

INTRODUCTION

The *Xiaodao lun* in the Medieval Debates

The *Xiaodao lun* (Laughing at the Dao) is an anti-Daoist polemical text written by the official Zhen Luan and presented to Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou dynasty in 570 C.E. Divided into thirty-six sections in mocking imitation of the division of the Daoist canon, the text concentrates on attacking Daoist mythology, doctrine, ritual, and religious practice. To do so, it cites heavily from Daoist scriptures and shows their inconsistency and absurdity by juxtaposing them with other Daoist texts and with Confucian classics, historical documents, and mathematical calculations. The *Xiaodao lun* is a highlight in an ongoing process of debate among Buddhists and Daoists in medieval China. Its origins, role, and special features are best understood in relation to the debates that both preceded and followed it.

Areas of Buddhist Adaptation to Chinese Culture

The medieval debates among Buddhists and Daoists from the fourth century to the early Tang dynasty formed an integral part of the adaptation of Buddhism into Chinese culture (see Sharf 2002). During this period, Buddhism had to come to terms with the ways and worldviews of the Chinese aristocracy in three distinct areas. In all cases, this meant relating anew to its own heritage as well as reorganizing to fit the new environment.

The first area of Buddhist adaptation was the Confucian establishment of China. Here Buddhism was found unintelligible and problematic mainly because of its specific practices: shaving the head, leaving the family, living in celibacy. Many of these ways blatantly denied traditional Chinese virtues, such as filial piety, the inviolate state of the body, and proper worship for one's ancestors. In addition, a major issue at the time was the Buddhists' refusal to bow to secular authority on the grounds that the Buddha had left the world and his followers were thus no longer responsible to its rulers.¹

¹ The demand that the monks should bow to secular authority and, especially, the emperor was first made by an official in 340 but met with opposition from other administrators, who were more Buddhist in orientation. In 403, Huan Xuan, usurper of the Jin throne, again made the demand. At this time, Huiyuan answered in his famous memorial. See Chen 1954, 262. For more details, see Tang 1938; Zürcher 1959; Kimura 1962; Chen 1964;

Schmidt-Glintzer 1976; Tsukamoto and Hurvitz 1985; Lai 1993. On the continuation of this debate in the Tang dynasty, see Tonami 1986, 479-88; Tonami 1988, 32.

Buddhist doctrine, also, was seriously questioned, especially the concepts regarding karma and rebirth (Lai 1993, 279). Whereas Buddhists proclaimed the doctrine of rebirth, the Confucian elite found it impossible to accept a new body after death. Moreover, the Chinese were utterly horrified by the notion of an ongoing responsibility and continued punishment. As Tsukamoto notes, "The reaction of the princes of nobles, told about reincarnation and the accompanying retribution, was a feeling of fright from which there was no escape (1985, 42)." To explain how rebirth was possible, Huiyuan, in defiance of the doctrine of *anātman*, presented his thesis on the immortality of the spirit, often translated as "soul" in the literature.² These various discussions and confrontations helped to define the position of Buddhism within traditional Chinese society both as a social organization and as a system of thought.

A second area in which Buddhism had to compromise with Chinese beliefs was the Chinese sense of ethnic identity and cultural superiority. Buddhism originated among non-Chinese people, summarily called *hu* 胡, or "barbarians," in the Chinese sources.³ Although the teaching developed first in India, to the Chinese the main exponents and representatives of Buddhism were Central Asians. They were people of Hunnish or Turkish origin who may be called "Turadians" (McGovern 1939, 7) or "Turko-Mongols" (White 1991, 124). Carried by these outsiders, Buddhism was presented in a strange language and with awkward practices and doctrines. To the Chinese mind, it was from the beginning associated with common prejudices regarding things non-Chinese, and its adaptation underwent phases that coincided closely with the changing fortunes of Chinese-Central Asian relationships.

The increasingly powerful domination of the northern part of China under Hun (Xiongnu and Xianbi) rulers fired the opposition of indigenous Chinese. In addition, the military prowess of marauding hordes who cruelly pillaged Chinese settlements caused the Chinese to associate their Central Asian neighbors with barbarianism of the worst sort. This image made its way into indigenous Chinese religion and literature. In the *Shenzhou jing* (Scripture of Divine Incantations), for example, the warriors of Central Asia were transformed into demons heralding the end of the world. In hosts of tens of millions, they overrun helpless civilians, devour little children, and spread disease

² Ch'en 1952; Ch'en 1964, 138; Liebenthal 1950, 1952, 1955; Schmidt-Glintzer 1976.

