religions

MDPI

Article

On the Origin of "Laozi Converting the Barbarians": A Historical Background Analysis

Jiamin Si [1], Jishao Han [1,*] and Yuan Zhang [2]

[1] School of History and Culture, Shandong University, Jinan 250100, China; si-jiamin@mail.sdu.edu.cn
[2] School of Foreign Languages, Hefei Normal University, Hefei 230061, China; zhangyuan918@hotmail.com
* Correspondence: hanjishao@sdu.edu.cn

Abstract: This article examines the historical background of "Laozi huahu 老子化胡" (Laozi converting the barbarians) and investigates its generation mode and constituent elements. It also discusses and reflects on issues such as the origin of "huahu" and Laozi's deification. The origin of "Laozi huahu" has little relationship to issues such as the divine system in the Han dynasty and Laozi's deification. Its elements are rooted in Chinese secular ideological resources. The story of "heroes moving across borders" during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, along with the notion of Laozi as the universal teacher for disciples of various schools, gave birth to the saying. An analysis of the historical background suggests that the origin of "huahu" had likely gone through a long evolutionary process, including an undocumented period where it was transmitted orally as a legend.

Keywords: "Laozi Huahu (converting the barbarians)"; origin; ethnic relations; Laozi's deification

1. Introduction

The "Laozi huahu shuo 老子化胡説" (The Theory of Laozi Converting the Barbarians) is a vital legend in terms of the formation of Daoism, the deification of Laozi, and other related topics. Since Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) discovered the Dunhuang 敦煌 documents of *Laozi Huahu Jing* 老子化胡經 (the Scripture of Laozi Converting the Barbarians), there have been various opinions by different scholars, including Wang Weicheng 王維誠 (W. Wang 1934), Erik Zürcher ([1959] 2007), Kusuyama Haruki 楠山春樹 (Kusuyama 1979), Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾 (Ōfuchi 1991), Liu Yi 劉屹 (Y. Liu 2011, 2013), and Jiang Sheng 姜生 (S. Jiang 2018). For a long time, the question of its origin has been traced back to Laozi's 老子 (or Laotze) journey to the West as stated in the *Shiji* 史記 (The Grand Scribe's Records) (Q. Sima 1963, p. 2141). Later, during the Eastern Han dynasty (25–220), Laozi was worshiped with the Futu 浮屠 (Buddha). It is rumored that "Laozi entered the land of the Yidi 夷狄 (western barbarians) and became Buddha 老子入夷狄為浮屠" (Fan 1973, p. 1082). During the Three Kingdoms period (220–280), it was said that "Futu scriptures are not far off Chinese *Laozi Jing* 老子經 (Scripture of the Laozi); therefore, it was believed that Laozi went out of the pass, through the Western Region 西域 to Tianzhu 天竺國 (India) to teach Hu 胡 (barbarians) 浮屠所載與中國《老子經》相出入，蓋以為老子西出關，過西域之天竺，教胡" (S. Chen 1964, pp. 859–60). In the Western Jin dynasty (265–317), the Daoist priest Wang Fu 王浮 composed *Laozi Huahu Jing* in the form of a text, which marked an end to debates about its origin.

Although the above statements provide an overview of the stages involved in the formation of "huahu" from a historical perspective, it is worth noting that this legend has much older origins. Zürcher realized this fact long ago and pointed out that "huahu" did not emerge as a tool for debate after the rise of Buddhism and Daoism rose to prominence (Zürcher [1959] 2007, p. 290). However, academia rarely discusses this issue in depth. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 even asserts without any discussion that "Laozi huahu" is an extension of

check for updates

Citation: Si, Jiamin, Jishao Han, and Yuan Zhang. 2023. On the Origin of "Laozi Converting the Barbarians": A Historical Background Analysis. *Religions* 14: 1136. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091136

Academic Editor: Wu Guo

Received: 1 August 2023
Revised: 30 August 2023
Accepted: 2 September 2023
Published: 5 September 2023

Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

the topic of "Laozi huaru 老子化儒" (Laozi converting the Confucians), which refers to Laozi's conversion of the Confucians during the Warring States Period (ca. 476–221 B.C.E.) (Gu 2011, p. 211). Such reasoning with a certain depth in intellectual history is valuable. Undoubtedly, an in-depth discussion of the historical and social background of the origin of "huahu" is a crucial prerequisite for understanding this issue. Examining the intellectual history behind a particular line of reasoning can be highly valuable. To fully comprehend the issue at hand, it is essential to engage in an in-depth exploration of the historical and social context surrounding the origin of "huahu".

This article examines the historical background of "Laozi huahu shuo" and investigates its generation mode and constituent elements. It also discusses and reflects on issues such as the origin of "huahu" and Laozi's deification.

2. Early Ethnic Relations in China: History and Legends

Supporters of the "huahu" theory believe that, after Laozi went west out of Hangu Pass 函谷關, he incarnated as the Buddha; then, he civilized the barbaric Hu people and turned them into Buddhists. It tells of the emergence of Buddhism and aims to prioritize Daoism over Buddhism, as those who believed in Daoism were Han Chinese, while the Hu people adopted Buddhism. It also promotes the idea that the "Han" 漢 (Chinese) were superior to the "Hu". Gil Raz points out that "huahu" was not just a unique doctrine; it associated Daoism with the "essence of Chinese civilisation" (Raz 2014). Furthermore, Liu Yi has already incorporated ethnic relations into his research on "huahu," thus indicating that it can be a crucial perspective for interpreting the origin of the theory (Y. Liu 2011, p. 54).

Throughout history, foreigners residing beyond borders have often been perceived as barbaric and hostile by locals. Even during the time of Greek civilization, historians such as Herodotus would use derogatory language describing outsiders. Archaeological and literary evidence shows that early Chinese society also held an unequal view toward outsiders. During the Yin-Shang period (approximately 14th–11th century B.C.E.), it was common practice to offer living humans as sacrifices to ancestors, with sacrificial victims primarily selected from enemies of the Yin belonging to barbarian tribes. This practice allowed Yin merchants to satisfy their ancestors by punishing their adversaries (Wang and Gu 2007, pp. 204–15).

Ensuring the equality for foreigners is a significant challenge that many countries and regions must face. Dutch scholar Siep Stuurman conducted research on common humanity by exploring how the Greeks, Hebrews, Indians, and Chinese addressed this issue. Stuurman identified specific religious and philosophical mechanisms that transformed foreigners into compatriots. The study revealed that Chinese culture embraced pluralism in its view of the Yi and Xia 夷夏 (the barbarians and the Chinese). Furthermore, Chinese culture has had an inherent relativistic viewpoint that was reflected in Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (ca. 145–? B.C.E.) praise for the Xiongnu 匈奴 in *Shiji.* This also demonstrates the influence of egalitarianism (Stuurman 2017, p. 137).

Chinese people are skilled at using "quasi-kinship" to unite different ethnic groups under a common humanity. While kinship-based clan groups are the most prevalent form of cohesion in human society, China has unique characteristics in utilizing kinship relationships. Sociologist Maximilian Carl Emil Weber (1864–1920) noted that "China has undergone many changes in its long historical process, but the only constant is clan kinship ties (or quasi-kinship cohesive relationships)" (Kang 2004, p. 9). In fact, not only does this relationship span an extended period, but China's use of this bond also surpasses that of ordinary "families" or "clans", thereby serving as a link between ethnic groups through quasi-kinship. Archaeological sites show that large settlements had already appeared during the Longshan period 龍山時期 (about 4350–3950 years ago) (S. Wei 2020, pp. 62–63). These settlements in China's central region faced more intense conflicts, then they tended to be larger and more strongly allied than those on the periphery. After a long collision and fusion, various ethnic groups elected Huangdi 黃帝 (the Yellow Emperor) as their common ancestor and merged into a quasi-kinship brotherhood alliance. It records that Huangdi

had "twenty-five sons, fourteen of whom gained their different surnames: namely, Ji, You, Qi, Ji, Teng, Pro, Ren, Gou, Xi, Ji, Ji and Yi 子二十五宗，其得姓者十四人，為十二姓，姬、酉、祁、紀、滕、箴、任、荀、僖、姞、儇、衣是也" (Z. Wei 2019, pp. 353–54). The actual situation behind this story may be that twenty-five clans that centered around twelve surnames formed a brotherhood alliance under the name of Huangdi as their common ancestor.

