The "Illustration of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" and the Contention Between Buddhism and Taoism during the Yuan Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

"Laozi's Transformation of the Hu" is a renowned historical event first documented in the Records of the Grand Historian. However, over successive generations, speculation has led to the interpretation that, after Laozi passed through the Hangu Pass toward the west, he was subsequently depicted as having "become a Buddhist." In the seventh year of the Dading era of the Jin dynasty (1167 AD), Qiu Chuji of the Quanzhen school received protection from the Mongol imperial court; consequently, Taoist influence expanded rapidly, with temples and monasteries established across the north. Drawing on the text of the Laozi's Transformation of the Hu, he created the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi; these images were widely disseminated through stone inscriptions and woodblock printing, which provoked widespread dissatisfaction within Buddhist circles. In 1258, at the behest of Möngke Khan, Kublai Khan convened a debate between eminent Buddhist and Taoist scholars at the Wan 'an Pavilion in Kaiping Prefecture; this event is recorded in history as the "Wu-Wu Debate." With Kublai Khan's support, the Buddhist scholar Pāśābā emerged victorious. Accordingly, in 1281, the Yuan court issued an edict comprehensively banning and destroying the steles and illustrated scrolls containing these images, in an attempt to erase the associated memory. This ban did not achieve its intended effect; instead, the prohibitory edicts and decrees preserved a substantial body of related documentary material. Using the Record of Debates on Falsification during the Zhiyuan Era and its later reprints as core materials, this paper explores the historical process through which this phenomenon emerged.

Keywords: *The Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi, The destruction of images, The conflict between Buddhism and Taoism during the Yuan dynasty, Historical memory*

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1258, at the behest of Mongke Khan, Kublai Khan convened a debate between the Buddhist and Taoist traditions at Wan 'an Pavilion in Kaiping Prefecture. During the debate, the focus shifted to the authenticity of the "Laozi's Transformation of the Hu." As a representative of Buddhism, Pagsa cited both the "Records of the Grand Historian" and the "Tao Te Ching," which contain no records of "transforming the Hu," thereby asserting that the "Laozi's Transformation of the Hu" was a later forgery. Under this argument, the Taoist side found themselves unable to counter effectively and were defeated. The Taoist debater was ordered to have his hair shaved, and the scripture tablets were burned. With the sudden emergence of the "Laozi's Transformation of the Hu," Taoism also had this story engraved on stone tablets, creating the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi." For a long time, research on the religious history of China has largely focused on textual materials, treating the accompanying images as mere illustrations of the scriptures. However, studies in both religious and art history have demonstrated that the intuitive, public, and replicable nature of images surpasses the dissemination capabilities of texts. Yet, for years, academic research on this topic has primarily concentrated on the philological study of the "Laozi's Transformation of the Hu," neglecting the significant role played by the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" in the Buddhist-Taoist debate. This article aims to address and resolve the following issues: How did the Quanzhen School

shift the focus of Laozi's Transformation of the Hu from textual scripture to visual imagery? Why did the Yuan Dynasty's vigorous efforts to suppress and destroy the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" fail to achieve the desired outcome? Using prohibition documents such as the "Zhiyuan Record of Debating Falsities" and later reproductions as materials, this article combines textual and visual analyses to provide a new perspective on understanding the Buddhist-Taoist debate during the Yuan Dynasty and the fate of ancient religious imagery in China.

2. LAOZI'S TRANSFORMATION OF THE HU FROM TEXT TO IMAGE

The story of "Laozi's assimilation of the Hu" is a narrative that has accumulated layer upon layer over several centuries. According to contemporary sources, the earliest record of this story appears in Volume 63 of the Records of the Grand Historian, in the "Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei": "Laozi cultivated the Way and virtue; he made it his aim to withdraw from the world and remain unknown. After living in the Zhou state for a considerable period, he observed the decline of the state and subsequently departed. Upon reaching the pass, Yin Xi, the gatekeeper, said to him: "You are about to withdraw; please compose a book for me." Thereupon, Laozi wrote a work consisting of two volumes, in which he expounded the meaning of the Way and virtue in more than 5,000 words; he then departed, and no one knows where he ultimately went." [1] According to the three commentaries, "custom" refers to Hangu Pass. Thus, this passage establishes the historical fact that "Laozi traveled westward through Hangu Pass." At the same time, the phrase "no one knows where he ultimately went" indicates that it remains unknown what happened to Laozi after his departure westward.