³ There are various terms for "barbarian" in Chinese, denoting peoples in different regions beyond the Chinese borders. The Hu in this context are specifically the tribes to the north and northwest, with the Yi in the east, the Rong in the west, the Di in the north, and the Man in the south. The barbarians were frequently associated with animals as is shown in the graph for *man* with its *insect* radical and in the character for *di*, which follows *dog*. The Rong, moreover, are often called the "Dog-Rong," reflecting their dog-ancestor myth and their allegedly canine nature. For a detailed discussion of the traditional Chinese vision of the barbarians within a broader mythological and comparative context, see White 1991.

across the land. Fought with desperation, they can only be overcome by the heavenly host of the indigenous Daoist gods fortified by proper morals and ancient rites (see Mollier 1990).

Anti-Buddhist sentiments did not, as a rule, go quite as far as this, still, the traditional prejudice against the Central Asian outsiders, who not only were the cause of military devastation, killing, and plunder but also lacked Chineseness and Confucian propriety, fueled the arguments again and again. Buddhism, from the beginning hindered by prejudices against all things other than Chinese thus had to fight an uphill battle against the xenophobia and insecurity caused by the political situation of the time (Zürcher 1959, 305).

The third area of Buddhist adaptation and confrontation was its relation to Daoism as the indigenous tradition of Chinese thought and organized religious practice. This area included, first of all, philosophical Daoism and its development in the Lao-Zhuang tradition with which interaction overall was fruitful and exchange of ideas and terminology remained open.⁴

At the same time, however, the relation with Daoism also meant that Buddhism was compared with organized Daoist cults, with communal religious groups and formal ritual practice as undertaken by the Tianshi (Celestial Masters) and their successors, especially the Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) school of the fifth century. In this respect, Buddhists tended to distance themselves decisively, not only to protect their self-identity but also to avoid the stigma of rebellion attached to organized Daoism since the Taiping (Dao of Great Peace), also known as the Yellow Turbans, rose against the Later Han in 184.

In these areas of adaptation and conflict, Buddhists and Daoists were the exponents of the two major religions. In the south, they were aristocratic members of the ruling class who had personal inclinations toward one or the other teaching or whose family belonged to an organized group as, for example, the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi, a member of the Celestial Masters. In the north, they were political and church leaders, who sought to gain power as advisers to the emperor and representatives of organized religion. Here, however, the contestants were not only of Chinese origin, so, although still located in the upper classes, the division was also between Chinese and non-Chinese. As a general rule and in all parts of China, the debates were an upper-class phenomenon that had much to do with the establishment and reorganization of power at the time.

⁴ In fact, the interaction with Lao-Zhuang was the one area in which Buddhism most easily influenced Chinese thought and through which it most swiftly entered the Chinese intelligentsia and aristocracy. In the long run, this fruitful association led to Chan Buddhism, the unique form Buddhism developed in China. See Fukunaga 1969; Knaut 1986; Kohn 1992, 117-38; Lai 1993, 281.

Kinds and Phases of Debates

The formal debates, to which the *Xiaodao lun* belongs, expressed the confrontation of Buddhism with both Daoism and Chinese ethnic superiority. There were four major phases and types:

First was the theory of the “conversion of the barbarians” (*huabu*). Originally intended as a plausible and entirely unpolemical explanation for the appearance of Buddhism in the west (Zürcher 1959, 293), it claimed that Laozi founded this new religion, so different yet so curiously similar to ancient Daoist thought and certain immortality practices, after he left China under the Zhou.

Later, around 300 C.E., the theory became more aggressive and was first formulated in a scripture of its own, the *Huabu jing*. In the centuries that followed, the text continued to grow both in volume and polemical harshness, as its narrative became ever more fanciful. Buddhists in due course resorted to an special *antihuabu* theory of their own, claiming that Laozi was originally Kāśyāpa, a disciple of the Buddha, who had been sent to bring an adaptation of Buddhism to China with his *Daode jing* (Scripture of the Dao and the Virtue; Zürcher 1959, 308). The debate on the mutual conversion of Buddhism and Daoism continued in varying stages of intensity and publicity until the Yuan dynasty when it was finally proscribed and its texts burned.⁵

Second were the debates in South China in the fifth and sixth centuries. These, too, were carried by antiforeign sentiment. The gist of the anti-Buddhist position was that, although Buddhism and philosophical Daoism might have much in common about basic teaching and access to universal truth, Buddhism was not suited for the Chinese because of its barbarian nature. Various single instances were cited in support of this claim and were refuted more or less ingeniously by fervent Buddhists.

