

THOMAS JÜLCH:

The Zhengzheng lun by Xuanyi: A Buddhist Apologetic Scripture of Tang China.

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Chinese Buddhist apologetic literature – writings that defend Buddhism against “Daoist” or “Confucian” (and eventually also Christian) critics, real or imagined – are an invaluable source of information on the intellectual history of China.

The book under review offers a full-length translation of the late seventh-century *Zhengzheng lun* 甄正論 (ZZL). It also includes an introduction, in which Jülch presents the religious-political setting of the ZZL; places the text against the backdrop of the genre; summarizes the arguments it contains; and attempts a comparative foray into late antique Christian apologetics.

The ZZL is an absorbing read, not least on account of its confrontational tone. Written during the tumultuous reign of Empress Wu, the text adopts the conceit of a dialogue – even a clash – between, on the Daoist side, a “Young Gentleman Obstructed by the Conventional” (Zhisu Gongzi 滯俗公子), and champion of Buddhism, the “Master who Reveals the Truth” (the eponymous *Zhengzheng Xiansheng* 甄正先生). The Master, with unforgiving poise, demonstrates to his young and naïve interlocutor that Daoism, especially the Lingbao tradition, is so much folly cooked up by a clique of opportunistic cynics, spiritually vapid and injurious to the state. Usually in Buddhist apologetics, the Buddhist plays defence; here he leads the attack.

In addition to its tone, another remarkable feature of the ZZL is the enigma of its author. According to the Buddhist tradition itself, the author, Xuanyi, was the paradigmatic convert. At first the head priest at the main Daoist temple in the capital, he eventually realized the superiority of Buddhism, accepted a prestigious Buddhist abbacy – and from this perspective composed the ZZL, a sincere reckoning with his former faith.

This traditional view, itself clearly a form of apologetics, does not stand up to historical scrutiny, however. In 1997 Antonello Palumbo argued that in fact Xuanyi was less a pious seeker, and more a political operator, always “hand in glove” with Empress Wu, her do-it-all man in the imperial management of religious affairs. While Xuanyi did hold appointments first at a Daoist and then at a Buddhist institution, both these appointments – and likewise eventually the ZZL itself, an anti-Daoism hit-piece produced on commission – were mainly political in nature, and not primarily motivated by any genuine religious motivations.

Surely, if this is even partly true, then fundamental questions arise, not only as to whether it is appropriate to consider Xuanyi, as Jülch seems to do, a “convert” (p. 11), but even whether it is justified to present the ZZL as an “apologetic” treatise at all.

Regrettably, although Jülch is aware of Palumbo’s critical reassessment of Xuanyi (p. 3), he does not consider its implications for questions like these. (Neither does he refer to a 2017 article by Zhang Peng 张鹏, which further problematizes the authorship question.)

The editors deserve our gratitude for including the Chinese original, which they took from the Taishō canon, alongside the translation. However, their decision to retain the Taishō punctuation was less fortunate. Although the Taishō edition was and remains a monument to scholarship, its punctuation is arbitrary and indeed often misleading. There are also occasional problems with *pinyin* transliteration (*Yiweitonggua* (p. 25), *Yixugua* (p. 26) – both should be split), and infelicities in

the English prose (“The Gongzi in a fearful manner said under shock”, the ungrammatical use of “respectively” (pp. 2, 8, 16, *et passim*), and of the definite article with proper names (“the Gongzi”, “the Xiansheng”)).

A more significant issue is that no serious attempt is made to consult systematically the available ancient print and manuscript editions of the ZZL. In most cases Jülch simply reproduces the text printed by the Taishō editors. While in some cases he does emend, apparently using the alternative readings listed in the Taishō’s limited apparatus, he does not inform the reader when he does so, or why. A scientific edition would go back to the sources used by the Taishō editors, and to editions not available to them, and re-edit the text.

Failure to do so creates problems. (Due to constraints of space, I limit my sample to pages 19–40 only.)

P.22 prints *zija xingguo* 自家刑國. In note 12 Jülch emends 刑 to 型, without citing evidence. But, to take just one of many witnesses available, the Fuzhou edition kept in the Kunaichō in Tokyo offers the reading 形. This variant yields 自家形國, which has an exact parallel in a commentary to the *Shiji*, the roughly contemporaneous *Shiji Suoyin* 史記索隱 – a potentially important intertextual moment that we are more likely to miss if we do not consider the alternative reading.

P.29 prints *fuzi* 夫子. In note 43 the author grapples with what to make of this *fuzi*, which is a term of respect, and as such is inappropriate in this context. But the same Fuzhou edition does not print *fu* 夫 here at all, leaving only *zi*, which is fitting. Jülch’s excursus in the note may prove unnecessary.

P.36 prints *famen* 法門. Once again, the Fuzhou edition does not have *fa*, only *men*. The difference between *famen* and *men* is significant in this polemical context, since *men* is entirely free of the Buddhist overtones which inhere in *famen*.

The Fuzhou readings cited above may or may not be “correct” – only a critical edition of all available witnesses would allow the scholar to make an informed decision. I list them here merely as a signal of how much is at stake with seeming minutiae.

Some of my reservations concern not the Chinese text but the translation (again, pages 19–40 only): *Ling tai* 靈臺 (p. 20) is not “numinous terrace” but “the stand of the numinous” mirror, as in the celebrated verses from the *Platform Sutra* tradition.

Yan xiang 言象 (p. 21) is likely not “words and form” but “words and images”, a nod to the classical theory of meaning that distinguishes between “words” 言, “images” 象, and “meaning” 意.

Jiao zhu 教主 (p. 35) is not “creator of teachings” but simply “narrator”, “main speaker” (paradigmatically, the Buddha in Buddhist sutras).

Baben saiyuan 拔本塞原 (p. 35) refers not to “aggressive and foolish policies” (n. 68), but to lacking a basis: here, the Lingbao texts are baseless, not having been spoken by any real “narrator”.

Mingzhen xingdao 明真行道 (p. 39) is not “the Dao is practiced purely”; *mingzhen* refers to the much-studied rituals of swearing an “alliance with the Perfected”.

All these are non-trivial problems. Yet, given that in the study of Chinese Buddhism in general we need more full-length translations of primary sources, this book is a welcome contribution. The introduction is both informative and accessible, and hence suitable for use in undergraduate courses on premodern China, while the translation itself will be relevant to scholars of Chinese religious history, as well as to non-China specialists interested in inter-religious relations.

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