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Research Articles

Examples of Buddho–Daoist interaction: concepts of the afterlife in early medieval epigraphic sources

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Introduction

THIS paper is based on a larger study of concepts of the afterlife in the engraved texts of 496 entombed epigraphs (*muzhi* 墓誌) and 494 votive stele inscriptions (*zaoxiang-ji* 造像記) from northern China from the fifth and sixth century CE, using the database of Wei Jin Nanbeichao Stone inscriptions 魏晉南北朝石刻語料庫, part of the larger database of excavated documents from the Wei Jin Nanbeichao 魏晉南北朝實物語料庫 at the Center for the Study and Application of Chinese Characters at ECNU Shanghai.¹

The methodological approach of the study is that of an intellectual historian rather than that of art historian or archaeologist. While this approach obviously neglects many fascinating and important aspects of the material studied, reading the inscriptions as texts can offer new perspectives on the study of intellectual history, in particular on the question of Buddho–Daoist interaction.

Epigraphic documents from the Six Dynasties period, a period that may be considered formative for Chinese Buddhism as well as Daoism, reflect the interaction of Buddhism

1. The ID numbers and image numbers used to identify the inscriptions mentioned refer to this database. The images shown are taken from that database. I thank Professor Wang Ping and Professor Zang Kehe from the Center for the Study of Chinese Characters at ECNU for allowing me to work with this database before its publication and to use its material. In addition to the database at ECNU, I have also consulted several other databases for stone inscriptions, which are listed in the references. It has to be noted that in general not all epigraphic texts we find in these databases go back to dated and localizable excavations. Some of the texts exist in the form of rubbings in collections, others were transmitted in collections. Wherever the place of excavation of an inscription is known, I add it.

Editor's note: The full-size versions of the images in this article are available for download from the same webpage.

and Daoism and traditional Chinese concepts in a different way from the received literature. Firstly, different from the received literature, which originated mostly from the social levels of the educated elite, epigraphic documents offer a glimpse on writings deriving from a broader array of social classes. Furthermore, while received literature has come down to us through a process of copying and collecting, which also involved the editing and streamlining of documents, epigraphic documents have survived unedited; sometimes because of calligraphic or artistic considerations, but often simply by chance, good climate conditions, or similar factors, which did not interfere with the intellectual content of the documents. They offer therefore something like a “cross-section” of ideas at a given time and place.

In terms of concepts, Buddhism as well as Daoism were dynamically evolving sets of ideas in a big pool of other sets of ideas. Mixing, co-option, etc., occurred on all levels;² yet, mixing or not, Buddhism and Daoism existed as two different entities. And it was in early medieval China that Daoism and Buddhism began to compete as such different entities. Understanding the processes, mechanisms and criteria of these contemporaneous trends of mixing and differentiating, poses one of our challenges in the study of the religions of the Six Dynasties period. The difficulties are amplified by the fact that the process did not occur in an intellectual or religious vacuum; it occurred in the context of a backdrop of firmly established traditions, beliefs and concepts, which were based on what has been called “classical religion”.³ The epigraphic materials might offer a glimpse of some facets of these complex processes.

Votive stele inscriptions and entombed grave inscriptions both concern the after-life of the dead, yet their purpose and outlook is very different. Engraved in stone in early medieval China, these epigraphic documents portray an amazing variety of concepts of the after-life. They offer glimpses of the process of intermingling concepts whose origins defy our scholarly categorization into Buddhist, Daoist or Confucian, building images that go beyond sectarian or doctrinal definitions.

Concepts of the afterlife in early medieval China

Death, the end of all life-processes, as one of the great and unavoidable events of human life, has always raised questions, needs, fears and anxieties. In China as in many cultures, religions developed strategies to help human beings deal with the many different issues that arise when a beloved person dies: commemoration, consolation, proper disposal of the corpse, alleviating anxieties and fears, as well as answers to the burning question

2. See, e.g., Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), for several examples. See also Friederike Assandri, “Early Medieval Daoist texts: Strategies of Reading and Fusion of Horizons”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (Sept. 2010): 381–396.

3. C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese society: a study of contemporary social functions of religion and some of their historical factors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 23.

whether there could be some continuation after physical death and if so—what, how, and where?

In early medieval China, different religious traditions co-existed side by side, offering a wide variety of concepts of the afterlife. In an “institutional” framework of religions there were established well delineated responses to the question of afterlife, responses that were usually also cemented in rituals dealing with the dead, funerals, and mourning. Yet, since different religions and traditions existed side by side, ultimately any individual confronting the loss of a beloved person had a variety of concepts and beliefs of different origins to choose from in his efforts to find consolation and create meaning of the experience of death. This comparative freedom of choice with regard to personal beliefs is reflected in the variety and diversity of concepts of afterlife present in epigraphic documents of the Six Dynasties period. In terms of the question of “mixing”, “borrowing”, “co-opting”, “influence”, “hybridity”, “syncretism” or however we choose to term the phenomenon of the combination of ideas originating in different religions in order to create meaning—or in the case at hand express a vision of afterlife—these documents are valuable. Carved in stone (and hence never edited) during a period that saw intense interaction between Buddhism, Daoism and traditional Chinese worldviews as well as the proliferation and formative development of the first two, they document a great variety of concepts of the afterlife current at the time.

The background:

Ancient afterlife beliefs—ascend, descent, and immortality

In China, from about the sixth century BCE a concept of dual souls emerged, one more rarefied, the other more physical. At death the two souls separate. The rarefied or spiritual soul ascends, and the physical or bodily soul descends with the corpse into the grave—from where it enters the underworld. Common names are *hun* 魂 and *bo* 魄; however, other designations are also employed and even the numbers vary.⁴

Since the dual concept of soul seems crucial for the interpretation of the epigraphic material under study, a short discussion of the background of this concept is needed. Lo surmises that possibly prior to the sixth century CE there existed differing concepts of the soul in the north and in the south, respectively called *hun* and *bo*.⁵ The earliest term for a soul would have been *bo*, a term traceable to an oracle bone inscription from the eleventh

4. Spiritual components could be also called *shen* 神, *ling* 靈, or *jing* 精; the physical part is also referred to as *xing* 形, form, or *zhi* 質, material substance; occasionally the number is not one each but three *hun* and seven *bo* souls; cf. Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 63.

5. Yuet-Keung Lo, “The destiny of *shen* (soul) and the genesis of early medieval Confucian metaphysics in China (221–578 AD.)” (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1991), 285; cf. also Yü Ying-shih, “Oh Soul, Come Back! A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (1987).

century BCE. The term was found mainly in the north; according to Lo, it designated a principle of life and also of thought and action, the absence of which eventually—not necessarily immediately—would lead to death.⁶

In the south, documented in the *Chuci* [Songs of Chu], there existed a concept of soul called *hun* in addition to a rather vague concept of *bo*.⁷ As described beautifully in the poem “Zhao hun 招魂” [Calling Back the Soul] of the *Chuci*, this *hun* soul was assumed to depart from the body after death and travel or roam—the poem’s warnings against going in the four directions, heaven or the underworld imply that the soul was supposed to be able to go there—even if from the point of view of the living human beings calling the soul back, it would be wiser to stay in the comfort of one’s home and body.⁸ According to Lo, the dualistic concept of *hun* and *bo* emerged roughly in the sixth century BCE, as the concept of *hun* also spread in the north.⁹

The resulting dualistic concept of a soul, of which we find traces in the classics, assumed a person had two souls residing in the body, one was the *hun* soul and one was the *bo* soul (in some texts also three *hun* and seven *bo* souls¹⁰). The *hun* soul is related to *yang* 陽, ascension and spirit, while the *bo* soul is related to *yin* 陰, the body and the grave. This is not the place to research in detail the developments that led from two distinct concepts of one soul to a concept of dual souls of each human being; here we shall only describe the phenomenon based on a few citations.

A passage of the *Liji*, “Jiao te sheng 郊特牲”, discusses different sacrificial practices of past dynasties, and here the terms *hun* and *bo* are employed clearly in reference to what ascends to heaven (*hun*) and what descends to the underworld (*bo*). The terms are further used in binomial expressions *hunqi* 魂氣, soul-ether, and *xingbo* 形魄, “physical form”-soul, and they are said to return to heaven and earth respectively. Thus here we have a concept of *bo* related to physical form descending to the underworld and a concept of *hun* related to *qi* 氣 (ether) ascending to the heavens. Since both are to receive sacrifice, we may reasonably assume that they refer to the ancestors and thus to “souls”.

有虞氏之祭也、尚用氣；血腥爛祭、用氣也。殷人尚聲、臭味未成、滌蕩其聲；樂三闋、然後出迎牲。聲音之號、所以詔告於天地之間也。周人尚臭、灌用鬯臭、郁合鬯；臭、陰達於淵泉。灌以圭璋、用玉氣也。既灌、

6. Yuet-Keung Lo, “The destiny of *shen* (soul)”, 285.

7. Yü Ying-shih, “Oh Soul, Come Back!”, 373.

8. An alternative interpretation of this is that the soul is recalled not to the body, but to the grave—which was equipped with replicas of all the comforts a house would offer. Compare Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 52 and 78–79.

9. Yuet-Keung Lo, “The destiny of *shen* (soul)”, 287. For a different interpretation of the emergence of the two souls concept see Ng, Zhiru, “The Formation and Development of the Dizang Cult in Medieval China” (PhD thesis, University of Arizona, 2000), 277: Ng assumes that the emergence of the two soul concept between the Warring States and Han is connected to a religious trend related to “a growing consciousness of individuality which led to the birth of a twofold classification of the self into the *hun* (heavenly) and *bo* (earthly) spirits”.

10. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 63.

然後迎牲、致陰氣也。蕭合黍稷；臭、陽達於牆屋。故既奠、然後炳蕭合膾臠。凡祭、慎諸此。魂氣歸于天、形魄歸于地。故祭、求諸陰陽之義也。殷人先求諸陽、周人先求諸陰。¹¹

14. At the sacrifices in the time of the lord of Yü the smell was thought most important. There were the offerings of blood, of raw flesh, and of sodden flesh—all these were employed for the sake of the smell.

15. Under the Yin, sound was thought most important. Before there was any smell or flavour, the music was made to resound clearly. It was not till there had been three performances of it that they went out to meet (and bring in) the victim. The noise of the music was a summons addressed to all between heaven and earth.

16. Under the Kâu, a pungent odour was thought most important. In libations they employed the smell of millet-spirits in which fragrant herbs had been infused. The fragrance, partaking of the nature of the receding influence, penetrates to the deep springs below. The libations were poured from cups with long handles of jade, (as if) to employ (also) the smell of the mineral. After the liquor was poured, they met (and brought in) the victim, having first diffused the smell into the unseen realm. Artemisia along with millet and rice having then been burned (with the fat of the victim), the fragrance penetrates through all the building. It was for this reason that, after the cup had been put down, they burnt the fat with the southernwood and millet and rice.

17. So careful were they on all occasions of sacrifice. The intelligent spirit returns to heaven, the body and the animal soul return to the earth; and hence arose the idea of seeking (for the deceased) in sacrifice in the unseen darkness and in the bright region above. Under the Yin, they first sought for them in the bright region; under Kâu, they first sought for them in the dark.¹²

The *Liji* also contains one of the oldest classical text sources that explains what happens upon the death of a human being with the two souls. The *Liji*, *Jiyi* 祭義, says:

宰我曰。吾聞鬼神之名。不知其所謂。子曰。氣也者。神之盛也。魄也者。鬼之盛也。合鬼與神。教之至也。衆生必死。死必歸土。此之謂鬼。骨肉斃於下陰為野土。其氣發揚于上為昭明 ...¹³

1. Zâi Wo said, “I have heard the names Kwei and Shan,¹⁴ but I do not know what they mean.” The Master said, “The (intelligent) spirit is of the *shen* nature, and shows that in fullest measure; the animal soul is of the *kwei*

11. *Liji zhengyi* (in *Shisan jing zhushu*, ed. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 26, 1457a.

