatory to posit that the dimensionality of space is immutable at ten (Kaku 1995, p. 172). Moreover, superstring theory posits that the cosmos initially manifested in ten dimensions. However, due to the cosmos being unstable in ten dimensions, it "diverged" into two parts, with a compact, four-dimensional universe (three spatial dimensions and one temporal dimension) disengaging from the remainder of the cosmos. The remaining multi-dimensional universe has diminished to such an immensely minute scale (approximately 10 billion billion times smaller than the nucleus of an atom) that it can never be accessed by humans (Kaku and Thompson 1995, pp. 13–14). This theory of high-dimensional space, due to its transcendence beyond common sense, is often utilized by religious individuals to "rationalize" certain supernatural and enigmatic elements. The Chinese Buddhist monk Da An posits that the depiction of diverse worlds manifested within a ray of light and a tree in the Pure Land Buddhist scriptures, embodies the existence of compactly coiled high spatial dimensions as illustrated by superstring theory (An 2024).

Poon postulates that this theoretical construct may elucidate why the spatial territory of the Pure Land could become infinite, thereby perpetually accommodating new inhabitants:

A considerable number of scientists currently posit that the universe surpasses three-dimensional space. From a mathematical viewpoint, every point in the cosmos could possess nine dimensions of space, including length, width, height, and six tiny curled spaces. Hence, each seemingly minute speck is potentially host to its own array of multidimensional spaces, capable of accommodating numerous appropriate beings, which is unfathomable... The elasticity of time and space is beyond our mundane intellect's grasp. Amitābha ceaselessly expands the Pure

Land and skillfully utilizes this multidimensional space, without contravening contemporary scientific theories. (Poon 2017, pp. 24–25; self-translation)

It is evident that Poon presumes that since superstring theory asserts the existence of six additional spatial dimensions that are tightly coiled within the cosmos, which can naturally be unfolded. Consequently, he suggests that Amitabha possesses the capability to unravel them and manipulate them, thereby amplifying the space of the Pure Land to accommodate an increasing number of inhabitants. In fact, the hypothesis regarding high-dimensional space in superstring theory represents merely an inference within the mathematical and logical domains. At present, no scientific instruments or apparatuses are capable of detecting the existence of these compacted and minute dimensions and, thus, this hypothesis has not been fully validated. Poon contends that the spatial dimension of the Pure Land has the potential for infinite expansion is not “contravening contemporary scientific theories”. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the so-called “scientific theories” in this context are merely those that are still in the inferential stage. Evidently, Poon either neglects this fact or deliberately skirts around it. Instead, he assertively declares that this showcases the compatibility between Pure Land Buddhism and science.

Regarding query three, specifically concerning why merely uttering the Amitabha name enables one to be reborn in the Pure Land, Poon postulates that it parallels the mechanism of a television receiving signals from a broadcast station.

I wish to construct the following metaphor. Imagine a television receiving signals from a specific station. The station transforms images and sounds into energy within a specific frequency range, broadcasts it in the air, and as long as the absorption frequency of the television is aligned with the frequency of a particular television station, it can receive the information from that station. Now, if the Pure Land is a supreme television station, then Amitabha’s boundless energy, transcending time and space, reaches our planet. I propose that the frequency of this energy, as elucidated by Shakyamuni Buddha, is the sound of “Amitabha”. Regardless of the language, Mandarin, English, etc., they are all translations from ancient Sanskrit, and their frequencies are quite similar. Sound is an energy, and when we chant Amitabha’s name, we can align with the energy of the Pure Land, and then the resonance is generated. (Poon 2017, p. 25; self-translation)

Notably, a substantial disparity exists between the electromagnetic signals transmitted by radio stations and the acoustic waves generated by human vocalizations. Poon’s method of inference, endeavoring to establish an analogy between these two distinct phenomena, appears rather tenuous and lacks a robust logical foundation.