The phrase "one does not know where it ultimately ended" has also left ample room for imagination regarding the complete story of "Laozi's integration into the Hu peoples." In the ninth year of the Yanxi era under Emperor Huan of the Eastern Han dynasty (166 AD), Xiang Kai submitted a memorial stating, "Some claim that Laozi entered the lands of the Hu peoples and became a Buddhist monk." [2] The use of the two characters "or yan" indicates that, at that time, "Huahuxu" had not yet risen beyond the level of mere rumor. By the reign of Emperor Hui of the Western Jin dynasty, the Taoist Wang Fu and the Buddhist monk Bo Yuan repeatedly lost their debates; consequently, Wang Fu composed the Laozi Huahu Jing to falsely portray Buddhism.[3] The text of the Huahuang was thus solidified into a specialized scripture. Over the following several centuries, the scripture underwent repeated additions and revisions; by the Tang dynasty, it had developed into a ten-volume edition. By the Wei and Jin periods, the Book of Wei, Biography of the Western Regions, records that "fifty li west of Khotan lies the Bimo Temple, which is said to be the place where Laozi transformed the Hu people into Buddhists."[4] This legend was associated with a physical "remnant." By the Tang dynasty, fragments of Tang-era handwritten manuscripts unearthed from the Library Cave in Dunhuang completed the narrative of Laozi's westward journey and his transformation of the Hu peoples. This also represents the most widely circulated version of "Laozi's transformation of the Hu peoples" during the medieval period.

It is worth noting that every refinement of Huahua's text at the textual level has been associated with the relative rise and fall of Buddhist and Daoist forces.

In the seventh year of the Jindai Ding era (1167 AD), Wang Chongyang founded the Quanzhen School, which advocated the unification of the Three Teachings. In 1222, his disciple Qiu Chuji traveled west to the Snow Mountains to meet Genghis Khan; for his advocacy of "stopping killing," he was granted the title of "immortal" and was entrusted with overseeing Taoism throughout the realm. Consequently, Quanzhen Taoism received the protection of the Mongol khanate, and its influence expanded rapidly: it established

[1] Sima Qian: Records of the Grand Historian, Volume 63, "Biographies of Laozi and Han Fei"; Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 2141。

[2]Fan Ye, Book of the Later Han, Volume 30, "Biography of Xiang Kai," Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1965, p. 1083。

[3] Huijiao: Biographies of Eminent Monks, Volume 1, Biography of Bo Yuan; Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1992, p. 46。

[4]Wei Shou: Book of Wei, Volume 102, "Biographies of the Western Regions"; Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974, p. 2264。

numerous temples and monasteries across the north, and repeatedly occupied Buddhist temples and converted them into Taoist monasteries. Against this backdrop, Quanzhen Taoists, drawing on the text of the Laozi Huahu Jing, created the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi—a series of eighty-one consecutive images that comprehensively presents the narrative of Laozi's successive births, his departure from the frontier to impart the scriptures, and his westward journey to transform the Hu people and attain Buddhahood. [5] This directly refutes the notion of Buddhism's independent origin and reduces Shakyamuni to a manifestation of Laozi.

The Quanzhen School adopted the practice of carving images onto stone and erecting monuments: it engraved the Illustration of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi on stone tablets and installed them throughout its numerous temples and monasteries. This clearly borrowed the promotional method favored by Buddhism, which involves carving stone statues. At the same time, the Quanzhen School also used woodblock printing among the general populace, producing woodblock prints that were widely distributed among the public for devotees to post and recite; thus, these images became deeply integrated into the daily lives of ordinary people. Through the combined efforts of stone carving and woodblock printing, the illustrations reached the illiterate general public, while the Buddhist scriptures reached the literate elite. Consequently, images of Laozi's transformation into the Hu people spread extensively both within temples and among the populace, becoming deeply ingrained in people's consciousness.

3. THE CONTENTION BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND TAOISM DURING THE YUAN DYNASTY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE ILLUSTRATED EIGHTY-ONE TRANSFORMATIONS OF LAOZI

Although the Illustrated Account of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi was derived from the canonical text, its narrative logic differs considerably from that of the text itself. The canonical text excels in narrative, whereas the image is best suited to visual representation. The first section of the Illustrated Account of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi depicts Laozi's birth and his assistance in the affairs of a sage king; the middle section presents images of Laozi traveling west beyond the Hangu Pass; and the final section depicts Laozi traversing the shifting sands and transforming into a Buddha in India. Each image is accompanied by explanatory text, forming a "visual chronicle."