12. James Legge, transl., *The Lî Kî (The Book of Rites)*, Part I (Sacred Books of the East, vol. 27/The Sacred Books of China, vol. 4), 1885, [online edition](#); accessed 2013–08–31.

13. *Liji zhengyi*, 47, 1595b–c.

14. i.e. *gui* and *shen*.

nature, and shows that in fullest measure. It is the union of *kwei* and *shen* that forms the highest exhibition of doctrine.

“All the living must die, and dying, return to the ground; this is what is called *kwei*. The bones and flesh moulder below, and, hidden away, become the earth of the fields. But the spirit issues forth, and is displayed on high in a condition of glorious brightness. The vapours and odours which produce a feeling of sadness (and arise from the decay of their substance), are the subtle essences of all things, and (also) a manifestation of the *shen* nature.”¹⁵

In this passage, we find the concept of two elements, one that ascends after death and one that remains with the body and disintegrates to become part of the earth. The terms are *shen* 神 and *gui* 鬼, *qi* and *bo*.

The belief in the existence of a *hun* and *bo* soul as two components related to ascent and descent and to Yin and Yang seems to have pervaded Chinese beliefs thoroughly.¹⁶ Anna Seidel described the beliefs of the lettered class (on whose writings our current knowledge is based) as follows: “At the moment of death one (or later three) pneumatic, more refined *Yang* component of man, the *hun* (let us not call it a ‘Soul’) escapes from the body, is ritually summoned back in the *chao-hun* ceremony, is then guided by careful steps to the realm of the deified ancestors, and was perhaps thought to descend to the Clan’s ancestral temple on the occasion of the sacrifices. Three (or later seven) vital or vegetative *Yin* energies, the *p’o*, follow the corpse back into the earth and have to be appeased with grave goods.”¹⁷

The concepts of the possible abodes of these souls changed over time, yet basic associations of descent, cold, water, *yin*, related to the more physical soul and ascent, light, *yang*, related to the spiritual soul, remained constant. According to Mu-chou Poo, “toward the end of the Warring States period the abode of the soul, whether the Yellow Springs or the Dark City, was seen as a terrifying place.”¹⁸ Geographically, the netherworld destinations of the dead were imagined in the north, the region traditionally associated with cold, water and death,¹⁹ either under Mount Tai 泰山 or, possibly older, under Mount Fengdu 酆都山 or Mount Luofeng 羅酆山. Countering the rather terrifying prospect of the cold

15. Legge, transl., *The Lî Kî (The Book of Rites)*, Part II, [online edition](#); accessed 2013–08–31.

16. The Eastern Han dynasty dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* defines the terms *hun* and *bo* in terms of Yin and Yang: 魂: “陽气也。从鬼云聲” (5791); and 魄: “陰神也。从鬼白聲” (5792). Cited from The Chinese Text Project, ed. Donald Sturgeon, [online edition](#); accessed 2013–08–31.

17. Anna Seidel, “Post-Mortem Immortality, or: The Taoist Resurrection of the Body”, in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions*, ed. Shaked D. Shulman and G. G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 226; cf. also Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 4.

18. Mu-chou Poo, “Ideas Concerning Death and Burial in Pre-Han and Han China,” *Asia Major* (1998.1): 158.

19. Marcel Granet, “La vie et la mort: croyances et doctrines de l’antiquité chinoise” (*Annuaire de l’École des Hautes Etudes, section des sciences religieuses*, 1920–1921; [digital edition](#), Chicoutimi: J.-M. Tremblay, 2004, 7–9; accessed 2013–08–29).

and dark underworld, the concept of immortality promised eternal life, thus avoiding the dreadful abode of the souls. Immortality concepts came to the forefront in Qin and Han times;²⁰ realms of the immortals were thought to be located either in islands in the eastern sea, or on Mount Kunlun in the west. In both places the elixir of immortality could be obtained.²¹

The concept of dual souls was not limited to the Confucian belief system. It also penetrated the Daoist Weltanschauung, as many occurrences in the third century Daoist text *Baopuzi* document.²² Another influential Daoist scripture, *Huangting jing* [The Scripture of the Yellow Court],²³ also clearly states, 魂欲上天魄入淵: “the *hun* soul wants to ascend to Heaven and the *po* soul descends to the watery underworld.” Focusing on the problem of avoiding death, this text proposes to keep the souls together or to reverse the process of separation: 還魂返魄道自然.²⁴ It is noteworthy in this context that, as Pregadio has shown, later concepts of Daoist transcendence, as presented in the early Tang Dynasty text *Daojiao yishu* (DZ 1129), distinguish between different ways of liberation, the highest being ascension to heaven in broad daylight, the lowest being release from the corpse (or physical body), which involved a descent into the grave and the underworld.²⁵

Thus, in the autochthonous Chinese tradition, even if Daoism and Confucianism had different approaches to death and post-mortem destinies, a basic duality of a light/dark, ascent/descent, heaven/earth or *yin/yang* persisted in both worldviews. The difference lay rather in the attitude towards the separation of the two souls: the ancient Confucian concept took the separation of two elements upon death for a given fact, while the Daoist tradition endeavoured to keep them together.

The Buddhist contributions to concepts of the afterlife

Buddhism, coming from India, brought new and different views on what happens at the death of a person. Based on its Indian cultural background, Buddhism assumed that the deceased would eventually reincarnate; they would be reborn in another existence, de-

20. cf. Poo, “Ideas Concerning Death and Burial,” 159–160, for citations from the classics and pre-Qin philosophers that point to a concept of immortality. See also Michael Loewe, *Faith, Myth and Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005), 25ff.

21. Loewe, *Faith Myth and Reason*, 25–34. See also Loewe, *Ways to Paradise: The Chinese Quest for Immortality* (London: Unwin Hyman), 1979.

22. See Ge Hong, *Baopuzi neipian*, ch. 2, “Lun xian 論仙”, for several occurrences.

23. *Taishang huangting wajing yujing*, DZ 332, j. 2.

24. A later elaboration of this concept was that immortality could be achieved “after death,” as Anna Seidel has argued in her study on “post-mortem immortality”, based on Daoist liturgical texts and grave-quelling writs. This “post mortem immortality” would be comparable to a resurrection, brought about by a reconstitution of the two (or more) souls together with the body. See Anna Seidel, “Post-Mortem Immortality”, 231, on *shijie* 尸解, deliverance from the corpse.

25. Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Notion of ‘Form’ and the Ways of Liberation in Daoism”, *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie*, vol. 14 (2004): 121–2.

pending on their accumulated karma.²⁶ While the Buddhist concept of rebirth in its original Indian notion did not presume an individual identity being reborn, in the Chinese adaptation, the concept of rebirth came to imply that according to one's conduct in life, a person would be reborn either in one of the hells, or in positive rebirths like rich families or heavenly paradises. The following short description of Buddhism, which is recorded by Falin in the seventh century, but based on a third century text, shows clearly how the afterlife concepts of Buddhism were understood in a Chinese conceptual frame, offering even a physical description of the “afterlife” existence:

後漢郊祀志曰。佛者漢言覺。將以覺悟群生也。統其教以修善慈心為主。不殺生類。專務清淨。其精進者為沙門。漢言息心。剃髮去家絕情洗欲而歸於無為也。又以人死精神不滅隨復受形。所行善惡後生皆有報應。所貴行善修道。以練其精神。練而不已以至無生而得為佛也。身長丈六尺黃金色。項中佩日月光。變化無常。無所不入。故能化通萬物而大濟群生也。有經書數千卷。以虛無為宗。²⁷

The *Hou Han jiaosi zhi*²⁸ has “Buddha”, which in Chinese means “enlighten”. It refers to enlightening all beings. What runs through his teaching [like a red thread] is that the main concern is to cultivate goodness and a compassionate mind, not to kill living beings, and its sole business is purity. The initiates are called Śramanas, which in Chinese signifies “stopping the mind”. [It implies] cutting one's hair, leaving one's family, cutting off all feelings and washing away desires, and returning to *wuwei* (non-activity). They also assume that when man dies his essence and spirit (*jing shen*) do not become extinct, but assume thereafter yet another form; good and bad deeds all have their retribution in the next life. Those who value doing good and practising the Dao [of the Buddha], follow it to exert and cultivate their spirit and essence (*shen jing*). They cultivate ceaselessly in order to reach the state of no rebirth and become Buddhas. [A Buddha's] body is one *zhang* and six *zhi* long [approximately 5.2 meters] and of a golden yellow colour. The back of his neck is adorned with the radiance of the sun and the moon [i.e. the light radiates from his neck and engulfs his head in a halo]; he can transform himself and has no constant shape, there is nothing he does not enter. This is why he can transform and penetrate the ten thousand things and it can make all things equal to a

26. Buddhist philosophy strictly speaking does not teach the persistence of an individual through different cycles of birth, but only karmic residues which would re-aggregate. However, this abstract theory was hard to grasp, and the concept that an individual would reincarnate became much more popular than the abstract philosophical theory.

27. *Poxie lun*, by Falin, T. 2109, 52: 479a7–15; cited from CBETA; accessed 2013-08-29.

28. The *Hou Han shu* does not contain such a chapter. The citation seems to originate instead in the *Yuan Hong Han ji* 袁宏漢紀, a Jin-Dynasty commentary on the *Hou Han shu*. See the note on the term “Futu [Buddha]” in the biography of Liu Ying, Prince of Chu (楚王 [劉] 英), *Hou Han shu* 42, 光武十王列傳第三十二, in the database edition of the *Hou Han shu*, 1428.

great extent. [Buddhism] has several thousand scrolls (*juan*) of scriptures and books; they take emptiness as their principle.

This concise characterization of Buddhism mentions clearly the concept of rebirth, including the fact that the individual has a moral and ethical responsibility for its afterlife destination, since this life's deeds condition the next life. We can note that there is no reference to dual souls with dual destinations. The concepts of reincarnation and karma—leaving aside the more sophisticated philosophical question of whether it is an individual soul that reincarnates, which pertains to Buddhist scholastics and most probably had rather little impact on the thinking of the general public—introduced the element of the morality of the individual's life as a possible determinant for the destination in the afterlife. Thus, the post-mortem fate of the deceased came to be seen as dependent not only on correct mourning, care and commemoration by the descendents, but also on the moral qualities of the deceased's life.²⁹ This change, in addition to the turmoil of the times, may have been cause for a change of attitude towards the otherworld and ancestors, which Bokenkamp has aptly described as “anxiety” over the fate of the deceased.³⁰

Countering this tendency, Buddhism offered the prospect of salvation, with a large pantheon of saviour deities and the concept of merit transfer³¹ to ancestors in the underworlds, concepts which seem to have been very attractive in early medieval and medieval China, as the development of the Buddhist and Daoist votive steles also indicates. With the host of Buddhist salvational deities came a number of heavenly paradises as possible destinations, where the souls would reincarnate if their karma was good. On the downside there were concepts of hell and purgatory, where the individual would spend time atoning for his or her misdeeds. The original Buddhist scope of achieving Nirvana, which would imply total extinction and exit from the cycle of life and death, seems to have been limited to rather few religious practitioners. Instead, the Mahayanistic concept of saviour deities, which would welcome the deceased to their paradise and there grant liberation to him, seems to have gained widespread acceptance. Foremost among them were Amitābha presiding over the Pure Land paradise in the West and Maitreya in the Tuṣita heaven. Cults for both began in the fifth century, as is documented by numerous votive steles.³²

29. Compare John D. Johnson, “The Nature and Origin of the Taoist Underworld of the Han and Six Dynasties Period” (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1999), 5. He notes that the underworld in China's antiquity served as a “storehouse” for the souls of the dead, assuring they were properly managed to prevent them from bothering the living. In addition, according to him, possibly in connection with Buddhist concepts like karma, it also came to serve as a place of punishment for the wicked. See further Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 4–6 and 14–15.

30. Bokenkamp, *Ancestors and Anxiety*, 18.

31. This concept was introduced to China by Buddhism, and it became extremely important, continuing so until the present; see Griffith Foulk, *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Charles Muller, s.v. 廻向; accessed 2013–12–30.