When Sima Qian wrote *Shiji* at the turn of the second and first centuries B.C., the concept that Huangdi was the ancestor of Huaxia had already deeply rooted in people's minds. Even the Xiongnu, who were at odds with Han dynasty then, were regarded by Sima Qian as descendants of Huangdi. This was because the Xiongnu were the descendants of Xiahoushi 夏後氏 (Q. Sima 1963, p. 2879). Meanwhile, according to *Shiji*, Yu 禹 was a great-grandson of Huangdi and a grandson of Emperor Zhuanxu 顓頊. Moreover, "Yu belonged to Si surname, but after he divided his territory among his offspring, they used their state names as surnames, and thus there came about Xiahou clan 禹為姒姓，其後分封，用國為姓，故有夏後氏" (Q. Sima 1963, p. 89). It can be seen that legends about Huangdi being the "ancestor king" have considerable openness. Common ancestry has become a way for ethnic groups to think about cognition boundaries.

In traditional China, society was based on the ethics of kinship. As contact and cognition with ethnic groups along border areas developed, blood and "quasi-blood ties" played an important role in fostering cohesion. This can inspire the application of other ethical concepts, such as the master–apprentice relationship, which is one of China's most important non-kinship relationships, thereby naturally possessing such potential value.

The transmission of knowledge is intertwined with human civilization. In the process of transmission, the teacher or educator in a superior position has the right to educate the disciple or students. This power is reflected not only in politics but also in society. For instance, during the Qin dynasty (221–207 BC), "clerks as teachers 以吏為師"[1] prevailed," while the Han dynasty (202–220 BC) witnessed "Sanlao who is treated as an official charge of education 三老掌教化",[2] thus indicating that educational authority was an integral part of national governance systems, particularly within rural power structures during the Han dynasty. Not only within the country, but also in border governance, emphasis was placed on demonstrating educational authority (Lu 2022). Li Lei's study of the Kuaiji Carving Stone 會稽刻石 reveals that Qinshi Huang 秦始皇 (the First Emperor of the Qin empire; r. 247–210 B.C.E.) deliberately exerted his authority over the "Yue people's cultural traditions," which was a form of external demonstration of educational authority (L. Li 2016).

Before the Central Plains dynasty practiced the civilization of foreign ethnicities, Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 313–238 B.C.E.) proposed that "the kids of foreign tribes, such as Gan-people 干, Yue-people 越, Yi-people 夷, and Mo-people貊 are born with the same voice, but grow up with different customs, because they received a different education 干、越、夷、貉之子，生而同聲，長而異俗，教使之然也" (Xianqian Wang 1988, p. 2). This suggests that barbarians could adopt Huaxia's customs if they received an adequate education. By the time of the Han dynasty, ancient frontier narratives already contained the idea of civilizing ethnic minorities. The typical legends include the following:

In the southeast of China during the late Shang dynasty, "Taibo 太伯of Wu 吳國, and his younger brother Zhongyong 仲雍, were both sons of Taiwang 太王 (supreme king) of Zhou 周 and elder brothers of Jili 季歷 … Taibo fled to the Man 蠻 of Jing 荊 and called himself Gouwu 句吳. The local people regarded him as righteous, and those who followed and allied themselves to him were more than a thousand families; they established him as the TaiBo (The Grand Eldest) of Wu" 吳太伯，太伯弟仲雍，皆周太王之子，而王季曆之兄也。…… 太伯之倳荊蠻，自號句吳。荊蠻義之，從而歸之千餘家，立為吳太伯。(Q. Sima 1963, p. 1445).

In the southwest region during the reign of King Wei of Chu 楚威王 (r. 340–329 B.C.E.), "General Zhuang Qiao 莊蹻 led the troops along the river, seized Ba 巴, Qianzhong 黔中 to the west. … He arrived at Dianchi 滇池, which was 300 *li* 里 square, next to the flat land, thousands of *li* of fertility, with the military power to determine what belonged to the Chu

楚國. He wanted to return, but the Qin 秦 attacked and captured the Jun 郡 (county) of Ba and Qianzhong in Chu, and the roads were blocked; he returned and relied on his people to become king of the Dian 滇. They changed their clothes and followed the local customs and thereby acting as their chieftain" 將軍莊蹻將兵循江上，略巴、（蜀）黔中以西。…… 蹻至滇池，（地）方三百里，旁平地，肥饒數千里，以兵威定屬楚。欲歸報，會秦擊奪楚巴、黔中郡，道塞不通，因還，以其眾王滇。變服，從其俗，以長之。 (Q. Sima 1963, p. 2993). Though the story bears the hallmarks of military conquest, the effect of spreading civilization is the same.

In northeast China, the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of Han) records, "As Yin 殷 dynasty declined, Ji Zi 箕子 left for ChaoXian 朝鮮 (the Korean Peninsula), teaching its people about propriety, righteousness, farming and weaving" 殷道衰，箕子去之朝鮮，教其民以禮義，田蠶織作。 (Ban 1964, p. 1658).

In northwest China, the *Houhanshu* 後漢書 (The History of the Latter Han Dynasty) records the origin of the Western Qiang people 西羌, saying: "During the reign of Duke Li of Qin 秦厲公 (r. 476–443 B.C.E.), Wuyi Yuanjian 無弋爰劍 was captured by Qin and made into a slave...When all the other Qiang saw Yanjian being burned but not dying, they thought he was a god and feared him; they respected him as their leader. There was little grain in the Hehuang 河湟 area but many birds and beasts, so hunting became their main activity. Yuanjian taught them how to farm and raise animals which gained their respect; gradually, more people settled down under his leadership" 羌無弋爰劍者，秦厲公時為秦所拘執，以為奴隸。…… 諸羌見爰劍被焚不死，怪其神，共畏事之，推以為豪。河湟間少五穀，多禽獸，以射獵為事，爰劍教之田畜，遂見敬信，廬落種人依之者日益眾。(Fan 1973, p. 2875). Yuanjian spread the Chinese lifestyle to the Qiang people; he taught them how to farm and raise animals. This shows that Yuanjian is essentially an example of a Chinese cultural hero.

These stories blend history with the legends surrounding ethnic groups since the Spring and Autumn period (770–221 B.C.E.). Wang Mingke 王明珂 summarized them as "heroic migration stories 英雄徙邊故事" (Mingke Wang 2009, pp. 79–93). These stories generally represent cultural or ethnic centralism, where ancient Chinese heroes bring civilization to other ethnic groups in all directions.

The civilization of the barbarians of the Chinese concept of education is a product that combines Chinese ethical concepts and historical cognition projected onto the "world". As Jia Fang 賈放 pointed out in his study of the Russian literary structuralist Propp (Владимир Яковлевич Пропп, 1895–1970), "the emergence of new ideas and theories must create a new set of terminology or give existing terms new meanings" (Jia 2019, p. 72). It can be said that the term system for Chinese people to civilize other ethnic groups is embodied in the "hero migration story" as a story template where the protagonist "hero" constantly changes; that could be Wu Taibo, Zhuang Qiao, Ji Zi or Yuanjian, and of course. That could also be someone else.