The "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" visually materializes Laozi's transformation into a Buddhist figure, explaining that the Buddha did not originate from the West but was instead a "manifestation" of Laozi from China. Through tangible representation, the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" completes what the scriptures failed to achieve: it transforms the abstract proposition that "Buddhism is subordinate to Taoism" into a visible reality. This significantly enhances its dissemination among illiterate ordinary people and facilitates the establishment of a hierarchical order between Buddhism and Taoism in their minds.

In 1258, Möngke Khan ordered Kublai Khan to preside over a major debate between Buddhism and Taoism in Kaiping Prefecture, an event known in historical records as the "Wuwu Debate." Kublai Khan personally presided over the debate, while court officials such as Yao Shu participated in its deliberation and evaluation; Buddhism was represented by P ā ś ā pa, while Taoism was represented by Li Zhichang and others who held the Qianzhen school of thought. [6]

When the debate between Buddhism and Daoism first emerged, the clash between the two sides centered on textual documents. P ā lsabpa's argumentative strategy was concise and forceful; he maintained that while the account of Laozi's journey westward beyond the Hangu Pass is recorded in the Records of the Grand Historian, there is no record of the narrative that Laozi "transformed the Hu people into Buddhists" in either the Records of the Grand Historian or the Tao Te Ching; thus, the idea that Laozi became a Buddhist after converting the Hu people was a later interpretive construction. In this debate, Daoism ultimately lost.

[5] Shi Xiangmai, Record of the Detection of Falsifications in the Dayuan–Zhiyuan Period, vol. 3; Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press, 2025, pp. 63–84.

[6] Shi Xiangmai, Record of the Detection of Falsifications in the Dayuan–Zhiyuan Period, vol. 3; Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press, 2025, pp. 63–84.

However, the deeper implications of this dispute went beyond a simple victory or defeat in the realm of textual scholarship. The Buddhist side understood that even if all copies of the Sutra on Laozi's Transformation of the Hu People were burned, as long as the stele inscriptions and illustrations depicting Laozi's Eighty-one Transformations remained, the narrative of Laozi's conversion could continue to spread among the populace through these images. Once images are detached from their textual context and acquire an independent channel of dissemination, their power to shape public perception can even surpass that of written classics. Consequently, Buddhism proposed that not only should the relevant scriptures be burned, but the associated images should also be eradicated—in other words, all inscriptions, stele carvings, and illustrated plates should be completely removed. At this point, within the Buddhist – Daoist dispute, the Illustrations of Laozi's Eighty-one Transformations were tacitly recognized by Buddhism as a "source of threat" or "weapon" independent of any textual source. Buddhism's attacks on these images precisely served to demonstrate the potency of image-based dissemination.

4. THE CONTENTION BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND TAOISM DURING THE YUAN DYNASTY AND THE BAN AND DESTRUCTION OF THE ILLUSTRATED EIGHTY-ONE TRANSFORMATIONS OF LAOZI

However, the judicial ruling issued in 1258 did not take effect immediately. In the eighteenth year of the Zhiyuan era (1281), the dispute between Buddhism and Taoism resurfaced; Kublai issued an edict ordering the entire printing plates of all Buddhist scriptures, with the exception of the Tao Te Ching, to be burned. He also ordered the complete investigation, prohibition, and destruction of the stone inscriptions and illustrations of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi erected by temples and monasteries throughout the realm. [7] Consequently, the stone tablets, carved plates, and paintings related to the "Laozi Eighty-one Transformations" were all confiscated. As a result, the physical remains of the "Laozi Eighty-one Transformations" from the Yuan Dynasty were almost entirely lost, with only scattered fragments of stones and records surviving. This suppression and destruction was not an isolated case in the history of image destruction in China; for instance, Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou suppressed Buddhism, and Emperor Wuzong of the Tang dynasty carried out a Buddhist suppression during the Huichang era, both of which involved large-scale destruction of Buddhist statues and sutra pillars. However, the suppression of Taoist images in the 18th year of the Zhiyuan era was particularly unique: the ruling regime intervened in the conflict between Buddhism and Taoism, leading to the complete prohibition and destruction of specific narrative images, with an intensity far exceeding previous instances.