32. For these cults, see Eugene Y. Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2005), 382; and for the steles, Hou Xudong, *Wu liu shiji*

The early Buddhist vision of afterlife and the dual soul concept

Buddhist soteriological and reincarnation theories did originally not build on a concept of two souls that separate upon physical death. Yet, Chinese Buddhists had to engage with the concept of dual souls, as is well documented in the received literature. One of the earliest apologetic treatises, dating probably to the second or third century CE, which is recorded in the *Hongming ji* (T. 2102) by Sengyou (445–518), is the *Mouzi lihuolun* 牟子理惑論, where we find a discussion of the concept of rebirth in terms of *hun* and *bo*:

問曰。佛道言。人死當復更生。僕不信此之審也。牟子曰。人臨死。其家上屋呼之。死已復呼誰。³³或曰呼其魂魄。牟子曰。神還則生。不還神何之呼。曰成鬼神。牟子曰是也。魂神固不滅矣。但身自朽爛耳。身譬如五穀之根葉。魂神如五穀之種實。根葉生必當死。種實豈有終已。得道身滅耳。³⁴

Question: Buddhism says, “When a man dies he has to be born again. I don’t believe this.” Mouzi said, “When man approaches death, his family goes up to the roof of the house to call him [in the *zhaohun* ceremony]. When someone is dead, whom do they call then? Some say his *hun* and *bo*.” Mouzi said: “If the *shen* 神 returns, then he lives. If it doesn’t return, then what do they call it?” [The opponent answered:] “It becomes a *guishen* 鬼神.” Mouzi said, “This is right. The Hun and the Spirit [*hun shen* 魂神] certainly don’t disappear. But it is only that the body withers by itself. The body is comparable to the root and leaves of the five cereals. *Hun* and *shen* are like the reality of the seed of the five cereals. How could the force of the seed end? When one reaches the Dao, it is just the body that disappears.”

This text employs the terms *hun* and *shen* seemingly synonymously as a designation for that which survives physical death. The Buddhist Mouzi’s answers seem to indicate that he claims that the basic post-mortem duality is not two souls, one physical and one spiritual, which both continue to exist in different locations, but that only the spiritual part—which he terms *hun* and *shen*—can continue to exist and reincarnate, while the body withers away.

A Buddhist encyclopedia from the early seventh century, *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, in a general discussion of funeral rites, shows that several centuries later the issue of *hun* and *bo* souls was still occupying Buddhists:

淮南子曰。天氣爲魂。地氣爲魄。³⁵魄問於魂曰。道何以爲體。魂曰。以無有形乎。魄曰。有形也。若也無有。何而問也。魂曰。吾直有所遇之耳。視之無形。聽之無聲。謂之幽冥者。所以喻道。而非道也。

beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1998), 104–5.

33. Author’s note: Punctuation emended.

34. *Hongming ji*, T. 2102, 52: 3b10–16, *SAT Daizōkyō Database*; accessed 2013–08–29.

35. See *Huainanzi* (*Zhuzi jicheng*, vol. 7; Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 9, 127: 天氣為魂、地氣為魄。反之玄房、各處其宅。守而勿失、上通太一。—“A person’s spiritual souls come from the vapors of

問曰。既知魂與魄別。今時俗亡何故以衣喚魂。不云喚魄。

答曰。魂是靈。魄是屍。故禮以初亡之時。以己所著之衣。將向屍魄之上。以魂外出故。將衣喚魂。魂識己衣。尋衣歸魄。若魂歸於魄。則屍口續動。若魂不歸於魄。則口續不動。以理而言。故云招魂不言喚魄。³⁶

The *Huainanzi* says : The *qi* of heaven makes up the *hun* soul, the *qi* of the earth makes up the *bo* soul. The *bo* soul asked the *hun*: What is the body of Dao? The *hun* answered: it is no form. The *bo* responded: [But] there is form. If there was not ‘being’ [form], then how could I ask for it? The *hun* said: I have just met something. Looking at it there is no form, listening for it, there is no sound. I call it dark and dim. It serves as a metaphor for Dao, it is not Dao [itself].

Question: Since we know *hun* and *bo* are different, then why do today’s people when someone dies use clothes to call back his *hun*? Why don’t they call back the *bo*?

Answer: *Hun* is numinous spirit (*ling*). *Bo* is the corpse. Therefore the Rites prescribe at the moment when someone just has died, that one take the clothes which that person had worn, and spread them on the corpse-*bo*. This is because the *hun* has [at this moment after physical death] gone outside. They use clothes to call the *hun* back, [because] the *hun* knows its own clothes, and following the clothes [can] return to the *bo*. If the *hun* returns to the *bo*, then the cloth placed over the mouth of the corpse will move [because breathing sets in again]. If the *hun* does not return to the *bo*, then the piece of cloth does not move. Speaking of it with reason. This is why it is called calling back the *hun* but not the *bo*.

The text analyzes *hun* and *bo* as different entities, associated with the spirit and the corpse respectively (魂是靈。魄是屍). According to this text, the *hun* soul leaves the *bo* soul/corpse and ascends. The text also explicitly recognizes that the *hun* soul has consciousness, because it is able to recognize its own clothes (魂識己衣) in the *zhaohun* (“Summoning of the Soul”) ceremony.³⁷ Thus, Buddhist texts, both in apologetic discussions and in an encyclopedic compilation, also recount the basic distinction of two souls, *hun* and *bo*, associated with ascension to Heaven and descent to the grave with the corpse respectively, attesting to the continued popularity and widespread distribution of the

heaven; his sentient souls come from the vapors of earth. Returning these to their mysterious apartments and causing each to dwell in its proper residence, if one is able to watch over these and not lose them, he achieves communion above with the Great One.” Translation cited from *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*, ed. C. Harbsmeier; accessed 2013–08–29.

36. *Fayuan zhulin* T. 2122, 53: 999a14–24; SAT Daizōkyō Text Database; accessed 2013–08–30.

37. This ritual can be traced back at least to the *Chuci* and the famous poem “Zhao hun 招魂”. Part of the ceremony was that a piece of clothing of the deceased was employed as a substitute for the deceased, and the soul was called to come back to this world. If the *hun* soul came back to join the *bo* soul, the dead person would be alive again.

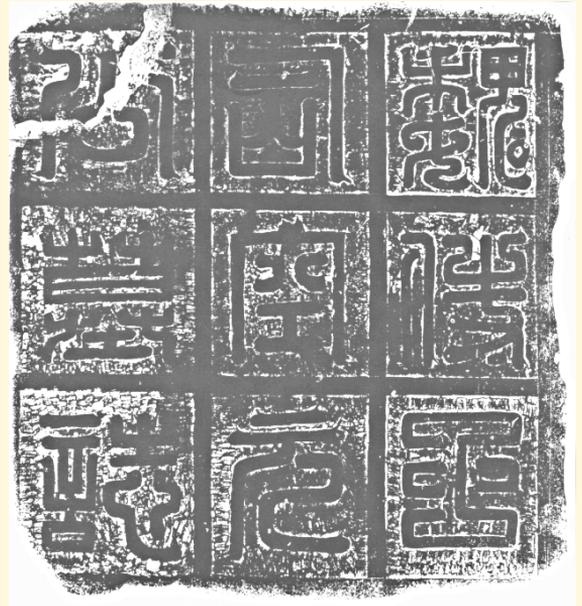
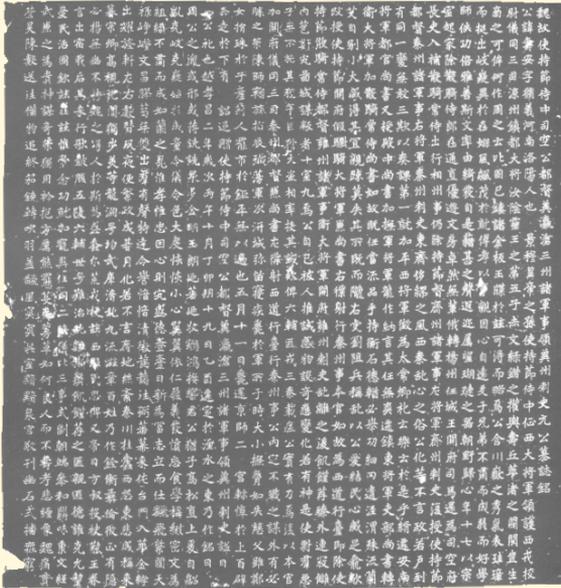


Figure 1: ID 228, 北魏, 孝昌二年 (526), 元壽安墓誌, 河南洛陽, Nos. 5041 (epitaph) and 5042 (lid).

concept. However, it seems that Buddhist reincarnation theories were attached rather to the concept of *shen*; the *bo* soul was relegated to the dead body and no particular discussion of its continued existence was attempted.

This would be a coherent discourse within the Buddhist frame of mind. Yet, in Six Dynasties China, Buddhism co-existed and consequently interacted with Daoism, Confucianism, and “diffused”³⁸ classical³⁹ religious beliefs. Did Buddhism’s focus on *shen* or *hun* as the agent of afterlife and carrier of what lives on after physical death eliminate concerns for the “soul” of the physical part of the deceased, the *xing* form, or *bo*, bodily soul? Did a descent into the underworld become an alternative destination of the *shen* or *hun* soul—an unpleasant alternative associated with ethically and morally incorrect behaviour during lifetimes, as Buddhism suggested? Or did the concept of something that descends continue to exist contemporarily with the concept of ascent, as descent of a physical bodily part—the corpse that would be buried in the tomb—together with the ascent of a *hun* or *shen* spiritual soul? How did Buddhist concepts of post-mortem paradise ascension and Daoist concepts of immortality interact? These are some of the questions that come to mind when studying the interaction of Buddhist, Daoist, and traditional Chinese concepts of afterlife, and epigraphic documents of the Six Dynasties period can offer some elements to answer them.

38. See C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 25 and 294f.

39. C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, 23.

Written in stone: entombed epitaphs and votive steles

Grave epitaphs (*muzhi*) and Buddhist or (in lesser numbers) Daoist votive steles (*zaoxiang-ji*) are generally considered two different types of epigraphic documents; they represent different traditions, and they had different functions. Yet both developed and flourished in China during the Six Dynasties period.

Muzhi—entombed epigraphs

Typically, a *muzhi* is a large square block of stone, engraved with text and often covered with a lid, which is buried in the tomb. In this form they seem to have developed during the Six Dynasties period (fig. 1).⁴⁰ The origins of the entombed epigraphs are to be sought in a variety of elements.⁴¹ Firstly, there were different inscribed objects buried in tombs, predating the development of the entombed epitaphs. One kind of entombed writs were commemorative inscriptions dedicated to an ancestor, found in ritual bronze vessel inscriptions of the Western Zhou,⁴² possibly these account for the fact that the character for the entombed epitaph, *ming* 銘 (“to extol the virtues of the ancestors”), is written with the *jin* 金 (metal) radical.⁴³ Other possible precursors are inscribed stones or bricks, which presumably served as grave-markers to allow descendents to identify a coffin and the remains of their ancestors, even in cases where the burial ground was disturbed or lost.⁴⁴ Yet another kind of inscribed document buried in tombs were the “grave quelling contracts” (*zhenmu wen* 鎮墓文)⁴⁵ and “tomb contracts” (*maidijuan* 賣地

40. For a detailed description of the form of the entombed epitaph see Albert E. Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 206–7.

41. For detailed discussions of the origin and development of the entombed epitaphs see Hua Rende, “Eastern Jin Epitaphic Stones 1: With Some Notes on the ‘Lanting Xu’ Debate”, trans. Ian H. Boyden, *Early Medieval China* 3 (1997); Angela Schottenhammer, “Einige Überlegungen zur Entstehung von Grabinschriften”, in *Auf den Spuren des Jenseits: Chinesische Grabkultur in den Facetten von Wirklichkeit, Geschichte und Totenkult*, ed. Angela Schottenhammer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003), 21–60; Timothy M. Davis, “Potent Stones: Entombed Epigraphy and Memorial Culture in Early Medieval China” (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2008); Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization*; and Kenneth E. Brashier, “Evoking the Ancestor: The Stele Hymn of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.)” (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 1997).