The "Laozi huahu" legend tells the story of Laozi, a Chinese hero or Shengxian 聖賢 (sage), who went to a remote area to enlighten foreigners. This narrative structure is consistent with the "heroic migration story," and their relationship is almost apparent. With this story template, it is only one step away from creating "Laozi converting the barbarians" by replacing the protagonist of the legend with Laozi and locating the enlightened people as the Hu people in the West.[3] Thus, the story of "Laozi huahu" has already taken shape.

3. Laozi's Character as a Teacher

Laozi's image transformed during the long period when "Laozi huahu" was brewing, which spanned the Han dynasty. Mr. Jiang Sheng's research pointed out that the appearance of Confucius meeting Laozi in Han tomb paintings indicates that this historical story already had religious connotations (S. Jiang 2011). Confucius and Laozi were not just simple human sages, but they possessed divine attributes. Some other scholars have examined the historical evolution of the legend of Laozi before the Tang dynasty (618–690) and concluded that, from a linear perspective, there was an important transi-

tional period during the Han dynasty where Laozi's image transformed from human to divine (Xingfen Wang 2019).

Therefore, it is necessary to clarify that Laozi embodies a dual identity: a historical figure (sage) and a deity-like one. In modern times, Daoist priest Wang Lixue 王理學compiled *Laozi shilu* 老子實錄 (The Authentic Record of Laozi). In the preface, he pointed out many misunderstandings about his true identity due to unresolved doubts about whether there were two different Laozi—one pre-cosmic and one cosmic. The former is ethereal and mysterious, while the latter has a physical body of flesh and blood, which makes him more accessible to people with verifiable historical records. "Laozi's philosophy of Wuwei has been welcomed by people from all over the world throughout history" 老子無為主義為古今中外所歡迎，其歷史多有不明真相的，皆為有先天老子、後天老子的疑案無法判決的原因。先天老子是氣體，是虛的，其事玄妙難測；後天老子是月（肉）體，是實的，其事平易近人，有正史可考，信而有征。 (Zhang 2021, pp. 122–23).

If we consider "the story of heroes moving to the border" as the source of "Laozi's conversion of barbarians", then Laozi's image as a historical figure becomes a determining factor. Still, there is much room for exploration. In the following section, we will examine Laozi's image as a teacher and consider his two-sided nature as both Confucius' mentor and an emperor's instructor. The reason for delving into this topic is that Laozi's reputation as a teacher is crucial to his portrayal as the hero who converts barbarians. Not only is the image of a teacher a direct metaphor for the right to educate, but Laozi, as a teacher, is most suitable for enlightening barbarians. That is the key point for combining his identity with "the story of heroes moving to the border".

3.1. Laozi as the Teacher of Confucius and Other Sages

Even if we do not immediately assume that Laozi was the principal figure in "transforming barbarians" during the Qin and Han dynasties, very few sages qualified for such a title. This is especially true considering that "Confucius meets Laozi" gradually became popular at that time; Laozi had become Confucius' teacher, and his role as a teacher was more representative than China's ancient sage representative, Confucius (551 BC–479 BC). Additionally, other philosophers also received teachings from Laozi.

During the Warring States period, Laozi was already established as Confucius' teacher through various dialogues recorded in The Book of Rites *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites), where many dialogues between Confucius and his disciples include the phrase "I heard from Lao Dan 吾聞諸老聃曰." In addition, Confucius mentioned that he assisted in burying a member of Xiangdang 巷黨 with Lao Dan and that Lao Dan taught him how to handle a solar eclipse they witnessed together (X. Sun 1989, pp. 545–46). According to Confucius, Laozi was a knowledgeable elder who guided him in many ways. The Daoist perspective on their relationship is described in *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang Zhou), which states: "When Confucius was fifty-one years old and still hadn't found the Way, he went south to Pei and met with Lao Dan 孔子行年五十有一而不聞道，乃南之沛見老聃." After meeting each other, Laozi gave some guidance to Confucius (Guo 2012, pp. 518–35). Other Warring States documents such as *Lüshichunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (The Annals of Sire Lü) and *Hanshiwaizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (The Unauthorized Biography of Han Poem) also contain varying degrees of records about this event.

Although the various schools of thought differ in detail, they all suggest that Confucius sought instruction from Laozi. During the Warring States period, many sayings about Laozi made it difficult for Sima Qian to record his biography accurately. In fact, at the end of "The Biography of Laozi" in *Shiji*, he hinted that "Lao Laizi was also a Chu person who wrote fifteen volumes on the use of Daoism and lived simultaneously with Confucius 老萊子亦楚人也，著書十五篇，言道家之用，與孔子同時"; "(Zhou Taishi) Dan is Laozi (周太史)儋即老子" (Q. Sima 1963, pp. 2141–42). This shows that Laozi had already become an iconic figure at that time whose deeds could not be measured solely by historical standards. According to Lü Simian 呂思勉, "various philosophical books often contain erroneous and doubtful facts. This is because ancient academic knowledge was primarily

passed down orally without written records, making it easy for errors to occur; additionally, people emphasized its meaning over their factual accuracy, resulting in fables. Therefore, relying on them to discuss historical facts can easily lead to mistakes. However, despite this fact, everyone at that time knew they were fables" 諸子書所記事實，多有訛誤，此似誠有可疑。然古人學術，多由口耳相傳，無有書籍，本易訛誤；而其傳之也，又重其義而輕其事。…… 此則所謂寓言也。此等處，若據之以談史實，自易謬誤。然在當時，固人人知為寓言。故諸子書中所記事實，乖謬者十有七八，而後人於其書，仍皆信而傳之。(Lü 2016, pp. 373–74). Although Confucius seeking instruction from Laozi may not have happened historically, it has become a firmly established idea in people's minds.

Aside from Confucius, Laozi also imparted his teachings to Yang Ziju 陽子居 and Yin Xi 尹喜. According to *Zhuangzi*, Yang Ziju and Lao Dan met in Liang梁 while traveling south to Pei 沛and west on the Qin road, respectively. During their encounter, Laozi advised Yang Ziju against arrogance or pride (Guo 2012, pp. 953–55). In *Shiji*, it is mentioned that Yin Xi compelled Laozi to write a book (Q. Sima 1963, p. 2141). As a teacher, Laozi's influence extended beyond the circle of Warring States philosophers after he guided Yang Ziju and Yin Xi. He continued teaching barbarians even after leaving China as part of his natural progression.

Overall, Laozi's identity has been attributed to many things, thereby creating an air of mystery around him with strong legendary elements. However, during the Warring States period, he was primarily recognized as a sage who taught other philosophers. Many stories clearly illustrate this point and reflect his historical significance rather than portraying him as an immortal figure, as later generations did.

3.2. Laozi as a Teacher of Emperors

According to *Lüshichunqiu*, not only silk can be dyed, but also a country "非獨染絲然也，國亦有染". The text cites the example of Shun 舜, who learned dyeing from Xu Yu許由 and Boyang 伯陽. Gao You's 高誘 (fl. first half of the third century) annotation suggested, "Boyang is probably Laozi, who was Shun's teacher at that time 伯陽，蓋老子也，舜時師之者也" (Xu 2017, pp. 47–48). Although it is uncertain whether the Boyang mentioned in *Lüshichunqiu* may refer to Laozi or not, Gao You's annotation indicates that, by the Eastern Han dynasty period, Boyang had already been identified as Laozi, and his role as Shun's teacher had become popular.

