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ABBREVIATIONS

DZ	*Daozang*, Daoist canon as numbered in Schipper 1975c; Komjathy 2002
BZL	*Bianzheng lun* (T. 2210; 52.489c-550c)
DJYS	*Daojiao yishu* (DZ 1129, fasc. 762-63)
fasc.	"fascicle," booklets of Daoist canon, 1925 Shanghai reprint
KH	Kenkyūhan 1988, annotated Japanese translation of the XDL
P.	Dunhuang manuscripts, Pelliot collection
S.	Dunhuang manuscripts, Stein collection
SDZN	*Sandong zhunang* (DZ 1139, fasc. 780-82)
T.	Taishō edition of the Buddhist canon
trans. in	translated in
WSBY	*Wushang biyao* (DZ 1138, fasc. 768-79)
XDL	*Xiaodao lun* (T. 2103; 52.143c-152c)
YJQQ	*Yunji qiqian* (DZ 1032, fasc. 677-702)

INTRODUCTION

The *Xiaodao lun* in the Medieval Debates

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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and shows their inconsistency and absurdity by juxtaposing them with other Daoist texts and with Confucian classics, historical documents, and mathematical calculations.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 ruler.[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 Ch'en 1954,

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* 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 "Turanians" (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

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262. For more details, see Tang 1938; Zürcher 1959; Kimura 1962; Ch'en 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.

[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.

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 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 contest-

[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; Knaul 1986; Kohn 1992, 117-38; Lai 1993, 281.

ants 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.

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" (*huahu*). 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 *Huahu 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 anti-*huahu* theory of their own, claiming that Laozi was originally Kāsyāpa, 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 anti-foreign 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 *saṇgha'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

[5] See Wang 1934; Ch'en 1945; Zürcher 1959; Thiel 1961.

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

The Barbarians

What the Chinese called "barbarians" (*hu*) were, in fact, people of the Central Asian steppes who were of Hunnish or Turkish origin. In ancient Central Asia, there were two groups of people: a western group of Indo-European descent and an eastern group of Huns, Turks, or Mongols. For lack of more exact information, the former are commonly called Scythians, as based on Greek sources, whereas the latter may be grouped as Turko-Mongols.

The two groups were quite distinct, as pointed out by McGovern (1939, 7). The Scythians were Caucasian, tall and bearded, red-haired and green-eyed. They spoke an Indo-European language and appeared on the horizons of history as

wily warriors harrying the settled cultures of ancient Mesopotamia. They became the Aryan invaders of India, at this time having control over horses but not yet riding them, and later founded the Persian empires and opposed the eastern expansion of Rome under the name of Parthians.

The Turko-Mongols, too, as archaeological finds and Chinese sources suggest, were a Caucasian people, tall and hairy, with curly brown hair and brown eyes. They spoke an agglutinating language of the Turko-Altaic family and appeared first as a group of tribes on the northern and eastern borders of the ancient Chinese homeland. They were, at this time, not yet nomadic but practiced limited agriculture, moving on whenever the soil was exhausted and fighting on foot. From the beginning, they seem to have mixed continuously with people of ethnic Chinese origin, gradually changing their racial characteristics (McGovern 1939, 8).

They apparently learned their fabulous horsemanship from the Scythians around 400 B.C.E. as the result of improved contacts throughout North Asia. Chinese sources clearly describe battles with them fighting on foot in the sixth century B.C.E. By 350, however, they were riding and shooting their bows over their shoulders in characteristic steppe fashion (McGovern 1939, 101). They had given up their semi-settled life in favor of the fully nomadic and highly specialized steppe culture they became so famous for.

Around the time China was unified in 221 B.C.E., they organized themselves into a larger political unit. Called Xiongnu by the Chinese, this became the first Hunnish empire, whose fortunes closely coincided with those of the Han dynasty to its south (McGovern 1939, 115). Relations between the two powers varied over the centuries, with especially Emperor Wu (140-87 B.C.E.) making serious inroads into Central Asia.[6] Nevertheless, the Xiongnu maintained their independence, and the two courts exchanged mutual gifts, "tributes" to the Chinese, and entered into regular marriage relationships. Never during this time was the supremacy of the Chinese seriously questioned. The statement of the *Lunyu* (Analects) remained unchallenged that "barbarian tribes with rulers are inferior even to Chinese states without them" (3.5).[7]

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[6] For a detailed exposition of the rise and fall, division and reintegration of the first great Hunnish empire, see McGovern 1939, 130-308.

[7] Throughout this time, myths of the canine nature of the barbarians and their dog-ancestor continued to flourish in China, keeping the outlanders well away from Chinese civilization and even the human community (White 1991, 126-28). The inherent anxiety of the Chinese in the face of things new, strange, and alien was thus expressed in the concrete fear of subhuman people threatening the northern borders and the integrity of Chinese culture (Trauzettel 1992, 315).