42. Davis, “Potent Stones”, 21–2.

43. Dorothy Wong, *Chinese Steles* (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 2004), 29.

44. The earliest examples of this type were bricks discovered in the tombs of delinquents. They recorded the place of origin, personal name, social standing and date of death of the deceased; in some cases also the crime and punishment received. See Schottenhammer, “Einige Überlegungen zur Entstehung von Grabinschriften,” 38.

45. Grave quelling contracts were written usually on pottery jars and buried in the tombs. Excavated specimens date to the late Han and Jin dynasties. They served to pacify the soil gods, in whose territory the grave might intrude, and to “introduce the newly deceased individual to the underworld administration” as well as to reinforce the separation of the living and dead and thus protect the living. See Davis, “Potent Stones,” 57–65 for a detailed discussion.

卷),⁴⁶ which addressed the spirits and officials of the underworld. The earliest excavated examples of such contracts date to the first century CE. These three kinds of inscribed objects—grave-markers intended to secure identification of tombs to the living descendants, tomb contracts addressing officials or spirits of the underworld, and ritual vessels inscribed with commemorative texts—were all buried in the tomb.

From the Eastern Han dynasty, tombs, especially those of wealthy and important people, were also marked with over-ground steles (*mubei* 墓碑). Commemoration was one important element of their function. However, since these steles were visible and ostentatious, they soon entered the growing debate on the exaggeration of funeral expenditures,⁴⁷ and were eventually proscribed—sometimes without much effect,⁴⁸ but after the edicts of Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220) in the State of Wei 魏 in 205, and of emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 265–290) of the Jin 晉, the prohibitions began to show effect.⁴⁹ Other proscriptions of the above ground grave stele by different emperors followed. Eventually, the originally perfunctory grave markers that were buried in the grave, came to take on the commemorative functions of the above ground grave stele as well. The functions, and also form of the different elements cited, were combined in the *muzhi* of the Six Dynasties period. They were elaborated to include a eulogizing biography, focusing on the special talents as well as the social career of the dead person, the date and circumstances of death and burial, as well as a eulogistic hymn (*ming* 銘) at the end.⁵⁰

Intended to be buried with the coffin in the grave, the afterlife imaginary contained in the texts focuses on the “world of the grave” or the underworld, images like eternal night, darkness and coldness or water abound, and frequently there is the lament that the deceased will never return.⁵¹ This recurring lament of the eternity of the grave, the “never to return” phrase, apart from expressing mourning over the irrevocable loss of a beloved person, also expresses the wish that the soul of the deceased may remain in the underworld, since influences of the dead from the graves were greatly feared.⁵² While my

46. These were documents, or contracts, intended to establish rightful ownership of the land of the tomb, which was typically said to have been acquired from some deity, like the Lord King of the East or the Queen Mother of the West or the local Earth God, often for a symbolic sum. For a detailed study, see Valerie Hansen, *Negotiating Daily Life in Traditional China: How ordinary People Used Contracts, 600–1400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 149ff; for a list of known tomb contracts, see *ibid.*, 231f.

47. This debate can be traced back to the Warring States period (see Poo, “Ideas Concerning Death and Burial”, 25–33f), but it gained impetus in the Han dynasty, where precise laws were established to regulate funerals and avoid exaggerated lavishness (Poo, “Ideas Concerning Death and Burial”, 41).

48. See Poo, “Ideas Concerning Death and Burial”, 42, who cites the years 69, 77, 99, 107, and 118 CE for decrees forbidding lavish burials, but notes on page 43 that they had little impact.

49. Victor Xiong, trans., “Zhao Chao: Stone inscriptions of the Wei Jin Nanbeichao Period”, *Early Medieval China* 1 (1994): 84–96; Schottenhammer, “Einige Überlegungen”, 25; Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 34.

50. Schottenhammer, “Einige Überlegungen”, 25.

51. See Friederike Assandri and Wang Ping, “Multiple Souls and Destinations: Early Medieval After-life Conceptions in the Mirror of Six Dynasties’ Stone Inscriptions”, *Hanguo hanzi yanjiu* 3 (Dec. 2010), 134–5, for examples cited from entombed epitaphs.

52. Peter Samuel Nickerson, “The Great Petition for Sepulchral Plaints,” in *Early Daoist Texts*, ed. Stephen

following discussion refers to votive stele inscriptions, the *muzhi* with their distinct vision of afterlife in the dark, cold, and watery underworld⁵³ provide an important backdrop for understanding the diverse afterlife concepts current in the Six Dynasties period. In particular, they underscore that the traditional dual soul theory, with one soul ascending and one soul descending after physical death, was alive and wide-spread in the period under discussion.

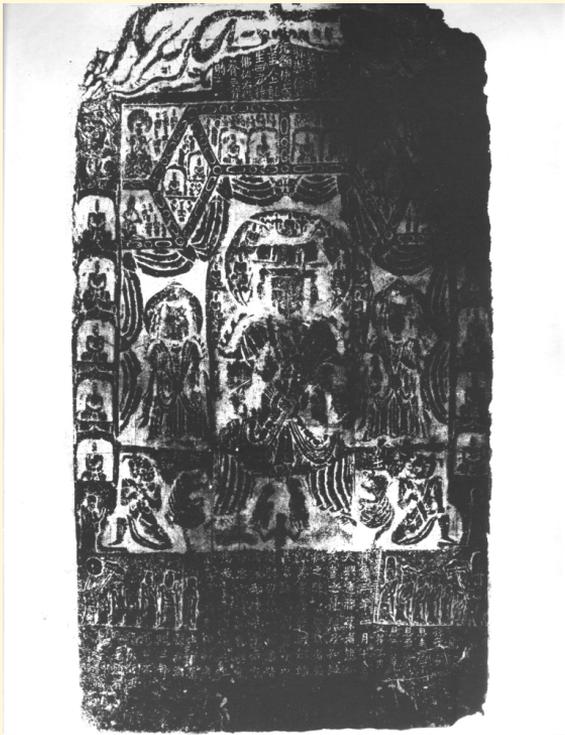


Figure 2: Two examples of *zaoxiangji*: ID 882, No. 4.080, 北魏, 神龜三年 (520), 翟蠻造彌勒像, excavated in Henan (left); ID 480, No. 8127, 北周, 天和元年 (566), 董法相造像記 (right).

Zaoxiangji—votive steles

Buddhist and Daoist votive steles (*zaoxiangji* 造像記) as a particular genre of stele and of religious art developed during the Six Dynasties period as well. They combine the ancient form of upright stele with Buddhist images. Eventually, Daoists also produced their own steles with images of Daoist deities (fig. 2).⁵⁴

R. Bokenkamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 231.

53. See Assandri and Wang Ping, “Multiple Souls and Destinations,” 132–7, for citations of typical examples of imagination of the afterlife in *muzhi*.

54. See Zhang Xunliao, “Daoist Stelae of the Northern Dynasties”, in *Early Chinese Religion, Part Two: The Period of Division (220–589 AD)*, ed. John Lagerwey and Lü Pengzhi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010): 437–544,

Buddhist images were known in China since Han Dynasty. Initially they were a rare phenomenon in China, often connected to miraculous finds of ancient relics and statues associated for example with King Aśoka.⁵⁵ The production of Buddhist images gained popularity during the Six Dynasties period. Using the medium of the stele (*bei* 碑), which had been well established for ritual and commemorative functions since the Han dynasty,⁵⁶ Buddhist and later Daoist believers commemorated their faith and established merit—merit which would be transferred to the ancestors to help them reach a positive destination in the afterlife. During the fifth and sixth centuries, large numbers of votive steles were set up in monasteries, private chapels or in grottoes. They were sponsored by individuals or by larger groups, often consisting of a society of a certain village or town (*yi* 邑義).⁵⁷

Inscriptions on votive steles usually declare the purpose of dedicating the stele, often for the benefit of deceased ancestors, and they document the donation, including lists of donors and payments made.⁵⁸ Like the *muzhi* described above, some *zaoxiangji* include a eulogistic hymn at the end. While votive stele are neither directly employed in funerary rites, nor set up at gravesites, they still relate to the afterlife and disclose afterlife concepts, because the merits associated with making Buddha statues refer to a large extent to the afterlife. One of the earliest translated Buddhist scriptures concerning the making of Buddha images is the *Scripture of King Udayana*,⁵⁹ the work of an unknown translator during the later Han dynasty. The scripture lists the benefits of making Buddha statues. Virtually all of them concern the afterlife; promising rebirth in various heavens, or on earth in rich families. Yet, where in this text the benefits seem to concern mainly

and Zhang Ze-xun, “The Daoist Epigraphs of Northern Wei Dynasty: A study of the Guanzhong’s district Religious Culture and Ritualistic Activities with Full Transcribed texts of its Daoist Epigraphs”, (PhD thesis, Chinese University of Hongkong, 2003).

55. See Alexander Coburn Soper, *Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China* (Artibus Asiae Supplementum 19, Ascona: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1959) for a discussion of the earliest Buddhist images in China on the basis of literary evidence.

56. *Bei* were used in funerary contexts from the Han Dynasty onwards. However, they have older functions in sacrificial and ceremonial contexts, as classical texts on ritual such as the *Liji* and *Yili* document. See Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 22–4.

57. Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 18, points out that the oldest form of upright stone used in religious contexts were upright stones that symbolized the earth god *she* 社 in the annual festivities in his honour. The local religious organizations responsible to serve the earth god were called *yishe* 邑社; they might be antecedents of the societies called *yi* 邑義 (Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 15).

58. As the studies by Hou, *Wu liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang*, Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), and others have shown, the steles were central for communal activities; the lists of names and responsibilities of donors in the inscriptions indicate that there were complex ceremonies involved in the making and setting up of the statues.

59. *Fo shuo zuo fo xingxiang jing* 佛說作佛形像經, T. 692, 16: 788b3–c18. Compare also the translation of this text by Faju 法炬 from the years of Jin Huidi 晉惠帝 (r. 290–306 CE), *Fo shuo zaoli xingxiang fubao jing*, 佛說造立形像福報經 T. 693, 16: 788c21–790a08; and a long citation of yet another version of this text in Daoshi’s *Fayuan zhulin*, T. 2122, 53: 540b25–c25.

the afterlife of the donor, in the early medieval Chinese stone inscriptions the benefits expected as a reward for the merit accrued from making statues tend to concern the ancestors of the donor rather than the donor himself—the merit was transferred to them.⁶⁰ In fact, ancestors and deceased family members, either generically as “seven generations of mothers and fathers and the parents that gave live (i.e. the donor’s own parents)”, or as specific deceased relatives, are mentioned most frequently as intended beneficiaries of the merit created by the production of the stele.⁶¹

The content of the wishes for the ancestors refers mostly to afterlife destinations in various Buddhist and non Buddhist heavens as well as in rich families among men. In addition, many inscriptions include a generic dedication to the imperial family, the emperor or the state, or generically to all beings. This underscores the public nature of these steles, which were exposed in grottoes and temples for all to see. The form of the Buddhist statue eventually was also used by Daoists;⁶² excavated examples of Daoist votive steles date from the end of the fifth and sixth centuries. The art historian Wu Hong has pointed out that the symbolic significance of the medium of stone connects votive stele and tombs. He suggested that as of the Western Han immortality, death, stone and the West are closely associated in Chinese religious art.⁶³ He assumes that this combination may have helped the introduction of Buddhism, also because “almost all Eastern Han motifs of Buddhist origins appeared in funerary contexts”.⁶⁴ Looking at the issue from a different angle, Susan A. Beningson traced how Han funerary customs and afterlife ideas, which were expressed in the structures and decorations of tombs, came to influence the earliest Buddhist cave chapels in the Gansu corridor and Dunhuang.⁶⁵

In addition to these links between votive stele and graves relating to an interaction of Han funerary customs and Buddhism, visual aspects of some of the epigraphic documents of the Six Dynasties also hint at a link: while the genre definitions and distinctions are clear, there are examples of visual similarities between *muzhi* and *zaoxiangji*, as shown in figure 3, and there are also examples where the inscription of a votive stele gives details

60. The transfer of merit especially to parents is also found in Indian Buddhist inscriptions; see Gregory Schopen, *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 230.