During the deification process of Laozi, his role as a teacher to emperors gained significant importance. Prior to the Tang dynasty, biographies referred to him as one of twelve imperial teachers or even thirteen saintly teachers, such as in *Gaoshanglaozi benji* 高上老子本記 (The Basic Annals of Lord Laozi), *Xuanzhongji* 玄中記 (The Biography of Mystery), *Laixiangji* 瀨鄉記 (The Hometown of Laozi), *Shenxianzhuan* 神仙傳 (The Legend of the Immortal), and *Chusaiji* 出塞記 (The Legend of Laozi's Journey). These works all mention either twelve imperial teachers or thirteen saintly teachers (Shi 1988, p. 726). Ding Peiren 丁培仁 pointed out that some of these books were written before the North and South dynasties (420–589) (Ding 2007, pp. 575–76). They summarize many versions since the Eastern Han dynasty. As part of his deification process, he became an imperial teacher, and this image was associated with divine immortals. Examining the development process of this image as an imperial teacher reveals some distance from the legend of "Laozi huahu".

During the Qin and Han dynasties, Laozi was primarily associated with the Fangshi 方士 (masters of esoterica). Emperors such as Qin Shihuang and Hanwudi 漢武帝 (emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, r. 141–87 B.C.E.) recruited Fangshi in search of immortality, thus leading to many people creating supernatural events or attaching themselves to immortals to win favor from the emperor. The "Laozi bianhua jing" 老子變化經 (The Scripture of the Transformations of Laozi) lists Laozi's experiences as "cultivating inner essence when retreating, becoming an imperial teacher when advancing 退則養精，進則帝王師". According to its records, Laozi appeared in human form 17 times as an imperial teacher throughout his life. For example, during Fuxi's 伏羲 time, he was known as Wen Shuangzi 溫蒉子: "In the fifth year of King Kang's reign 元（王）康五年, Laozi transformed into a

woman's womb and was born seventy-two years later with the surname Li and given name Dan. He adopted the style name Boyang and served as a minor official for seven hundred years before arriving at Chu state, where King Ping 楚平王 (r. 528–516 B.C.E.) refused his advice due to a lack of moral virtue. Consequently, he left Chu and crossed westward through Hangu Pass, where he taught Yin Xi using two chapters on *Wuqianwen* 五千文 (Five Thousand Words, it is also known as *Tao Te Ching* or *Daode jing* 道德經). During Qin dynasty, he was known as Jianshu Zi 蹇叔子, at the time when he entered (the land of) the Hu, he was known as Futujun 浮屠君, during Han dynasty [he was known as] Wang Fangping 王方平" 元（王）康五年，老子化入婦女腹中，七十二年乃生，讬母姓李，名聃，字伯陽，為柱下吏七百年，還變楚國，而平王喬蹇不從諫，道德不流，則去楚而西度咸（函）谷關，以《五千文》上下二篇授關長尹喜。秦時號曰蹇叔子。大（入）胡時號曰浮慶（屠）君；漢時號曰王方平。 (K. Wang 2004, pp. 181–82). Scholars, including Kikuchi Noritaka 菊地章太, believe that this scripture was compiled at the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (Kikuchi 2009). Further research by Sun Qi 孫齊 shows that, at that time, the followers of Fangshi Wang Fangping used this concept of Laozi being an imperial teacher to promote him as a reincarnation of Laozi himself to elevate his status (Q. Sun 2016).

Despite Laozi's status as an emperor and teacher at this time, Wang Fangping's disciples relied on a tradition of Daoist sorcery that included generations of supernatural teachers, which were most likely fabricated by the Fangshi. According to Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283–363), *Shenxianzhuan*, Emperor Wen of Han 漢文帝 (r. 180–157 B.C.E.) visited Heshanggong 河上公 specifically seeking advice on *The Scripture of Laozi*:

> When the emperor encountered some confusing passages in scripture, he sought an explanation, but no one could provide one. Minister Pei Kai裴凱suggested that a scholar well-versed in Laozi lived near the Yellow River in Shanzhou 陝州. The emperor dispatched an envoy to ask his questions, but Heshanggong replied: "The Dao and virtue are venerable and honorable; they cannot be discussed from afar." Upon hearing this, the emperor promptly visited him.
>
> 帝於經中有疑義，人莫能通。侍郎裴凱奏云："陝州河上有人誦《老子》。"即遣詔使齎所疑問之，公曰："道尊德貴，非可遙問也。"帝即駕幸詣之。
>
> (Ge 2020, p. 229)

During the early Han dynasty, there was a trend of worshipping Huang-Lao 黃老之學. Empress Dowager Dou 竇太后, the mother of Emperor Wen, was known to be fond of the teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi. As per *Shiji* records, it was mandatory for the emperor and his sons to read Huangdi and Laozi's works while also showing respect towards their skills. This legend exaggerates the trend in worshiping Huang-Lao during that period—好黃帝、老子言，帝及太子諸竇不得不讀《黃帝》、《老子》，尊其術 (Q. Sima 1963, p. 1975). According to *Shenxianzhuan*, Heshangong demonstrated his divine power when he met Emperor Wen (Ge 2020, p. 229); his power convinced Emperor Wen. Such displays were a common propaganda tactic used by the Fangshi.

During the early Han dynasty, Laozi's words and skills were highly respected by emperors. As the Fangshi promoted and transformed his teachings, a new tradition emerged where Laozi became a teacher for emperors. In addition, deified Laozi had the opportunity to convert barbarians to Buddhism; as mentioned in the previous "Laozi bianhua jing," he could enter the land of the Hu. However, during the Han dynasty period, the goal of the Fangshi was simply the pursuit of wealth and status, and they had no incentive to build further details regarding Laozi's entry into Hu's land. Therefore, when Buddhism entered China, the role of the Fangshi in structuring the "huahu" was limited.

Furthermore, in the tradition of the Han Fangshi, they seemed more interested in attracting outsiders rather than actively civilizing barbarians. During the reign of Emperor Chengdi 漢成帝 (r. 33–7 B.C.E.) of the Western Han dynasty, a man named Gan Zhongke 甘忠可 from Qi wrote *Tianguanli baoyuan taipingjing* 天官曆包元太平經 (The Scripture of the Great Peace and the Conservation of the Origin According to the Calendar of the Officials of Heaven) in twelve volumes. During the reign of Emperor Shundi 漢順帝

(r. 125–144) of the Eastern Han dynasty, a Fangshi named Gong Chong 宮崇 presented his teacher Gan Ji's 干吉 (or Yu Ji 于吉) work *Taiping qinglingshu* 太平青領書 (The Book of the Great Peace with Blue-Green Headings), which consisted of one hundred and seventy volumes. However, because "his words were based on Yin-Yang Five Elements 陰陽五行 theory and contained many witchcraft-related terms," it was reported to the authorities that Gong's work was full of superstitions and not grounded in reality, so it was confiscated. 其言以陰陽五行為家，而多巫覡雜語。有司奏崇所上妖妄不經，乃收藏之 It was not until during the reign of Emperor Huan Di 漢桓帝 (r. 146–168) that Xiang Kai 襄楷 presented it again and made this book known to the public (Fan 1973, p. 1084). The vast volumes contained in *Taiping qinglingshu* present the collective achievements of the Han Fangshi. Though somewhat altered by later generations, they still represent the Fangshi thoughts regarding the middle to late Eastern Han period. The extant version of the book is called *Taipingjing* 太平經 (The Scripture of the Great Peace). In Volume 88 of the *Taipingjing*, through dialogue between immortals 真人 and celestial masters 天師, there is such an appeal: "When barbarians hear about us [China], they will retreat; China will expand without fighting or invading others … When China prospers greatly, good people from eighty-one domains shall come down [to China] 夷狄聞之，日自卻去，中國日以廣，不戰鬥伐而日彊也。…… 中國當大興平，八十一域善人當降，來歸中國" (Ming Wang 2014, pp. 344–45). This shows that, according to the Fangshis' beliefs during the Han dynasty, China was meant to enjoy visits from all nations instead of bringing civilization to backward countries.