After the downfall of the Han dynasty, the Huns, too, suffered from inner turmoil. Their empire was divided, and several small kingdoms took its place. Although some of them were heavily sinicized by then, they were still, in age-old fashion, content to remain on the fringes of Chinese politics. This changed, however, with the increased dissipation of the Western Jin rulers toward the end of the third century. A Xiongnu kingdom northwest of Chang'an, lead by members of the former Xiongnu ruling family, decided that they could rule China better than the Chinese. Claiming descent from the Han emperors through the female line, they adopted the family name Liu and founded their own dynasty, the Liu-Han, in 304 C.E.[8] For the first time, a foreign ruler was making claims to the Chinese throne. Expanding rapidly, the Huns thus struck terror at the Jin court, but fell themselves victim to dissipation and indecision after a few victories had been won.

Two major generals of the Liu-Han, Shi Le and Liu Yao, rose in rebellion and defeated the Xiongnu emperor in 318 (McGovern 1939, 331). Turning against each other, they each founded an independent dynasty, Western Zhao and Eastern Zhao. After ten years of fighting, Shi Le of the Western Zhao emerged victorious and in 330 styled himself the new emperor of northern China (McGovern 1939, 337). His rule and that of his nephew and successor Shi Hu did not prosper. They lacked resources, were too military in orientation, and suffered from ongoing racial conflicts. Their rule is described as one of pure terror in the Chinese sources (Wright 1948, 324). Nonetheless, the Xiongnu rulers made decisive changes in the role Buddhism played on Chinese soil.

Both Shi Le and Shi Hu used Fotudeng as their adviser. The first politically influential Buddhist in Chinese history, he established his authority by making rain, foretelling the future, and healing—all activities the Huns were used to from their native shamans (Wright 1948, 338). Once in power, Fotudeng managed to stay on the winning side in whatever conflict arose at court, thus exerting a strong influence on the politics of the day. Because of his efforts, Buddhism was for the first time accepted as a favored and official religion in China (Lai 1993, 285). He involved Buddhist monks in all activities of the court, created a popular Buddhist religion among the people with the support of the state, and acquired government sponsorship for translations, temples, and Buddhist art (Wright 1948, 327). Doing so, he developed the kind of state-centered Buddhism typical for the north.

[8] See McGovern 1939, 320. For additional discussion, see also Wright 1948, 322; Zürcher 1959, 83. The article by Wright is reprinted in Wright 1990, 34-72.

At this time, Buddhism first extended to the ethnic Chinese and Buddhist art and culture developed rapidly. Under Shi Hu (r. 334-349), moreover, official permission was granted to all his subjects not only to make offerings at Buddhist temples but to become Buddhist monks. As a result, "Buddhist temples and monasteries began to spring up in all parts of the country, and the monasteries were filled with thousands of devout monks of native Chinese origin" (McGovern 1939, 340).[9] Without this Turko-Mongol interference, which continued actively and eventually led to the massive translations of Buddhist texts under Kumārajīva and to the artistic marvels of the cave temples, Buddhism would not have played the active political role that it later did.[10]

Shi Hu was also the first non-Chinese ruler with the stated ambition to control all of China as the son-of-heaven. He even turned against his own compatriots to achieve this aim. Wily and ambitious, well-versed in Chinese statecraft and literature, he was no longer the primitive barbarian described in Chinese polemics, even though large numbers of those continued to be settled on Chinese soil. Shi Hu was a serious foe in the battle for the empire. His fortunes failed, however, owing to the instability of his own court. The flexible inheritance patterns of the Huns who, although much adapted to Chinese customs, never settled for undisputed primogeniture caused his dynasty to fail shortly after his death.[11]

Around the middle of the fourth century, northern China was thus divided among several kingdoms besides Shi Hu's Western Zhao in the northwest. Further into the Ordos region was a small Chinese kingdom known as Liang; in the northeast was the Yan kingdom under the Murong, a Hun-Xianbi tribe; in the center, finally, were the Toba, another Xianbi group, who called their state Dai (McGovern 1939, 347). Like the Liu-Han, the Toba were highly sinicized and from early on adapted Chinese administrative structures and techniques. They profited from the increased Hun-Murong hostilities and, over several decades,

[9] For more details, see also Wright 1948, 327; Yoshikawa 1984, 463; Lai 1993, 286.

[10] For more on the historical development of this time, see Franke 1934; Zürcher 1959; Eberhard 1965; Dien 1991; Lai 1993.