61. Compare also Hou, *Wu liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang*, 152ff.

62. For a detailed discussion of the Daoist steles of the Northern Dynasties, including a description of their form, the images and inscriptions, see Zhang Xunliao, “Daoist Stelae of the Northern Dynasties”, and Zhang Ze-xun, “The Daoist Epigraphs of Northern Wei Dynasty”. For a translation of a Daoist votive stele inscription, which underscores the close relation to Buddhist steles, including the wishes for the ancestors, see Assandri and Wang Ping, “Multiple Souls and Destinations”, 129.

63. Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 128.

64. Wu Hung, *Monumentality*, 135–6; cf. also Angela Falco Howard *et al.* (eds.), *Chinese Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 201.

65. Susan L. Beningson, “Shaping Sacred Space: Studies in the Ritual Architecture and Artistic Programs of Early Buddhist Cave temples and their Relation to Tombs in Fifth Century China” (PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2009).

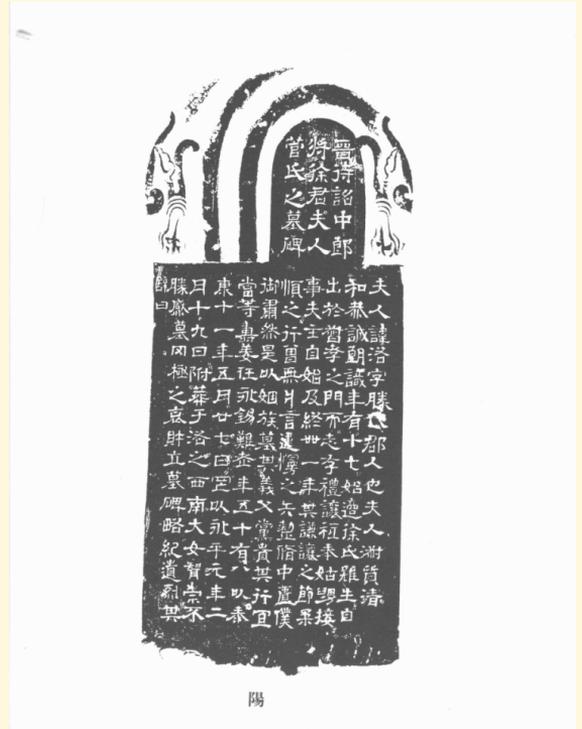


Figure 3: ID 451, No. 8044, 北齊, 武平三年 (572) 暈禪師等五十人造像記陰 (left); ID 47, No. 2054, 晉, 永平元年 (291), 徐君妻管洛墓誌碑額, excavated in Luoyang (right). The latter is also called 晉待詔中郎將徐君夫人管洛墓誌銘.

of life and burial as a *muzhi* would.⁶⁶

The Buddhist steles document the great success of Buddhism; Daoism eventually produced votive steles as well. The entombed epitaphs document the persistence of traditional afterlife beliefs and concerns. The texts engraved on these epigraphic documents offer some clues about how different concepts of the afterlife could interact in this multi-layered and multi-player scenario.

Interacting visions of the afterlife

Studying the texts of *muzhi* and *zaoxiangji* together, one is firstly struck by the different outlook of the afterlife envisioned: Where the entombed epitaphs describe gloomy darkness, cold, and an eternity of no return for afterlife, the steles speak of rebirth, light,

66. For example ID 13; No. 3001 北魏, 神瑞元年 (414), 淨悟浮圖記, is an inscription on a votive stele dedicated to the Buddhist Master Jing Wu. It details his clerical career and the different monasteries he stayed in, as well as his burial. This inscription thus unites functions of entombed epitaphs or grave stele with the votive stele.



Figure 4: Visual similarities of a *zaoxiangji* (ID 635, No. 5015, 北魏, 孝昌二年 [526], 吳高黎墓誌, excavated in Luoyang; left) and a *muzhi* (ID 1188, No. 6149, 東魏, 武定六年 [548], 志朗造像記; right).

and heavenly paradises (fig. 4).⁶⁷ Yet, they were written at the same time, in roughly the same area. There are no consistent differences in the social environment;⁶⁸ nor does the often offered explanation—that one is Confucian, one is Buddhist—really hold: There are

67. For a detailed discussion with examples from epigraphic documents see Assandri and Wang Ping, “Multiple Souls and Destinations”, 132–43.

68. While a large part of votive stele was indeed written by simpler folk, we do find votive steles commissioned by high ranking officials or generals. See for example: ID 666, 北齊, 天保七年, 趙郡王高歡造像三段之造无量壽像記; ID 677, 北齊, 天統元年, 鄭述祖雲居館題記; ID 686, 北周, 明帝元年, 強獨樂文帝廟造像碑; ID 921, 北周, 天和六年, 趙富洛等 [廿] 八人造觀世音象記; ID 925, 東魏, 武定元年, 高歸彥造象記, which all mention a military officer (大將軍) as donor. The inscriptions ID 639, 西魏, 龍門山造象五段之蘇方成妻趙鬘題記; ID 654, 東魏, 黃石崖造象三段之齊州長史乞伏銳題記; ID 666, 北齊, 天保七年, 趙郡王高歡造像三段之造无量壽像記; ID 816, 北魏, 延昌二年, 張相隊造像記; ID 834, 東魏二, 武定七年, 義橋石像碑 all mention an official of the second rank (光祿大夫) as donor.

examples of entombed epitaphs for Buddhists which depict the same afterlife vision of an unfriendly cold and dark world of no return as found in other entombed epitaphs.⁶⁹ This suggests the persistence of the traditional concepts of a soul. If we consider the issue from the perspective of a mourning person who has lost a beloved, the simultaneous presence of the traditional dual soul concept—with one element descending into a cold and dark underworld and another element ascending into the heavens or light—and a Buddhist concept of a possible reincarnation of the whole person (or whatever of it survived physical death) in a paradise filled with joy, must have posed quite a dilemma. The epigraphic documents show a wide array of possible solutions to the dilemma, and we find several interesting “Buddho-Daoist” concepts.

The motive of ascent and Buddho-Daoist paradises

In terms of spatial organization, the concept of ascent of a *hun* soul is compatible with the idea of the ascent of the soul to Mount Kunlun to obtain immortality from the hands of the Queen Mother of the West, as well as with ancient concepts of winged immortals ascending to the stars.⁷⁰ The geographical direction of the West, where Mount Kunlun as well as the Buddhist paradise of the Pure Land were located, offered yet another point of compatibility. Spatial organization as a determining factor in the assimilation or mixing of concepts of different origins seems to override at times sectarian concerns; in the following two inscriptions we find the conflation of motifs of a Pure Land Paradise and immortal realms:

使亡父母託生紫府安樂之鄉神飛三光普焰十地

I wish to let my deceased mother and father be reborn in the Purple Residences [of the immortals] in the [Land of] peace and joy, and their spirit should fly up to the three luminaries (sun, moon, stars), and illuminate the tenth [and highest] spiritual stage of bodhisattvahood [or more literally: the ten lands].⁷¹

69. See for example the epitaph of a Buddhist nun: ID 288; No. 5126, 邢巒妻元純阡墓誌, dated to 北魏, 永安二年 (529), excavated in Luoyang, which has in the final eulogistic hymn: 離茲塵境, 適彼玄場; 幽監寂寂, 天道芒芒; 生浮命促, 晝短宵長; 一歸細柳, 不反扶桑—“She left this dusty region, and reached that dark expanse. The dark underworld supervision [offices] are so lonely, Heaven’s Way is so vast; life is fleeting, one’s lifespan is so short-lived, the time of daylight [in the world of light of the living] is short, the time of night [in the dark underworld] is long; once she returns to the place of the young willows, where the sun goes down, she never returns to the world of the Fusang tree, where the sun rises.” Similarly ID 1003, No. 4056, 北魏, 神龜元年 (517), 高英墓誌, 魏瑤光寺尼慈義墓誌銘, another epitaph for a Buddhist nun excavated in Luoyang, while mentioning Buddhist-inspired concepts of liberation, in the end concludes that the deceased will enter forever the world of the Dark Springs: 長辭人世, 永即幽泉; 式銘茲石, 芳猷有傳—“Forever she leaves this human world, eternal are the Dark Springs, we model an epitaph on this stone so that her reputation and fame are handed down.”

70. See, e.g., Edward H. Schafer, *Pacing the void* (Warren, Conn.: Floating World, 2005), 235–236.

71. ID 91, No. 3015, 北魏, 太和七年 (483), 崔承宗造像記, excavated in Licheng in Shandong (山東歷城).



Figure 5: ID 91, No. 3015, 崔承宗造像記

An inscription on a Maitreya statue, dedicated by the Buddhist Liu Gezhen and his brothers to their deceased parents, wishes that the merit of the making of the statue should:

使亡父母託生紫微安樂之處，還願七世父母師僧眷屬見在居門老者延年，少者益筭

... cause that the deceased father and mother are reborn in the place of Purple Tenuity (*ciwei*) of peace and joy, and furthermore [this wish should extend to] seven generations of parents and Masters and monks and all related to them, the old should have a long life and the young should augment their life account.⁷²

Both inscriptions mix the Daoist heavenly location *cifu* 紫府 or *ciwei* 紫微 with the Buddhist paradise of the Pure Land in the West. *Ciwei* is a stellar location, a heavenly

72. ID 815, No. 4004, 北魏, 延昌元年 (512), 劉洛真造像記, from the Longmen grottoes in Luoyang, Henan (fig. 6). The term 益筭 is reminiscent of the Daoist *Yisuan jing* (DZ 650 and 672), which was also eventually copied by the Buddhists and is found in several versions among the Dunhuang manuscripts. See Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face*, 100ff, for a detailed discussion of the texts as well as of the methods of augmenting one's life account.



Figure 6: ID 815, No. 4004, 劉洛真造像記.

palace where the immortals reside; it is said to be the residence of Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊 (the Heavenly Worthy of the Primordial Beginning), the highest deity of Six Dynasties Daoism.⁷³ The term *anle* 安樂, peace and joy, instead, was associated originally rather with Buddhist paradises, in particular with the Pure Land paradise of Amitābha, as numerous early Buddhist sūtras testify.⁷⁴

73. The second chapter of the late seventh century text *Daojiao yishu* (DZ 1129) records the following: “今依元始天王告西王母、太上紫微宮中、金格玉書，靈寶真文篇目十部妙經、合三十六卷—This is according to what Yuanshi Tianzun has told the Queen Mother of the West in the Highest Ciwei palace, the golden Characters of the Jade Book, the ten parts of the Wondrous Scriptures of the True Writ of the Lingbao, all together thirty-six scrolls.” The preface to the *Duren jing* with four commentaries, *Yuanshi wuliang duren shangpin miaojing sizhu*, DZ 87, 4a, mentions: “於是元始天尊坐於玄都玉京紫微上宮—Thereupon the Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning sat in the Jade Capitoline of the Dark Capital in the Ciwei palace.” Ciwei palace here seems to be the center of the heavens, seat of the highest deity Yuanshi Tianzun, and the origin (and repository) of the Daoist texts. The term is certainly also related to Cifu, which *Wushang biyao*, DZ 1138, 22, 12a, lists as a palace where immortals and perfected reside: “紫府宮。右在青丘之左風山上。天真神仙玉女遊觀—The Cifu Palace is on top of Wind Mountain to the left of Green Hill. Heavenly True ones, Transcendents and Jade Maidens roam and contemplate there.”