In brief, it is more convincing to interpret "Laozi huahu" within the context of Laozi as a sage. However, it should be noted that Buddha, who is also a key figure in "Laozi's influence on the Hu people becoming a Buddha," has two faces: a historical figure and a western deity. Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451) cited *Weilüe* 魏略 (A Brief History of the Wei) in his annotations to *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (The History of Three Kingdoms), saying that when Buddhism was first introduced to China, the Chinese people tended to view Laozi as the former.

> In the kingdom of Lin'er, there is a legend that tells of a prince named Futu who was born to the king Xietouye 屑頭邪 and a queen called Moye 莫邪. … Futu's teachings has some similarities and some differences from those found in Laozi's classic text from China. It is believed that Laozi traveled west through the Western Regions to Tianzhu, where he taught the Hu people.
>
> 臨兒國，浮屠經云其國王生浮屠。浮屠，太子也。父曰屑頭邪，母云莫邪。…… 浮屠所載與中國老子經相出入，蓋以為老子西出關，過西域之天竺，教胡。
>
> (S. Chen 1964, pp. 859–60)

The Buddha in this text is portrayed as a prince of the Lin'er State and one under the influence of Laozi's teachings.

This statement aligns with the stories of Laozi guiding Confucius, Yang Ziju, and Yin Xi. This serves as another example of Laozi's image as a sage teacher. Additionally, an intriguing phenomenon arose after the Han dynasty, where there was a debate between Buddhism and Daoism regarding "Laozi huahu". Both religions referred to historical books and classics while arguing from the perspective of "who is the teacher of another 釋李師資" and "whose birth was first 佛老先後". The prerequisite for their argumentation was to consider them as historical figures. This indirectly indicates that divinity may not be the core issue in the "huahu".

4. Reflection on the Deification of Laozi

When discussing the origin of the notion of "Laozi huahu", it is impossible to avoid addressing the deification of Laozi. Cultural phenomena such as multiple reincarnations 累世託生, his role as an imperial teacher for generations, and his embodiment of the Great Way 大道 are crucial aspects for understanding this process (G. Liu 1935; Seidel 1969; Kusuyama 1979; Kohn 1998). It is generally believed that Laozi became deified during the Eastern Han dynasty. Although some scholars have attempted to trace this process back to earlier times

by suggesting that there were already elements of deification present in stories such as when Laozi met Yin Xi in *Shiji* (Z. Liu 2005), according to Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) listed him among the upper-middle category (from a system of 9 ranks) of people in the *Hanshu* at the beginning stage of the Eastern Han dynasty, thereby indicating that his divine status had not yet been confirmed at this time (Rao 2003, p.188). In any case, the deification process of Laozi must have been phased, and its significant milestone was to equate him with the Great Way, which is the origin of the universe. Regarding the relationship between "Laozi huahu" and the deification of Laozi, academia often regards the latter as an essential premise for the former. The typical logic was roughly summarized by Wang Weicheng:

> Laozi was already deemed legendary during the Eastern Han Dynasty for his extraordinary abilities. The idea that Laozi went to convert the barbarians first appeared during Emperor Huan's reign … Later, Daoism developed based on the teachings of Huang-Lao from the Han dynasty, with Laozi as its founder and ancestor. Some texts also mention Futu-Laozi. Both Daoism and Buddhism flourished in China during Emperor Shun and Emperor Huan's reigns. However, Chinese people have always valued their own culture over foreign cultures leading to a view of "us" versus "them." As descendants of the Huaxia tribe, those who followed Daoism believed they could not allow foreign religions to coexist with theirs, resulting in inevitable conflict. Therefore, some stories associate Laozi leaving Zhou through the Pass or going on a journey to become immortal with his supposed conversion of barbarians into Buddhists.
>
> 東漢時所傳説之老子，已甚異乎常人，成為神話之人物。而老子化胡之說，即始傳於桓帝之時。…… 後世道教當沿漢代黃老之學而來，其教宗祖老子，浮屠老子嘗並列，順帝、桓帝之時，道佛二教均當始興，道教為中國所自出，佛教乃從外來，中國人民素持"夷""夏"之見，尊華夏而賤夷狄，則從道者流，自以華胄我族，豈容彼夷異教幷立？衝突抵抗，勢有必然。故或遂附會舊時老子去周出關，真人西遊，及老子神話化之說，造為老子入夷狄為浮屠之言。
>
> (W. Wang 1934, pp. 6–8)

This interpretation of "How did Laozi become a deity" presented here exhibits clear Whiggism tendencies (Butterfield 1965, p. 11). It assumes that Laozi was already the central figure in a legend about "converting barbarians to Buddha;" it also speculates on his historical status as a "deified sage." However, during the Han dynasty's religious tradition, there were not only significant deities such as Laozi, and some scholars believe that, by the end of the Han dynasty, Laozi was merely an important immortal rather than a primary god (Y. Liu 2013, pp. 6–8). This raises questions as to how much Laozi was worshiped during the Eastern Han period.

During the Western Jin dynasty, historian Sima Biao 司馬彪 (ca.?–306), in *Xuhanshuzhi* 續漢書志 (The Records of Sequel to the History of Han), evaluated Emperor Huan of the Eastern Han dynasty as being fond of "immortal matters" and cited his worship of Laozi as evidence (B. Sima 1973, p. 3188). However, it is important to note that, although Emperor Huan's worship of Laozi was considered an "immortal matter", the representation of Laozi in this kind of ritual may differ from the immortal Laozi who has been revered for generations as a teacher to emperors and is equivalent to the Great Dao. In 166 A.D., during Emperor Huan's reign in Yanxi's ninth year 延熹九年, Xiang Kai advised him against such practices.

> I have heard that you have built a shrine in the palace to honor Huangdi, Laozi, and Buddha. The Dao emphasizes purity, emptiness, non-action, kindness towards life, and abhorrence of killing. They also advocate for restraining desires and avoiding excesses. However, your Majesty has not followed these principles and imposed unreasonable penalties on others. By deviating from their Dao, how can you benefit from them? It is said that Laozi traveled to barbarians' land and became Buddha who did not sleep under the same mulberry tree three times

> so as not to create feelings of kindness. This was the ultimate essence, Jing 精. When presented with a beautiful woman by a heavenly god, he saw through her external appearance and recognized her as just "a leather sack filled with blood". With this ability to "keep the One" (Shouyi), he achieved enlightenment. In contrast, your Majesty has collected beautiful women worldwide and indulged in refined foods and wines alone without restraint. So why do you still aspire to be like Huang-Lao?
>
> 又聞宮中立黃老、浮屠之祠。此道清虛，貴尚無為，好生惡殺，省欲去奢。今陛下嗜欲不去，殺罰過理，既乖其道，豈獲其祚哉！或言老子入夷狄為浮屠。浮屠不三宿桑下，不欲久生恩愛，精之至也。天神遺以好女，浮屠曰："此但革囊盛血。"遂不眄之。其守一如此，乃能成道。今陛下淫女豔婦，極天下之麗，甘肥飲美，單天下之味，柰何欲如黃老乎？
>
> (Fan 1973, pp. 1082–83)

After reading this passage, Xiang Kai comprehends that, while Huangdi, Laozi, and Futu possessed certain divine qualities—such as Futu's ability to endure the scrutiny of heavenly gods—they were primarily recognized as individuals who achieved enlightenment by pursuing clarity, inaction, and unity. They were not synonymous with the Dao.