[11] An adopted Chinese member of Shi Hu's family eventually emerged as emperor. He decided to throw in his lot with the Chinese and started a wholesale persecution of Huns, killing them by the tens of thousands (Wright 1948, 324). It is interesting to note that by this time Huns and Chinese were physically so close that they could not always be told apart (McGovern 1939, 350). Zürcher notes that "the infiltrated foreigners constituted one half of the population of Shensi" (1959, 81 and 307).

expanded their rule over most of northern Central Asia, ascending to imperial powers in 386 and holding North China for almost two centuries.[12]

The Conversion of the Barbarians

The theory of the "conversion of the barbarians" developed in this political context. It began, as Wang Weicheng (1934) and Erik Zürcher (1959, 288-320) have admirably demonstrated, in the second century C.E. and took its starting point with Laozi's biography in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (Historical Records). Here Laozi is said to have emigrated from China because of a decline in the virtue of the Zhou. He reached the border pass where the guard Yin Xi asked him to leave a record of his philosophy. He did so, transmitting the *Daode jing* in five thousand words, then left. "Nobody knows what became of him," the text concludes.[13]

Later works—a memorial by Xiang Kai of 166 C.E.,[14] the *Liexian zhuan* (Immortals' Biographies), Pei Songzhi's commentary to the *Sanguo zhi* (Record of the Three Kingdoms), the *Xiyu zhuan* (Chronicle of Western Regions), and the *Gaoshi zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Men)—developed the basic narrative to have Laozi continue his westward journey, either with Yin Xi or alone, and convert the barbarians of Central and South Asia in the name of Buddha.[15]

These documents referred mildly to a historical identity of Buddhism and Daoism, treating the barbarians with indulgence.[16] Although different and culturally inferior, the Central Asians were known and could be dealt with (Nakajima 1985, 254). The inhabitants of India, in particular, were seen as "kind and full of love towards men, they adore the Buddha and therefore do not attack others, they are weak and afraid of war" (Zürcher 1959, 304, based on Han sources). The new

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[12] The Toba were eventually supplanted in northern Asia by another Central-Asian tribe, known as Tujue or Turks. For details, see Saunders 1971, 18-23.

[13] *Shiji* 63. See Fung and Bodde 1952, 1:170; Lau 1982, X; Kohn 1991, 62; 1992, 41-42.

[14] For a translation and analysis of the memorial, see Pelliot 1906, 386-90; Crespigny 1971, 29; Petersen 1989.

[15] For a detailed discussion of all these texts and their references to the conversion legend, see Wang 1934 and Zürcher 1959. On the role of the conversion in the Laozi legend, see Kohn 1989d. For its application as a framework narrative in other Daoist scriptures, see Seidel 1984; Kohn 1991, 64-70.

[16] The tendency to identify the two teachings also appears in early Buddhist texts of the time, such as the *Mouzi lihuo lun* (Mouzi's Correction of Errors; T. 2102; 52.1a-7a), which describe Buddhist attainment in terms taken from the *Daode jing* and the Buddha like the deified Laozi. See Yoshioka 1959, 32.

teaching was a curiosity but not threatening, just as the Huns beyond the borders were clearly distinct and politically and culturally inferior.

This situation changed around the year 300, when a full-fledged conversion scripture, the *Huahu jing*, was compiled by Wang Fu. This event is recorded in Huijiao's and in Pei Ziye's *Gaoseng zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks), in the *Jinshi zalu* (Miscellaneous Records of the Age of Jin), and in the *Youming lu* (Record of Darkness and Light; Zürcher 1949, 294). In this "Conversion Scripture," the originally innocuous theory for the first time was used against Buddhism as a means to belittle and denigrate the newly arrived teaching. By polemical means it established the cultural superiority of the ethnic Chinese.

Zürcher relates this change to the "atmosphere of fear and suspense and the awareness of acute danger" in the light of massive immigration of foreigners and more military activity of the Huns (1959, 307). In addition to this sense of danger and the strong presence of non-Chinese in the country, the fact that at this time a Xiongnu ruler laid first claims ever to the Chinese imperial throne tilted the precarious Chinese-Central Asian balance. No longer a clearly defined and outside entity, the "barbarians" suddenly were part of Chinese interior politics, worthy foes in all respects who might, and eventually did, conquer large parts of the country and establish themselves as rulers.

Whereas the conversion theory before had been used only to explain the appearance of a new religion in Central Asia, now it fulfilled the function of bolstering Chinese ethnic superiority. The Huns and Indians were no longer curious and strange yet ultimately predictable and culturally inferior peoples. Suddenly, they appeared as equals and were threatening Chinese imperial integrity with their own means and on their own level. Far from uncouth barbarians, the Huns at this time and the Toba shortly after were aspiring to be the equals of the Chinese in culture and social structure and their superiors in military craft.

Before, the "conversion of the barbarians" had been a logical continuation of the well-known Laozi legend and a plausible explanation not only for the appearance of Buddhism but also for its welcome in China where the theory justified its place among the higher teachings. Now, under the impact of a threatening new political force, it was turned into a vivid expression of xenophobia and the helpless aggression generated against an overwhelming foe. The strangeness of culture and customs that once allowed the Central Asians to overrun China but had increasingly been replaced by Chinese cultural traits was now unearthed and turned against them, marking them as despicable and lowly. Buddhism, the teaching associated with the west, at this point became a vehicle for the expression of something entirely political and ethnic. As in the later debates, religion here was used as a means to political aims.

4/ Laughing at the Dao