74. To name just a few of the most popular ones: *Daban niepan jing* (*Nirvana Sūtra*), *Taishō* 374, 10 speaks of 西方安樂國土; *Miaofa lianhua jing* (*Lotus Sūtra*), T. 262, 6: 54c1–2, has: 即往安樂世界阿彌陀佛大菩薩眾圍繞住處; the *Da fanguang fo huayan jing* (*Huayan Sūtra*), T. 278, 29: 589c3–4 and 46: 694c26–27 speaks of 安樂世界; however, there are many more occurrences in the received Buddhist canon. In a rare case, the term had also found its way into Daoism in northern China: the *Laqun yinsong jiejing*, DZ 785, written by Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之 (365–448), uses the term *anle zhi chu* in the sense of a paradise to be reached by the dead, in a prayer: 願言、某乙三宗五祖、七世父母、前亡後死，免離苦難，得在安樂之處。 However, the common context for the term *anle* is Buddhism, namely the Western Paradise of Amitābha. It seems possible that the term entered the Daoist text from a popular milieu, which is also reflected in the epigraphic sources—where the issue was “what happens to the dead?” rather than a sectarian concern, “to which religion do

Thus, conceptually we have a conflation of motifs pertaining to different afterlife destinations originating in different traditions—a stellar destination which would match with the concept of ascent of the *hun* soul, and which in Daoism stood for a realm of the immortals and also for a realm where the sacred potent scriptures that can show the way to immortality, are kept and conferred. The second part instead, *anle*, evokes the association of a Buddhist paradise whose most obvious association is Buddha Amitābha’s Pure Land. In these examples we see Daoist motifs related to the realm of the immortals entering a Buddhist context, in inscriptions on Buddha or Maitreya statues. The different concepts or imaginations were merged in terms of spatial imagination, the motif of ascent. I should add that there are also cases, where the different Buddhist paradises are confused or conflated, by monks as well as lay believers,⁷⁵—which also indicates that what was important was not a sectarian cult to a particular deity, but the ascension of the spirit or soul to a positive afterlife destination.

Post-mortem duality and reincarnation in paradise in Buddhist votive steles

The concept of two elements which separate after physical death, is explicitly present in some Buddhist steles, documenting an interaction of Buddhist tenets with older Chinese concepts. However, the terminology employed is rather *shen* 神 and *xing* 形, spirit and form, than the terms *bo* and *hun*; yet, the context suggests that conceptually the two terms denote something that ascends and something that descends into the grave respectively, just like the terms *hun* and *bo*.

An inscription on a statue of Maitreya originating in Linzi in Shandong (山東臨淄), expresses the hope that the *shen* of the seven generations of ancestors may be reborn in paradise (七世先亡、神昇淨境). With reference to the Buddha the text then juxtaposes

we belong?”.

75. ID 599; No. 5061; 北魏; 龍門山造像九十八段之宋景如題記, an inscription on a statue of Buddha Śākyamuni from the Longmen grottoes in Henan, has: 藉此微功願令亡比託生西方妙樂土值佛聞法見彌世勒. “I rely on the merit of this image [of the statue?] to cause the deceased ancestors to be reborn in the West in the [Land] of Wondrous Bliss, and that they can hear the dharma directly from the Buddha and see Maitreya Buddha.” Here we have an example for a conflation of two Buddhist paradises, the paradise in the west, which is associated with Buddha Amitābha, and Maitreya Buddha, whose paradise is according to the scriptural tradition in Tuṣita Heaven in the north. Also in ID 878; No. 3043 後魏; 太和二十三年 (499); 僧欣造象記; an inscription on a Maitreya statue from Beijing, Fangshan (房山) commissioned by a monk Seng Xin 僧欣 for his parents and all masters and monks, we find a conflation of Amitābha’s and Maitreya’s paradises: 願生西方無量壽佛國龍華樹下三 [?] 說法下生人間侯王子孫与大菩薩同生一 [?] 願一切衆生普同斯福願如是 “May they be reborn in the Western Land of the Buddha of Everlasting Life [i.e. Amitābha] and [participate] under the Longhua Tree in the three assemblies where [Maitreya] preaches the dharma. If they are born among man, may they be sons and grandsons of lords and kings and may they bear a vow like the great Bodhisattva. May all beings partake of this fortune. ... this is what [I] wish.” It is noteworthy that in these conflations of Buddhist concepts of afterlife destinations, the spatial association is consistently the west. This orientation reminds us of the Queen Mother of the West and the Han concepts of immortality.

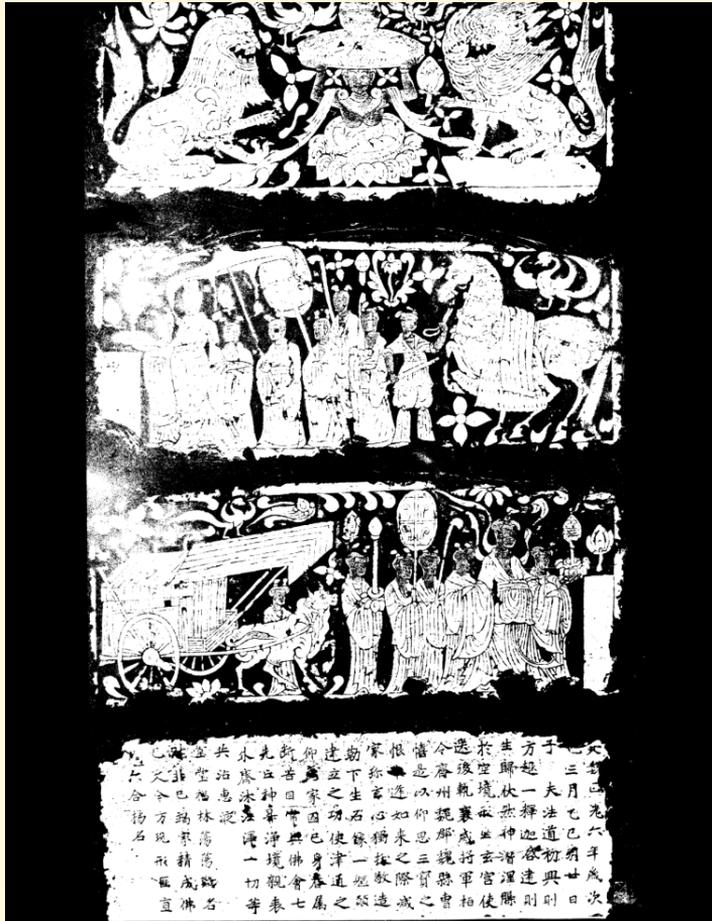


Figure 7: ID 539, No. 4181; 曹望愷造象銘.

the terms *shen* and *xing*, with *shen* entering Nirvana and the sphere of emptiness, and *xing*, the physical form, remaining in the tomb:

夫法道初興，則十方趣一、釋迦啓建，則含生歸伏。然神潛涅槃、入□空境。形坐玄宮。

About the beginnings of the Way of Buddhism, it is the same in all ten directions. Śākyamuni Buddha explained and established, and all beings adhere to it. Thus the *shen* hides in Nirvana and enters the realm of emptiness, the *xing*, physical form, remains in the dark palace [of the tomb].⁷⁶

The stele from Shandong mentioned above, juxtaposes a rebirth and a spirit:

使亡父母託生紫府安樂之鄉神飛三光普焰十地

I wish to let my deceased mother and father be reborn in the purple residences

76. ID 539, No. 4181; 北魏; 正光六年 (525); 曹望愷造象銘; see fig. 7. The rest of the sentence is unclear, due in part to blurring in the image available to me.

[of the immortals] in the land of peace and joy, and their spirit should fly up to the three luminaries (sun, moon, stars), and illuminate the tenth [and highest] spiritual stage of bodhisattvahood.⁷⁷

This seems to suggest that there is “a rebirth” (*sheng*) in paradise, which contains reference to the Daoist heavenly realms of immortals (*cifu*), combined with the Buddhist concept of a Western paradise of peace and joy (*anle*), and an ascension of the rarefied *shen* to a more ethereal destination, associated with heaven and light, and the stages of spiritual development of a bodhisattva.

A similar juxtaposition can be seen in the inscription of stele ID 842 (fig. 8) in the dedication at the end of the longer, clearly Buddhist-inspired, inscription:

以此果緣福鍾師僧七世、願使神登紫宮、形昇妙境。見在寧康、子孫興茂
I wish to take the fortunate karma created with this fruit (of the merit of making the statue) to cherish seven generations of masters and monks; I wish to cause their spirits to ascend to the [star constellation of the] Purple Palace and their physical form to ascend to paradise. Who is still living in this world shall be serene and healthy; sons and grandchildren shall flourish. ...⁷⁸

Here again we find the juxtaposition of *shen* and *xing*. *Shen*, presumably the more spiritual part of post-mortem existence, is associated with ascent and the Purple Palace, a synonym for the aforementioned Ciwei, the Daoist stellar paradise of “Purple Tenuity” located in the Heavens and associated with immortals, sacred writs, and powerful deities. *Xing*, presumably the more physical part,⁷⁹ is associated with Paradise (*miaojing*), possibly referring to a vague concept of a Pure Land.⁸⁰ Here *xing* is presumably the counterpart of *shen*. Yet the physical form is not said to go to the underworld of the grave, but to ascend to a different destination, namely to paradise. This presents an interesting elaboration of the theme of dual destinations, where in the traditional scheme one part ascends and the other part descends in the underworld—a destination which, also under the influence of Buddhist concepts, must have been seen as an increasingly less desirable destination of afterlife in early medieval China. Here this destination of the physical form or component of the being is transformed into an ascent as well. However, the double ascent motive

77. ID 91, No. 3015, see above, fig. 5, p. 21.

78. ID 842, No. 7069, 北齊一、天保八年 [557]、劉碑造像銘, from Henan, Dengfeng (河南登封).

79. In a discussion of the concept of *xing* 形, form, based on different Daoist texts, Fabrizio Pregadio emphasizes that the term *xing* should be understood as “that which identifies and defines single entities as such” (Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Notion of “Form” and the Ways of Liberation in Daoism”, *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie*, vol. 14 (2004), 98), different from *ti* 体, body, in reference to the physical frame of human beings. Form is conceived as the “vessel” of “non-form,” that is of Dao (Pregadio, *ibid.*, 99) and its relation to spirit or *shen* 神 in the Daoist texts is that of a state to the ruler, with *shen* being the ruler (Pregadio, *ibid.*, 108–109).

80. The term *miaojing* appears for example in Buddhābhaya’s (active in Chang’an in the first quarter of the fifth century) translation of the *Huayan jing*, *Da fangguang Fo huayan jing*, where the term appears several times, e.g. T. 278, 1: 400c19–20: 衆生一見如來身悉能斷除衆煩惱遠離一切諸魔事是名清淨妙境界。



Figure 8: ID 842, No. 7069, 劉碑造像銘.

does not imply a unified entity that lives on after death; there are still dual destinations for the rarefied *shen* and the physical component.

Also the following two votive stele inscriptions, both from Longmen Grottoes in Henan (河南洛陽龍門石窟),⁸¹ present a double ascent motive, juxtaposing *shen* and *ji*, traces, presumably again just like *xing* referring to a more bodily or physical element that remains after physical death and is seen as a pair with *shen*. The juxtaposition here clearly implies Daoist and Buddhist terminology, namely nine heavens and ten “earths”, the latter being the ten stages of bodhisattva-hood. An inscription found in the Guyang cave 古陽洞 of the Longmen grottoes (fig. 9) has:

願元世父母及現世眷屬、來身神騰九空、迹登十地、三有同 [願。

We wish for the original father and mother up to all people belonging to us in this generation, that in their future bodies their *shen* spirit may soar up to the Nine Heavens, and their traces may ascend to the tenth stage [of bodhisattva-hood]. This wish is extended to all beings in the three realms of the mortal world.⁸²

Another inscription from the Longmen grottoes in Henan also contains the wish that:

元世父母及弟子等來身神騰九空迹登十地五道羣生咸同

The original father and mother as well as disciples in their future bodies, may their *shen* spirit soar up to the nine heavens and may their traces ascend to the tenths stage of bodhisattva-hood, and may this wish be the same for all beings of the five ways of incarnation.”⁸³

81. Geographical proximity of origin might have facilitated the copying of motifs in this case. Yet, the fact that the motif appears at least twice in different inscriptions still underscores its attractiveness, and is therefore significant.

82. ID 114; No. 3055 北魏; 景明三年 [502]; 高樹解伯都等卅二人造像記. The term *sanyou* 三有 refers to existence in the three realms of desire, form and formlessness.