Concerning query four, specifically on whether one can reach Pure Land, which is situated one hundred quadrillion Buddha realms from Earth, Poon employed the wormhole hypothesis in physics to respond. A wormhole is a theoretical conduit for travel between distant cosmic locales. The wormhole possesses two access points termed “mouths”, one (for instance) proximate to Earth, and the other located in an extraterrestrial locale spanning light years. The mouths are interconnected via a passage through hyperspace (the wormhole), potentially merely a kilometer in length. Upon entry into the near-Earth mouth, one finds himself within the tunnel. By traveling a mere kilometer along the tunnel, one arrives at the other mouth, emerging in the extraterrestrial locale spanning light years (Thorne 1995, p. 484). This theoretical proposition in physics, which bypasses space limitations through the use of wormholes, and permits instantaneous travel between two disparate spatial points, provides a theoretical basis for Buddhists to “demystify” some enigmatic narratives in Buddhist texts. For instance, the Taiwanese scholar Chen Shi-bin, who is a devout Buddhist, posits that the Buddhist scriptures depict various universes

interconnected like a vast net, and bodhisattvas can freely traverse through innumerable worlds via “net holes” (wangkong 網孔). Chen proposes that these “net holes” are equivalent to the so-called wormholes in physics (Chen 2019, p. 372).

Likewise, Poon postulates that a wormhole offers a potential gateway for humans to reach the Pure Land located at unthinkable great distances:

From a mortal standpoint, no matter how swift our mode of transportation, we cannot reach the Pure Land. However, Einstein noted that time and space are misperceptions designed by humans. For example, space can be distorted. Einstein proposed the concept of “Einstein–Rosen Bridge”, which Wheeler designated as a “wormhole”, capable of traversing time and space, and connecting points separated by vast distances in space-time. (Poon 2017, p. 25; self-translation)

Having expounded on the aforementioned four issues through the application of diverse physical theories, Poon asserted with confidence, “The Pure Land teachings may appear superstitious at first glance, yet they are entirely compatible with modern science” (Poon 2017, p. 25). It is worthy of attention that some “scientific theories” which Poon claimed to be not in conflict with Pure Land Buddhism have not been accepted by the mainstream scientific circle, and even remain controversial. Some science theories employed are in the nascent stage of reasoning and suppositions, or theories whose underlying principles remain unexplained. Precisely because these theories are partly yet to be fully verified or are fraught with enigma due to their inability to elucidate the underlying principles, they afford Poon more interpretive latitude. Nonetheless, the controversial nature and questionable reliability of these scientific theories significantly undermine Poon’s claim regarding the “compatibility” between Pure Land Buddhism and science.

4. Conclusions

The above has expounded on how Poon Chung-kwong attempted to explain four pre-conceived questions about Pure Land Buddhism by employing a variety of physical theories. This kind of apologetic discourse is mainly intended to address the public’s perception of Buddhism as “unscientific” or even “superstitious”. He seeks to establish that various aspects of the mysterious Pure Land of Sukhāvātī, as conceptualized in Pure Land Buddhism—specifically, its establishment and the rebirth of believers within this realm—are in accordance with scientific tenets. Precisely because various physics concepts he utilizes, including superstring theory, quantum consciousness, and wormholes, among others, remain hypothetical and unsubstantiated up to the present time, this circumstance grants him greater leeway to reconcile them with the enigmatic narratives within Pure Land Buddhist texts.

Nevertheless, it is worthy of particular attention that a number of the physical theories Poon invoked are still in the stage of speculation, and the reliability of certain of these theories is highly contentious. The “scientific theories” he claimed to be non-conflicting with Pure Land Buddhism largely pertain to these very theories. Thus, his proposition regarding the compatibility between Pure Land Buddhism and science appears to lack solid foundation. Intriguingly, he seemingly either overlooked this critical point or, perhaps, deliberately evaded it, yet persists in employing these theories to justify Pure Land Buddhist tenets.

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