Liu Yi's investigation of the "Laozimubei" 老子母碑 (The Stele of Laozi's Mother) came to a similar conclusion. The tablet was written by Wang Fu 王阜 in Changsha 长沙 during the time of Emperor Huan's reign, thereby representing the local officials' respect for the elderly. Liu Yi pointed out that later generations' claim that "Laozi is the Dao" in Wang Fu's "Shengmubei" 聖母碑 (The Stele of the Holy Mother) is not present in the original text of "Laozimubei". Similarly, Bian Shao 邊韶, a minister of Chen 陳, wrote "Laoziming" 老子銘 (The Inscription on Laozi) during the time of Emperor Huan of the Han but did not mention Laozi as the origin of the universe (Y. Liu 1998). This statement makes sense when combined with Xiang Kai's discussion; however, it ignores the differences in beliefs about Laozi among different groups if one believes that equating him with the Dao was not a concept people had during Han dynasty. Different classes may have had different ways of understanding the same belief subject. For example, some scholars have pointed out that Xiwangmu in the Han dynasty was regarded as an immortal goddess by upper-class believers and an omnipotent deity by ordinary believers (Wang and Wang 2022).

The case of Wang Fangping and his work "Laozi bianhua jing" shows that the Fangshi who actively promoted the deification of Laozi outside of the emperors and bureaucrats had already gone further down on their path to deify him throughout the Han dynasty. However, the Fangshi cannot represent the overall level regarding the deification of Laozi during the Han dynasty; moreover, under a background where the highest rulers respected elders highly, bureaucrats such as Wang Fu or Bian Shao might have deliberately elevated the status quo when describing Lao-tzu just to fit into current trends. Therefore, the actual position held by Laozi within the people's spiritual world during the Han dynasty might have been even lower.

The Han dynasty required a potent deity with extensive influence if they intended to create "huahu" based on their belief in deities and to incorporate the transformation of barbarians into Buddhists. However, despite Laozi's experience in Journey to the West, he was not regarded as the primary deity during Huangdi's advocacy for simplicity and detachment from desires and extravagance. Hence, it remains uncertain whether Laozi could convincingly fulfill the role of "converting the barbarians to Buddha".

In the Han dynasty's divine system, Xiwangmu (the Queen Mother of the West) might be a great deity with the ability to "convert barbarians into Buddhists". Although there is no reference to this saying, assuming and discussing it can be likened to drawing auxiliary lines in solving a geometry problem—it helps clarify certain viewpoints.

First of all, Xiwangmu is a deity closely related to the West. The belief in Xiwangmu is a very complex system. Riccardo Fracasso's research shows that Xiwangmu belonged to at least three different systems of gods before the Han dynasty (Fracasso 1988). However, the

most basic concept embodied in her name and reflected in the belief in Xiwangmu is her close connection with the West, which easily leads people to associate her with Western barbarians. Modern studies on early Buddhist statues also focus on this point, as Subai 宿白 points out: "Xiwangmu was transmitted through Kunlingzhique 昆陵之闕 (The gap in the Kunlun Mountains) in the western wilderness and connected with Western barbarians … Xiwangmu was transformed into a Buddhist statue and may have had some connection with the barbarians who worshipped Buddha at that time" (Su 2004). Of course, Wang Yu's 王煜 research shows that faith in Xiwangmu did not come from northwest China but was one of the core concepts of "Western Belief 西方信仰" indigenous to China reflecting ideas about ascending to heaven and becoming immortal (Y. Wang 2020). In the Han Dynasty, Xi Wangmu was not regarded as a "barbarian god". In summary, Xiwangmu living in the West does not mean she came from there as Buddha did.

Secondly, it is not difficult to add the "huahu" element to the belief in Xiwangmu due to the strong plasticity of her story. An example of this is seen in the appearance of Dongwanggong (the King Father of the East) 東王公. Chen Zhi 陳直 once pointed out that "during the Han Dynasty, Xiwangmu's stories were used as mirrors and painting themes, and Dongwanggong was added as a match" (Z. Chen 2006, p. 187). During this period, Xiwangmu's portrayal was almost all-encompassing and underwent multiple changes in both image and identity. This favorable condition allowed Xiwangmu to become a god in the religious environment of the Han dynasty with the ability to "convert barbarians into Buddha".

Finally, archaeological data from the Eastern Han dynasty suggests a connection between Xiwangmu, the Hu people, and Buddha. The stone shrine of Guo's tomb in Xiaoshan Hall, Shandong Province 山東孝山堂郭氏墓, which was built around the early Eastern Han dynasty, has six sets of images from top to bottom on its west wall. The middle position of the lower part of the first set is Xiwangmu and her attendants. The fourth set reflects the war between the Hu and Han with the title "Hu King 胡王" (Y. Jiang 2000, p. 23). In the middle–late period of the Eastern Han dynasty, many bronze mirrors with inscriptions or images related to Xiwangmu appeared. Some scholars named them as "Eastern Han chariot immortal image mirrors 漢車馬神仙畫像鏡", often with inscriptions such as "conquering barbarians 四夷服" and "exterminating Hu-Lu 胡虜殄滅" (S. Wang 2006, p. 1). In addition, a series of painted stone tombs were unearthed in Yinan County 沂南 at the end of Eastern Han dynasty in Shandong Province. On the octagonal pillar in the central room, there are decorations, including Xiwangmu and Buddhist figures holding hand seals (Zeng et al. 1956, pp. 26–27). It can be seen that there are close connections between Xiwangmu, the Hu people, and Buddha.

In fact, in the past study of "Laozi huahu", if any of the cases we have listed appear, scholars might consider it as evidence of "huahu". For example, when Laozi, the Hu people, and Buddha appear together in the Cliff Sculptures of Kongwang Mountain 孔望山摩崖造像, it would be considered related to "huahu" (R. Wang 2008). However, when the main character (Laozi) is replaced by Xiwangmu, who has higher divine power, there is no such saying as "Xiwangmu huahu". It can be assumed that, at the beginning of its formation and even for a period after its formation, "huahu" maintained a certain distance from the divine system of the Han dynasty.

The belief that Laozi was a deity is not the basis for "Laozi huahu". Instead, it was the historical legends of "huahu" that laid the foundation for his deification. When Buddhism entered China on a large scale, while Daoism integrated Chinese divine systems and ideas (including "huahu") to confront it, the deification of Laozi merged fully with "Laozi huahu", and Laozi was considered as a religious founder.

5. Conclusions

The academic research on "Laozi huahu" has been historically viewed through a religious lens, with some considering it as the precursor to Daoism or a response to Buddhism's influence on Chinese culture. Others see it as an entry point for Buddhism into

China. However, this article argues that the origins of "huahu" can be traced back to China's secular intellectual resources. Specifically, the theme of "heroes moving borders" during the Spring and Autumn period and Warring States period, along with Laozi's concept of being a teacher for various schools of thought, laid the foundation for what would become known as "huahu".[4]

Although it is impossible to determine the exact period when the concept of "Laozi huahu" was formed through research into the intellectual history, there are early indications based on historical materials. For instance, during the Han and Jin dynasties, people believed that foreign Chupu 樗蒲 (chaupar) was used by Boyang to calm his anxiety after entering Rong 戎 (Ouyang 1965, p. 1278). Additionally, rumors suggest that Laozi created Hujia 胡笳 (Hu's flute), an instrument used by barbarians during his travels to the west (Fan 1973, p. 1082). Li Daoyuan's 酈道元 (ca.?–527) recorded in his *Shuijingzhu* 水經註 (Commentary on the Water Classic) that there was the Boyang Valley 伯陽谷, Boyang Lake 伯陽水, Boyang City 伯陽城, and Boyang River 伯陽川 beside the Wei River 渭水. "It is said that Li Er 李耳 went westward from here and spread his name throughout these mountains and plains" (D. Li 2007, p. 430). Generally speaking, the story of "Laozi huahu" revolves around mountains and rivers that first caught people's attention. The Chupu and Hujia, which are particularly noteworthy, were likely spread during the Western Han dynasty due to deepening exchanges between the Central Plains and Western Regions. This suggests that "Laozi converting the barbarians" may have emerged during this time, with its original version potentially differing from what we know today. Still, its basic content should already have existed.