83. ID 812; No. 3054, 北魏; 景明三年; 孫秋生等造像記 (fig. 10); *wu dao* 五道 refers to the five destinies of reincarnation: hell-being 地獄, hungry ghost 餓鬼, animal 畜生, human being 人間 and god 天上 (see the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Charles Muller, s.v. 五道 five paths, accessed 2013-08-31).

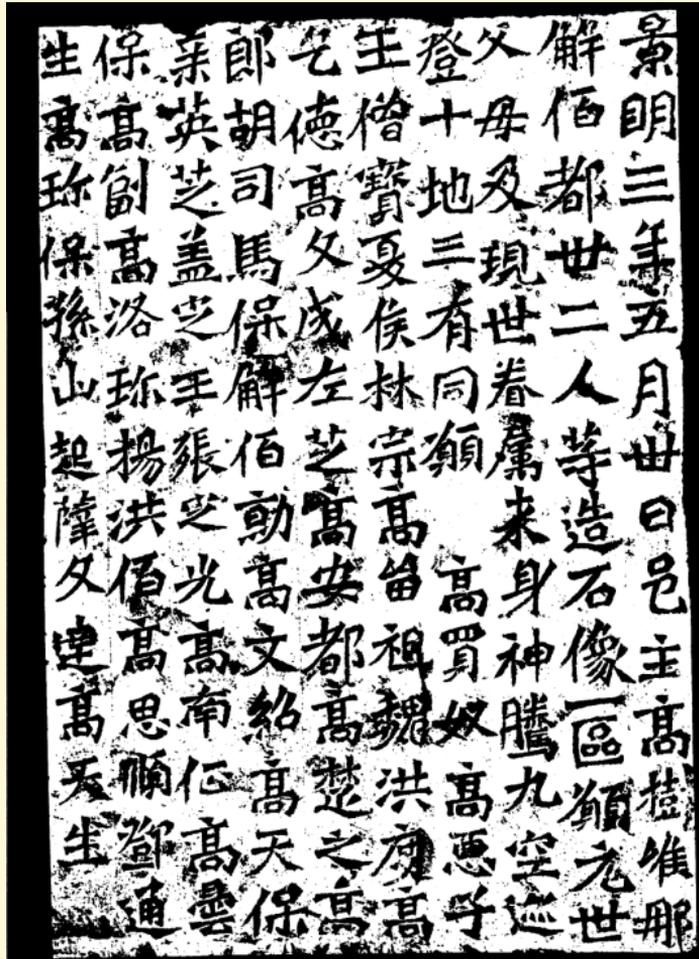


Figure 9: ID 114; No. 3055, 高樹解伯都等卅二人造像記.

The term *jiukong*, nine heavens, which is here envisioned as the destiny of the *shen*, is frequently used in Daoist texts of the medieval period and refers to the highest heavens.⁸⁴ The term *shidi*, ten stages, instead refers to a popular Buddhist concept, the concept of the

84. These heavens are the residence of the gods, where they receive or transmit the holy scriptures—holy scriptures that are frequently associated with methods for attaining immortality. The Daoist encyclopedia *Wushang Biyao*, DZ 1138, compiled under the Northern Zhou around 570CE, cites many texts that document these associations. See, e.g., j. 24, citing 靈樂洞真七聖元紀經, has: 《回天九霄白簡青籙》、上聖帝君受於九空, 結飛玄紫炁自然之字, 玄紀後學得道之名, 靈音韻合, 玉朗示真、或以字體、或以隱音、上下四會、皆表玄名、空生刻書廣靈之堂。Here the nine heavens are the place of revelation of potent magic scriptures which can confer immortality to the person receiving it. Also j. 33, referring to *Dongzhen basu zhenjing* 洞真八素真經, speaks of a transmission of scriptures in the nine heavens; here the transmitting agent is the Queen Mother of the West: 扶桑大帝當以經傳太極四真人、諮於西龜王母。王母告大帝曰、上皇之年、所以為學, 得見寶文、便位登玉清者、皆密脩寶道祕靈、不宜於口、不形於人、替感至寂、以致上真。故道貴隱寂、化于無形、出于無聲。自我受真經於九空、已經累億之劫、未傳三人。



Figure 10: ID 812; No. 3054, 孫秋生等造像記

ten stages of the development of the bodhisattva.⁸⁵ The inscriptions listed above refer to 神騰九空、迹登十地. *Laishen* 來身 refers to an afterlife, *shen* to an ascending part, and the *ji* 迹, traces or remains, could refer to the older concept of a more physical soul which descends to the underworld.⁸⁶

It is relevant in this context that the term *shidi* is composed of the elements *shi*, the number ten, and *di*, earth. It is therefore strictly parallel to the term *jiukong*, composed of *jiu*, the number nine, and *kong*, heaven. On the level of language, the two binominal ex-

85. The ten stages of the bodhisattva path refer to the Buddhist doctrine of a succession of ten steps or stages of spiritual cultivation that a being has to pass before becoming a bodhisattva. While different texts, notably the *Huayan* and the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, have different sets of ten, a general agreement that the way of the bodhisattva consists of ten successive stages, exists. Interestingly, while this process of ascending to the tenth stage is frequently associated with rebirth, a Chinese commentator, the influential Buddhist Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顛 (538–97), claimed that the tenth stage could be reached in this body. In his *Miaofa lianhua xuanyi*, T. 1716, 33: 698b19, he claims: 圓教肉身於一生中有超登十地之義—“The perfect teaching means that within one life in the physical body the ten stages are overcome”.

86. Alternatively it could refer to karmic residue that the person has accumulated. However, this latter explanation might have been chosen only by persons familiar with the complexities of Buddhist doctrine, while the former interpretation could have been chosen by persons not familiar with Buddhist doctrines, but with traditional concepts of souls.

pressions therefore correspond nicely to the dualistic scheme expressed in the antitheses of earth/heaven, underworld/heavenly paradise, spiritual part and physical part, or Yin and Yang. On the other hand, in terms of meaning, the terms refer to two possible destinations of spiritual development: the Daoist heavens as source of potent scriptures, often containing recipes and techniques for obtaining immortality and also as a realm where the immortals roam; and the Buddhist tenth stage of bodhisattva-hood—the highest spiritual goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which implies full enlightenment but not necessarily complete extinction in *nirvāṇa*, since the fully enlightened bodhisattva can (and usually will) choose to stay in the world to help to liberate all beings from suffering. The term *laishen*, “future body” seems to refer to both components mentioned after (*shen* and *ji*, spirit and traces) and thus to a “complete” person. Does this mean that in a reincarnation the person was complete yet split to attain Daoist immortality and Buddhist enlightenment? Or were the two destinations conceived as ultimately one, another case of conflation of paradises? Or was there a similar concept like that of the Daoist post-mortem immortality, which Anna Seidel described, where the two souls were refined in different places, then to be joined for immortality?⁸⁷

Possibly this indicates that the donors of the stele still would think of the dead person as “one person”, no matter if there persisted a concept of the disintegration of the physical person into a more spiritual part and a more physical. However, the fact that a duality of spirit (*shen*) and something else, presumably rather physical (here *ji*, traces) is present, and that these two entities or components seem to have different destinations, one associated with Daoism, and heaven, one associated with Buddhism, and even if only on the surface of language, with earth, is significant.

It brings to mind not only the duality of a *hun* and a *bo* soul, of spirit and physical body, but reminds us also of the several early medieval apologetic texts which often in a polemical manner associate Daoism with Yang and Buddhism with Yin.⁸⁸

Thus, there seem to be “clusters” of associations of a term, where the original meaning or intent of an expression is retained, but envisioned in a new context. In the case of the steles inscriptions discussed, the term *shidi* probably does refer to a spiritual goal of Buddhist cultivation—which would be the meaning of the term.⁸⁹ Yet, its juxtaposition

87. Seidel, “Post-Mortem Immortality”.

88. See for example *Xiaodao lun*, section 8, in *Guang hongming ji*, T. 2103, 9: 146c2, translated by Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 79; or the Daoist *Santian neijie jing*, DZ 1205, trans. in Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 222–223.

89. The concept of reaching the ten stages of bodhisattvahood as an afterlife destiny is expressed also in other votive steles, where it becomes clear that the meaning was seen as related to wisdom, insight, and ascent: Inscription ID 176, No. 3142, 北魏, 永平四年 [511], 元變造像記, from the Great Buddha cave at the Longmen grottoes in Henan, in an unfortunately badly damaged inscription combines the term *shidi* with ascent: 登十地 (ID 111, No. 3045, 北魏, 太和年間 [477–99], 謝伯違造像記); an inscription on a Maitreya statue from the Guyang cave of the Longmen grottoes in Henan, wishes for the parents’ health and long life, and that their “wisdom may ascend to the ten stages” (父母康延智登十地). ID 811, No. 3033, 北魏, 太和廿二年 [498], 始平公造像記, another inscription from the Guyang cave of the Longmen grottoes, wishes

with the term *jiukong* adds other layers of meaning to it, including the possibility that the tenth stage of bodhisattvahood could have been seen here as an “alternative” afterlife destination for the part of the deceased which was usually thought to descend—into the earth and a rather unpleasant underworld.

These few examples of the eclectic mixtures we can find in Buddhist votive steles document how Buddhist beliefs did not necessarily simply replace older concepts. Instead, they supplemented them, and dynamic—and variegated—interactions evolved.

The chronological solution and the role of wisdom

Lastly, a look at the inscription of a Daoist votive stele will show yet other facets of “mixing” or “dialoguing” of Buddhist and Daoist concepts.

An inscription on a statue of Laojun from Henan, Yanshidong (河南偃師董家村), is dedicated to the deceased child Yuan Lüe (亡息元略) by his father Qiang Zuan 姜纂.⁹⁰ While the identity of the deity the image represents, is not specified in the title, the inscription speaks of Lord Lao:

夫靈暉西沒至理東遷圖盡神明、像窮變現、逍遙業峻、因藉報遠清信士姜元略、志隆邦國、仁越州閭、衡巷仰風、鄉邑譽望。早洞玄源、夙達空旨而石火電爛儻忽從化 ... 寶散閻泉、玉碎黃壤。父纂情慕東門心覺冥福特為亡略、敬造老君像壹區左右二侍聖相。真容妙絕娑婆雕檀刻削波斯而奇鑄金鏤石優填慚巧。以此勝因追資元略直登淨境獨步虛空逍遙天服乖出六塵遨遊慧體長超八難。

The sun goes down in the West and the highest principle rises in the East. The design shows the brilliance of the spirit fully, the image demonstrates the changing manifestation clearly. The Dao is distant and the Karma is stern; karmic conditions are what bring about the later retribution. The believer Yuan Lüe’s [the deceased] ambition was great in the big and small states, his humaneness (*ren*) surpassed provinces and villages, [the common people] look up to the wind, he was well known among village and town companions. [We hope that] he may reach [understanding of⁹¹] the Dark origin fast and that he may quickly penetrate the absolute truth of emptiness,⁹² and [may he] like a spark of fire or a lightning quickly follow transformation ..., the treasure [of

for a deceased father, that his spirit should fly up to the three [luminaries, i.e. sun, moon and stars?—the character is unclear], and that the wisdom may encompass the ten stages (願亡父神飛三[?]、智周十地).

90. ID 415; No. 7164; 北齊; 天統元年 (565) 姜纂造像記 (fig. 11).

91. Note that the term *dong* 洞, as does *da* 達 in the next section, means to penetrate or reach, in a concrete sense as well as in the sense of understanding something. The double meaning is often intended in early medieval texts, especially those of Daoism. Here it may refer to reaching the origin of all being (presumably in the sense of returning to Dao after death), but also to understanding it.