However, the ban on destruction did not completely erase the relevant cultural memories; instead, it gave rise to a series of related historical memories concerning the preservation of the images. First, the official edict prohibiting destruction itself constituted a special type of documentary archive. These materials were all recorded in the Zhiyuan Bianwei Lu. The Zhiyuan Bianwei Lu was compiled to refute the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi; it provides a detailed record of the names associated with the images and their general descriptions. Thus, a document system originally intended to advocate for the burning of the images instead preserved, through written records, complete documentation of the prohibited images.

At the same time, the prohibition against destruction also imbues this visual narrative with a sense of taboo; the taboo itself continuously fuels the motivation to reproduce and reprint it. After the Ming and Qing dynasties, practitioners of Taoism frequently reprinted the Illustrated Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi under the guise of textual research and restoration; consequently, most of the ancient Illustrated Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi that have survived today are reprints produced during the Ming and Qing periods.

In the history of world religions, incidents involving the prohibition and destruction of artworks similar to the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" have occurred repeatedly. For example, the famous iconoclasm movement in the Byzantine Empire during the 8th to 9th centuries and the Protestant purge of Catholic church icons during the Reformation. These actions

[7] Shi Xiangmai, Record of the Detection of Falsifications in the Dayuan–Zhiyuan Period, vol. 3; Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Press, 2025, pp. 63–84.

ostensibly aimed to eliminate image-related symbols, but in reality, they sought to erase the memory of these images among the populace. The uniqueness of the prohibition and destruction of the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi" lies in the fact that both the prohibition and its execution were carried out by a third-party imperial authority, transforming it from a purely religious conflict into a politically motivated state action. In the history of religious art in China, imperial authority plays a pivotal role, as it can intervene in governance at any time. This form of "image politics" is the key to understanding religious art in China.

Although the physical image of the Yuan-dynasty work The Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi has disappeared, records of its destruction, as well as later reproductions and catalogues of various stele inscriptions, have survived. At present, although researchers cannot directly view the original work, they can rely on the dual evidence provided by records of its destruction and its later reproductions to reconstruct the social meanings that the image once carried.

5. CONCLUSION

In the study of art history, the destruction and banning of images have always been a primary focus of research; however, due to the scarcity of archival materials, most studies have been unable to explore these issues in depth. Nevertheless, the rise and fall of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi illustrate that the value of a religious artwork lies not only in its aesthetic form and level of craftsmanship, but more importantly in how it is produced, viewed, contested, and destroyed — precisely the academic frontier shared by the history of material culture and the study of image politics.

From the Records of the Grand Historian of the Han dynasty, which states that Laozi "went west beyond the Hangu Pass," to the compilation of the Laozi's Transformation of the Hu People during the Western Jin dynasty, the discourse on Laozi's transformation remained largely confined to textual debate. During the Mongol-Yuan period, the Quanzhen school of Taoism rose to prominence. In order to expand its religious influence, its followers transformed this highly controversial narrative into an image: the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi. Through stele inscriptions and woodcuts, Quanzhen Taoism disseminated among the common people the important conclusion that Buddhism originated within Taoism. Consequently, this intensified the conflict between Buddhism and Taoism. In essence, the emergence, dissemination, and subsequent prohibition or destruction of the Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi were products of the power struggle within the Mongol-Yuan political and religious landscape.

In 1258, the Wuwu Debate initiated its confrontation by examining the authenticity of documents, and the ultimate goal of Buddhist demands was not merely the destruction of scriptures but also the complete eradication of steles, engraved plates, and paintings, thereby acknowledging the threat posed by the independence of images. In the 18th year of the Zhiyuan era, the Yuan court intervened in sectarian disputes through the power of imperial authority and implemented a comprehensive ban on the destruction of the "Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi." The image eradication led by imperial authority differed from the destruction of idols in historical Buddhist eradication movements; its objective was not to oppose idol worship but to eliminate a specific set of narrative images serving sectarian competition, highlighting the political attributes carried by ancient religious images in China.

The campaign to prohibit destruction appeared to eliminate the physical images, yet objectively preserved the catalogs and summaries of those images. The ban imbued this set of images with a sense of taboo, which in turn prompted the continuous reproduction and reprinting of Taoist works during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The study of The Eighty-one Transformations of Laozi also provides insights for other related research on the prohibition and destruction of images; the study of art history need not be confined to surviving physical objects, as destroyed images likewise possess significant value.