It seems highly plausible that there were versions of "Laozi converting the barbarians" circulating in oral accounts without any written version or being recorded in any existing books long before the theory appeared in the received literature. This period should be known as the "primitive" era of "Laozi huahu".

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, J.H.; Methodology, J.S. and J.H.; resources, J.S. and J.H.; writing—original draft, J.S.; writing—review & editing, J.S., J.H. and Y.Z.; supervision, J.H.; funding acquisition, J.H. and Y.Z. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by National Social Science Foundation of China, grant number 20BZJ044; and by Higher Education Institutions' Talents Support Program, grant number gxbjZD2021007.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 According to *Shiji*, "Prime Minister Li Si 李斯 said: '… I suggest that all history books except Qin be burned. … Medicine, divination, and planting books are not destroyed. If anyone wants to learn the decrees, use the officials as teachers.' The emperor said: 'Allowed.'" 丞相李斯曰: "…… 臣請史官非秦記皆燒之。…… 所不去者，醫藥卜筮種樹之書。若欲有學法令，以吏為師。"制曰："可。" (Q. Sima 1963, pp. 254–55).

2 *Hanshu* says, "A Ting 亭 (pavilion) was set up every ten miles with a governor. Ten Ting form a Xiang 鄉 (township), each has managers, such as Sanlao 三老, Youzhi 有秩, Sefu 嗇夫, Youjiao 遊徼. Sanlao is treated as an official charge of education." 十里一亭，亭有长。十亭一乡，乡有三老、有秩、嗇夫、游徼。三老掌教化。(Ban 1964, p. 742).

3 In some atypical versions of the "Laozi huahu," Laozi's teaching influenced not only the Western people but also the four directions. The statue tablet of Xinyanzhi 辛延智, made in 548 (in the Western Wei Dynasty 西魏), says Laozi enlightened and taught the barbarians in the south, west, north, and east (Shaan Xi Yao Xian Yao Wang Shan Bo Wu Guan et al. 1996, p. 138).

4 The factors that led to their integration are difficult to determine. However, according to historical records, besides Laozi converting "Hu", there is also a saying that Laozi entered "Rong 戎". For example, Zhang Hua 張華 (232–300) states: "Laozi entered the western Rong and made Chupu 樗蒲" 老子入西戎，造樗蒲 (F. Li 1960, p. 3219b). which suggests that "Laozi entering Rong" may be the blueprint for "Laozi transforming Hu." Especially considering that during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States period, "Rong" could refer to Qin State. As recorded in *Guanzi* 管子 (Master Guan Zhong): Qihuangong 齊桓公 (Duke Huan of Qi; r. 685–643 B.C.E.) went westward, conquering Bai Di 白狄 territory until he reached Xihe 西河 … and then Qin Rong began following him 西征，攘白狄之地，遂至於西河 …… 而秦戎始從" (X. Li 2004, p. 425). Moreover, due to Qin's relatively backward culture at this time, the six states viewed it as barbarians during the Warring States period, as stated by *Shiji*:

"Qin was initially a small country far away from others; they were treated like barbarians 秦始小國僻遠，諸夏賓之，比於戎翟" (Q. Sima 1963, p. 685). Therefore, the Chu state waged war against Qin for long periods, with Laozi traveling westward towards Qin before enlightening them with his teachings, which was a cultural offensive against Qin. The short-lived Qin dynasty fell and was replaced by the Han dynasty, under which "Laozi teaching Qin" became popular during the "criticizing Qin" trend at the beginning of the Han Dynasty due to its strong satirical meaning. Furthermore, Laozi passed through Hangu Pass when he left Zhou Dynasty, an important passageway from the Six Kingdoms to Qin State, suggesting that there may be a connection between Laozi's journey westward and his relationship with Qin. In addition, in the previously mentioned "Laozi bianhua jing", it is said that Laozi served as an emperor's teacher for generations with one line stating: "During the time of Qin State, he was called Jian Shuzi". This may also be related to "Laozi teaching Qin". If on top of "teaching Qin", Laozi continued to teach and govern towards the West, then it would have reached into territories inhabited by Western barbarians where converting into Hu-people could naturally occur.

References

Ban, Gu 班固. 1964. *Hanshu* 漢書. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局.

Butterfield, Herbert. 1965. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

Chen, Shou 陳壽. 1964. *Sanguozhi* 三國志. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Chen, Zhi 陳直. 2006. *Shiji Xinzheng* 史記新證. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Ding, Peiren 丁培仁. 2007. *Zengzhu Xinxiu Daozang Mulu* 增注新修道藏目錄. Chengdu: Bashushushe 巴蜀書社.

Fan, Ye 范曄. 1973. *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Fracasso, Riccardo. 1988. Holy Mothers of Ancient China: A New Approach to the Hsi-wang-mu Problem. *T'oung Pao* 74: 1–46. [CrossRef]

Ge, Hong 葛洪. 2020. 胡守為校釋 *Shenxianzhuan Jiaoshi* 神仙傳校釋. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Gu, Jiegang 顧頡剛. 2011. Kongzi yu laozi zhi guanxi 孔子與老子之關係. In *Gujiegang Dushubiji* 顧頡剛讀書筆記 *Jingxi Zaji* 景西雜記. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, vol. 1.

Guo, Qingfan 郭慶藩. 2012. *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋. Annotated by Xiaoyu Wang 王孝漁. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Jia, Fang 賈放. 2019. *Puluopu De Gushishixue* 普羅普的故事詩學. Beijing: Zhonguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe 中國社會科學出版社.

Jiang, Sheng 姜生. 2011. Hanhua kongzi jian laozi yu handai daojiao yishi 漢畫孔子見老子與漢代道教儀式. *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 2: 46–58.

Jiang, Sheng 姜生. 2018. Handai laozihuahu ji diyutu kao 漢代老子化胡及地獄圖考. *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 2: 73–85.

Jiang, Yingju 蔣英炬, ed. 2000. Shandong han huaxiangshi 山東漢畫像石. In *Zhong Guo Hua Xiang Shi Quan Ji* 中國畫像石全集. Edited by Zhong Guo Hua Xiang Shi Quan Ji Bian Ji Wei Yuan Hui 中國畫像石全集編輯委員會. *Shandong Huaxiangshi Quanji* 山東畫像石全集. Jinan: Shandong Meishu Chubanshe 山東美術出版社, vol. 1.

Kang, Le 康樂. 2004. Weibo yu ZhonGuo de ZongJiao 韋伯與<中國的宗教>. In *Max Weber's Zhonguo De Zongjiao & Zongjiao Yu Shijie* 中國的宗教; 宗教與世界. Translated by Le Kang 康樂, and Huimei Jian 簡惠美. Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe 廣西師範大學出版社.

Kikuchi, Noritaka 菊地章太. 2009. Tonkou syahon "Oiko henka kei" no kouzou to seisei 敦煌写本『老子変化経』の構造と生成. *Toyo University Oriental Studies* 46: 372–50.

Kohn, Livia. 1998. *God of the Dao, Lord Lao in History and Myth*. Ann Arbor: Center for the Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

Kusuyama, Haruki 楠山春樹. 1979. *Rōshi Densetsu no Kenkyū* 老子伝説の研究. Tokyo: Sōbunsha 創文社.