92. According to the *Hanyu da cidian*, 空旨 refers to the Buddhist absolute truth of emptiness of all being (謂諸法皆空的真諦).

the teaching] [shall] disperse the dark springs of the underworld, [just like] Jade [could] break apart the Mound of Yellow [earth] (of the grave).⁹³ His father Zuan with feelings offers this letter to the gate⁹⁴ and in his heart trusts that this underworld merit will benefit especially the deceased Lüe. Reverently he [i.e. the father] made a Statue of Laojun and two accompanying sages. ...The true face [of the statue] transcends the Sahā world [i.e. the universe where human beings live], carved in sandalwood, the imposing appearance would be admired [even in] Persia. The engraving and carving would make even Udayana⁹⁵ ashamed by its skilfulness. ... With this superb karma I seek to help Yuan Lüe to ascend straight to the Pure Lands and to be able to alone pace the void and roam in the heavens,⁹⁶ skilfully to escape from the six dusts and freely to roam the substance of wisdom and to overcome forever the eight difficulties of rebirth.⁹⁷

The inscription on a Daoist statue in figure 11 shows a “dialogue” of different traditions—even though it is an image of a Daoist deity, namely Laojun, the deified Laozi, the author of the inscription refers explicitly to the practice of making Buddhist images (cf. King Udayana). However, he claims to surpass even the original first Buddha image in beauty and skill of carving. This is a case where we can see an attempt at differentiation, yet this differentiation does not consist in any claims to originality of concepts, instead it is built on a claim to surpass the original, Buddhist image in its craftsmanship. This implies that the obviously Daoist author of the text, presumably the donor of the statue, is explicitly aware of the Buddhist tradition of statue making and the story of its origins. He is also aware of the association of statue making and merit that can be transferred to the deceased, which was established in the Buddhist context. All of these elements he seems to accept, or co-opt, in the Daoist context expressly by making a statue of Lord Lao. Yet, a level of competition seems to be present, as he declares the aim of surpassing in craftsmanship and beauty the famous first statue of the Buddha ordered by King Udayana. It is,

93. This couplet is unclear; I assume that *bao* refers to the Buddhist (or Daoist) teaching, which will lead to ascension of the deceased overcoming the descent into the underworld, just like Jade (which is hard and strong) could break apart a heap of yellow earth, which constitutes the mound of the grave.

94. It is not clear to what “gate” refers here.

95. King Udayana was according to legend the first to produce a Buddha image, as discussed above in the section on *zaoxiangji*, p. 16.

96. The term *tianfu* 天服 is not clear; it could refer to Heaven, parallel to emptiness in the phrase before. It could also refer to heavenly clothes, in a more literal translation, a term which is used in Buddhist texts frequently in descriptions of heavenly beings. In this case the translation should be “roam in heavenly clothes”, or, understanding the term as *pars pro toto*, “roam as a heavenly being”.

97. For the eight difficult destinies of rebirth, see *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, ed. Charles Muller, q.v. 八難, accessed 2013–08–30: The term refers to eight conditions of rebirths, in which it is difficult to hear the law of the Buddha, namely the conditions of being in hell, being a hungry ghost, being an animal, being in the long-life heavens, being in the Uttaraku lands (a paradise in the north), being deaf, blind or dumb, being a worldly philosopher, and being in the intermediate time between a Buddha and his successor.



Figure 11: ID 415; No. 7164; 姜纂造像記.

however, not quite clear if the emphasis in this competitive attitude is on a Daoist statue surpassing its Buddhist models, or if it is simply his personally commissioned statue being more beautiful than even its most famous predecessor.

The wishes for the afterlife destination, and the vision of afterlife expressed, combine Buddhist and Daoist concepts on different levels. We find the rather abstract concepts of “understanding the Dark origin” [of Dao] and realizing the truth of emptiness [a reference to the Buddhist concept of emptiness as ultimate reality], in addition to the combination of Buddhist and Daoist concepts of ascent: the Buddhist Pure Land Paradise and the Daoist practice of Pacing the Void,⁹⁸ a practice related to astral imaginations and ascent. This conflation of Daoist stellar imagination and a Buddhist paradise is similar to the cases in Buddhist votive steles discussed above.

It is noteworthy that the inscription speaks of an underworld, using the term dark springs as well as yellow mount of the grave, which both refer not to Buddhist-inspired hells, but rather to the lore of traditional concepts of the netherworld—the cold and dark watery region of the yellow, dark, or cold springs,⁹⁹ where the *bo* soul would descend

98. On this term, see Schafer, *Pacing the Void*, 234ff.

99. All these terms, yellow springs, dark springs and cold springs are common epithets for the nether-

to. It also speaks of ascent, pacing the void, and the Pure Land paradise. The motif of ascent complements the explicit hope that the deceased passes quickly through the—presumably less enjoyable—underworld destination.

This is possibly early documentary evidence for the assumption of a chronological order in the afterlife destinations:¹⁰⁰ the deceased, or what survives of him after physical death, first descends into the underworld and then from there ascends to further destinations in the heavens. The chronological order seems to somehow “unite” the two souls and destinations, since presumably what is here assumed to descend first in the underworld and then ascends is one entity, and not two. It seems that the author of the inscription presumes that his deceased son has gone to this underworld of the “dark springs”, and that he can liberate himself from this unpleasant world through insight and wisdom.

The terms denoting this liberating wisdom employ Daoist and Buddhist terminology for absolute truth, suggesting possibly that both Daoist and Buddhist concepts were seen equally efficient or identical. This suggests that this Daoist believer had accepted the Buddhist notion that final liberation from suffering can be achieved through insight or enlightenment. It is well known that in Buddhism insight into ultimate truth, or enlightenment, is assumed to lead to final liberation of the being from the cycle of rebirth and suffering. Buddhist teachings presuppose that the presence of beings in samsara, in this world which is defined as a world of suffering, is tied to the being’s ignorance of their own true nature and the nature of all things as empty or non-existent. Thus the conclusion that correct insight, or wisdom, leads to final liberation as the ultimate goal of religious cultivation in the Buddhist context follows quite logically from the presuppositions. The case of Daoism however is different. Daoist teachings did not presuppose that this world is suffering and beings need to escape from it. On the contrary, Daoist cultivation aimed at prolonging the presence of the being in this world by achieving long life or immortality.

It is therefore noteworthy that in this Daoist inscription liberation through insight refers not to liberation from the sufferings of life, but from the sufferings of the underworld. Insight and wisdom are here conceived as that which enables a soul to ascend, leaving behind the dreaded dark and cold watery underworld. In addition, the merit created by making the statue of the Daoist deity Laojun is named as that which shall cause the deceased to reach paradise—the Pure Land (located in the west and associated with the Buddhist deity Amitābha), where he will “pace the void”—again a conflation of Daoist and Buddhist motifs related to ascent.

world. They appear in many entombed epitaphs of the Six Dynasties period as well; see Assandri and Wang Ping, “Multiple Souls and Destinations”, 133–137.

100. A concept of a chronological order of first descent and then ascent is common in Chinese popular religion. Ascent is envisioned only after a being has passed through purgatory, located in the underworld and containing ten courts. Escape from purgatory, after atonement for the sins, is imagined on a bridge leading to the Pure Land or to the Daoist Heavens. See Ken Brashier, “*Taizong’s hell: A Study Collection of Chinese Hell Scrolls*” [accessed 2013-08-31], and in particular [images of the bridges leading out of hell](#). Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*, 5, proposes that the concept of purgatory, which is related to a temporary descent in an underworld, developed in connexion with Buddhist concepts of hell around the seventh century.

This emphasis of wisdom and insight as one way to escape the netherworld of the dark springs might offer a clue for our understanding of a larger development in Daoism: While early medieval Daoist scriptures, like for example the *Huangting jing* mentioned above, tend to emphasize physical and mental cultivation intended to lead the adept to immortality, the later Six Dynasty period Daoism saw a proliferation of scriptures which claimed to lead adepts to insight into ultimate truth.¹⁰¹ This proliferation has been attributed generally—and vaguely—to “Buddhist influence”.¹⁰² Stele inscriptions like the ones discussed that associate the concept of wisdom and insight into ultimate truth explicitly with the idea of afterlife ascension, which referred generally to positive afterlife destinations, and, like the last stele discussed, even with escape from the underworld, offer a clue into one (though surely not the only) dimension of the attractiveness of the concept of wisdom as a religious goal. If wisdom was conceptually associated with ascent of the entity that survived physical death of a being, this same wisdom would have been associated, as is clearly expressed in the last inscription discussed, with positive afterlife destinations in the heavens, like Daoist stellar locations or Buddhist paradises. Such an association again might account for a spread of the concept of liberation through wisdom beyond an intellectual, educated elite.

Concluding remarks

The examples of afterlife concepts in Buddhist and Daoist votive stele discussed so far show some of the possible “fields of associations of concepts”, which offer clues for the understanding of some of the processes and criteria of the “mixing” of ideas of different origin. They underscore the fact that ultimately sectarian considerations of Buddhism vs Daoism seemed to have played a minor role. Instead, it seems that spatial or geographical orientation played a decisive role, and allowed the combination of afterlife destinations pertaining to different religions, seemingly without sectarian considerations.

These concepts of spatial orientation (ascent and descent) might have their origin in the ancient concept of dual souls that separate to go to different afterlife destinations after physical death—a concept that was cemented also in the traditional funeral rites, which persisted and were elaborated in the face of new concepts of rebirth brought by Buddhism. This underscores that Buddhist beliefs did not simply replace older concepts. Instead, they supplemented them, and dynamic—and variegated—interactions evolved.

Thus when the stele entitled 劉碑造像銘 (fig. 8, p. 26) presents the wish that the *shen*

101. See Kristopher Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, ed., *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 516.

102. Social developments, with Daoism entering higher social strata during the Six Dynasties, might have spurred a general tendency towards intellectualizing and abstracting of religious goals as well, yet this does not exclude image and motif associations like the ones described playing a role in this process; in particular they might have been instrumental in spreading a concept of liberation through insight in the less educated social strata, too.

of the ancestor may ascend to a Daoist stellar paradise and his *xing* to a Buddhist paradise, we can see the traditional concept of a post-mortem duality, as well as a Buddhist concept of paradise, which has to be reached after physical death, and a Daoist stellar location, where the immortals or perfected Daoist beings roam. It is noteworthy that this version of afterlife destinations for post-mortem existences retains the motive of duality of what survives after physical death, form and spirit, corresponding to the concept of the duality of *hun* and *bo*, but eliminates the motive of descent into the dreaded underworld, offering a positive ascent to both parts of the post-mortem duality.

The Daoist inscription discussed last shows yet another variation of the themes: In this inscription we find the motive of post-mortem descent and ascent, yet instead of the assumption of dual souls or dual post-mortem existence, this inscription assumes a chronological order, where the deceased—seemingly not split into the duality of spirit and form or *hun* and *bo*, goes first to the underworld and from there ascends. Prerequisite for the ascension are the deceased’s moral qualities and, more importantly, insight into absolute truth and the generation of merit through the votive stele by his surviving father.

The two inscriptions from the Longmen grottoes which contain the expression “*jiukong ... shidi*”, present yet another facet of combining and mixing traditional, Buddhist, and Daoist themes. In their case, the term *shidi*, afterlife destination of the “traces”, presumably the more physical part of the post-mortem duality, refers to a spiritual goal of Buddhist cultivation—which would be the meaning of the term. The *shen* ascends to *jiukong*, a heavenly location prominent in Daoism. Thus, in terms of meaning, these inscriptions again retain the duality of post-mortem existence, but assign an ascent motive to both, avoiding the idea of a descent to the underworld. However, on the surface of language, the parallel terms *jiukong* (nine heavens) and *shidi* (ten earths) also retain the dual destinations of the older concept of a *hun* soul that ascends to heaven and a *bo* soul that descends into the earth. These inscriptions are thus an eloquent example of the complex and multi-layered meanings and processes that could come into play in the process of “mixing”, creating “clusters” of associations of terms which elaborate on foundational motifs of afterlife visions of Buddhism, Daoism, and the “diffused classical” religion.¹⁰³

With regard to the study of Buddhō–Daoist mixtures, or of “Buddhō–Daoism”, the examples discussed in this study emphasize the fact that Daoism and Buddhism interacted with each other within a matrix of “classical” or “traditional” religious notions.

103. The term is C. K. Yang’s, see above, p. 2.

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