The debates in the south took place in formal treatises and letters written among the Chinese aristocracy. They represent the process of the sangha’s adaptation to the reality of Chinese society and show how the Chinese came to accept the foreign beliefs in their midst. Here the discussions about the monks’ bowing to the emperor and about the immortality of the spirit took place. Throughout these organizational and doctrinal confrontations, however much Buddhism wrestled with the Confucian establishment, it yet showed a strong tendency to establish itself as a solid supporter of the Confucian state and an acceptable version of the Chinese indigenous worldview. Even in the debates with the Daoists, the ultimate argument was always the acceptability of some belief or practice within the Confucian system of rites and propriety. Thus, the *Hongming ji* (Record to Spread and Clarify [Buddhist Doctrine]) by Sengyou (445-518), which documents all these confrontations, was written expressly to

⁵ See Wang 1934; Ch’en 1945; Zürcher 1959; Thiel 1961.

justify the Buddhist faith and present it as an integral and worthy part of Chinese culture (Schmidt-Glntzer 1976).

Third were the confrontations between Buddhists and Daoists in North China. Here the role and position of organized religion, both Buddhist and Daoist, was closely linked with the government of the state. The north at this time was ruled by the Toba, a Xianbi-Hun people. They had increased gradually during the fourth century to extend their domination over all of northern China and had become quite sinicized in the process as they adapted Chinese administrative structures and governmental systems. Nevertheless, their rule was frequently shaken from within, both by rival chieftains rising in rebellion and by messianic cults spreading discontent and apocalyptic revolts (Eberhard 1949). To hold their rule together, the Toba keenly felt the need for an integrative orthodoxy that, supported by a network of institutions throughout the country, would hold the populace together and serve as an effective means of administration and supervision. Buddhist and Daoist clerics eagerly presented their respective teachings as candidates for the needed role.

For the most part, the Buddhists were successful in this venture. The establishment of so-called sangha-households under the Northern Wei gave them solid control over the local population and made their organization indispensable to the central administration (Sargent 1957; Lai 1987; Gernet 1995). But Daoists, too, had successes of this kind. Several northern rulers agreed to receive registers and, thus, become initiated Daoists (Seidel 1983). In addition, the Daoists built their own state religion under Kou Qianzhi, new Celestial Master, who had received divine inspiration from the deified Laozi in 415 (see Yang 1956; Mather 1979; Kohn 2000).

The debates in the north were formally staged court affairs, a forum in which the two competing factions could vie for the emperor's favor. They were, in fact, power struggles, disguised as doctrinal disputes yet often became hard-core polemics. In all cases, the factions tried to present their own teaching as of utmost usefulness to the ruler in active government while discrediting their rival's ability to be of equal service.

The *Xiaodao lun*, commissioned by and presented to Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou in 569, in this context served to demolish Daoism as the ideal teaching with which to rule the Chinese. The debates at the time were part of the emperor's active search for a worldview that would not only keep his subjects content but could be combined with ancient Confucian ritual to supply an orthodoxy for a reunited China.

A fourth kind of debate took place in the first century of the Tang dynasty. Continuing the debates under the Northern Zhou, this set of confrontations, too, was concerned with the establishment of an orthodoxy for the newly unified empire. The Tang ruling house, because their surname Li was identical with that of Laozi, tended to favor Daoism. Pushing their luck, the Daoists Fu

Yi and Li Zhongqing petitioned for a complete abolition of Buddhism. Buddhists, notably the monk Shi Falin, countered with attacks on Daoist theory and practice, compiling and developing much that had been said in earlier debates.

The dialogue flourished. All Tang emperors of the seventh century, concerned with social harmony and an integrated orthodoxy, convened conferences and opened forums for discussion between the two teachings. The debates only ceased with the ascension of Empress Wu, who clearly favored Buddhism (Tonami 1988, 41). Nor were they taken up again in the eighth century, when Emperor Xuanzong created an imperial version of Daoist orthodoxy (Benn 1987). Thereafter, the rebellion of An Lushan threw the country into disorder, and the various religious and political factions had to fight for survival rather than supremacy (Li 1981, 107). After the Tang, the debates flared up only once more, again clamoring for political influence under a foreign dynasty, the Yuan. They ended with a Buddhist victory and a serious proscription and massive persecution of all things Daoist (Ch'en 1945; Thiel 1961; Reiter 1990).