Li, Daoyuan 酈道元. 2007. *Shuijingzhu Jiaozheng* 水經注校證. Annotated by Qiaoyi Chen 陳橋驛. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Li, Fang 李昉, ed. 1960. *Taiping Yulan* 太平御覽. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Li, Lei 李磊. 2016. Wuyue bianjiang yu huangdi quanwei: Qinshihuang sanshiqinian dongxun kuaiji shishi gouchen 吳越邊疆與皇帝權威——秦始皇三十七年東巡會稽史事鉤沉. *Xueshu Yuekan* 學術月刊 10: 144–52.

Li, Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳. 2004. *Guanzi Jiaozhu* 管子校注. Proofread by Yunhua Liang 梁運華. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Liu, Guojun 劉國鈞. 1935. Laozi Shenhua Kaolüe 老子神化考略. *Jinling Xuebao* 金陵學報 4: 6–7.

Liu, Yi 劉屹. 1998. Laozimubei kaolun 老子母碑考論. *Shoudu Shifan Daxue Xuebao* 首都師範大學學報 4: 34–41.

Liu, Yi 劉屹. 2011. *Jingdian Yu Lishi: Dunhuang Daojing Yanjiu Lunji* 經典與歷史：敦煌道經研究論集. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社.

Liu, Yi 劉屹. 2013. *Dunhuang Daojing Yu Zhonggu Daojiao* 敦煌道經與中古道教. Lanzhou: Gansu jiaoyu chubanshe 甘肅教育出版社.

Liu, Zhaorui 劉昭瑞. 2005. Laogui yu nanbeichao shiji laozi de shenhua "老鬼"與南北朝時期老子的神化. *Lishi Yanjiu* 歷史研究 2: 172–79.

Lü, Simian 呂思勉. 2016. Xianqin xueshu gailun 先秦學術概論. In *Lüsimian Quanji* 呂思勉全集. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, vol. 3.

Lu, Xiqi 魯西奇. 2022. Fulao: Zhongguo gudai xiangcun de "zhanglao" jiqi quanli 父老：中國古代鄉村的"長老"及其權力. *Beijing Daxue Xuebao (Zhexue Shehuikexue)* 北京大學學報 (哲學社會科學) 3: 89–101.

Ōfuchi, Ninji 大淵忍爾. 1991. *Shoki no Dōkyō* 初期の道教. Tokyo: Sōbunsha.

Ouyang, Xun 歐陽詢. 1965. *Yiwen Leiju* 藝文類聚. Edited by Shaoying Wang 汪紹楹. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe.

Rao, Zongyi 饒宗頤. 2003. Shidao bingxing yu laozi shenhua wei jiaozhu de niandai 釋、道並行與老子神化為教主的年代. In *Raozongyi Ershi Shiji Xueshu Wenji* 饒宗頤二十世紀學術文集 vol. 5 *Daojiao Tanyuan* 道教探原. Taipe: Xinwenfeng 新文豐.

Raz, Gil. 2014. 'Conversion of the Barbarians' [huahu 化胡] Discourse as Proto Han Nationalism. *The Medieval History Journal* 17: 255–94. [CrossRef]
Seidel, Anna. 1969. *La Divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoïsme des Han*. Paris: École Francaise d'Extrême-Orient.
Shaan Xi Yao Xian Yao Wang Shan Bo Wu Guan 陝西耀縣藥王山博物館, Shaanxi Lintongshi Bowuguan 陝西臨潼市博物館, and Beijing Liaojin Chengyuan Bowuguan 北京遼金城垣博物館, eds. 1996. *Beichao Fodao Zaoxiangbei Jingxuan* 北朝佛道造像碑精選. Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe 天津古籍出版社.
Shi, Chongxuan 史崇玄. 1988. Yiqie daojing yinyi miaomen youqi 一切道經音義妙門由起. In *Daozang* 道藏. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe 文物出版社, Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian 上海書店, Tianjin: Tianjin Guji Chubanshe, no. 1146. vol. 24.
Sima, Biao 司馬彪. 1973. *Xuhanshuzhi* 後漢書志. In *Houhanshu*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Sima, Qian 司馬遷. 1963. *Shiji* 史記. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Stuurman, Siep. 2017. *The Invention of Humanity: Equality and Cultural Difference in World History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Su, Bai 宿白. 2004. Sichuan qianshu he changjiang zhongxiayou bufen qiwu shangdefoxiang: Zhonguo nanfang faxian de zaoqi foxiang zhaji 四川錢樹和長江中下游部分器物上的佛像——中國南方發現的早期佛像劄記. *Wenwu* 文物 10: 61–71.
Sun, Qi 孫齊. 2016. Dunhuangben laozi bianhua jing xintan 敦煌本<老子變化經>新探. *Zhongguoshi Yanjiu* 中國史研究 1: 101–5.
Sun, Xidan 孫希旦. 1989. *Liji Jijie* 禮記集解. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Wang, Ka 王卡, ed. 2004. Laozi bianhua jing (dunhungben) 老子變化經 (敦煌本). In *Zhonghua Daozang* 中華道藏. Beijing: Huaxia Chubanshe 華夏出版社, vol. 8.
Wang, Ming 王明, ed. 2014. *Taiping Jing Hejiao* 太平經合校. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Wang, Mingke 王明珂. 2009. *Yingxiong Zuxian Yu Dixiong Minzu: Genji Lishi De Wenben Yu Qingjing* 英雄祖先與弟兄民族：根基歷史的文本與情境. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Wang, Ping 王平, and Bin Gu 顧彬. 2007. *Jiaguwen Yu yinshang Renji* 甲骨文與殷商人祭. ZhengZhou: Daxiang Chubanshe 大象出版社.
Wang, Rui 王睿. 2008. Kongwangshan moyazaoxiang yu laozi huahushuo 孔望山摩崖造像與"老子化胡"說. *Lianyungang Renwen* 連雲港人文 1: 1–4.
Wang, Shilun 王士倫. 2006. *Zhejiang Chutu Tongjing* 浙江出土銅鏡. Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe.
Wang, Weicheng 王維誠. 1934. Laozi huahushuo kaozheng 老子化胡说考證. *Guoxue Jikan* 國學季刊 4: m1–m122.
Wang, Xianqian 王先謙. 1988. *Xunzi Jijie* 荀子集解. Edited by Xiaohuan Shen 沈嘯寰 and Xingxian Wang 王星賢. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Wang, Xiaoyang, and Shixiao Wang. 2022. On the Differences between Han Rhapsodies and Han Paintings in Their Portrayal of the Queen Mother of the West and Their Religious Significance. *Religions* 13: 327. [CrossRef]
Wang, Xingfen 王興芬. 2019. Cong "kongzhishi" dao "guoshi": Tangqian laozi chuanshuo de yanbian jiqi wenhua yiyun 從"孔子師"到"國師"——唐前老子傳說的衍變及其文化意蘊. *Gansu Shehui Kexue* 甘肅社會科學 4: 48–55.
Wang, Yu 王煜. 2020. Kunlun, tianmen, xiwangmu yu tiandi: Shilun handai de "xifang xinyang" 昆侖、天門、西王母與天帝——試論漢代的"西方信仰". *Wenshizhe* 文史哲 4: 58–69.
Wei, Si 衛斯. 2020. "Taosi yizhi" yu "yaodu pingyang" de kaoguxue guancha: Guanyu zhongguo gudai wenming qiyuan de tantao "陶寺遺址"與"堯都平陽"的考古學觀察——關於中國古代文明起源的探討. In *Xibu kaogu* 西部考古. Beijing: Kexue Chubanshe 科學出版社, vol. 20, pp. 59–76.
Wei, Zhao 韋昭. 2019. *Guoyu Jijie* 國語集解. Collected by Yuanhao Xu 徐元誥. Edited by Shumin Wang 王樹民 and Changyun Shen 沈長雲. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Xu, Weiyu 許維遹. 2017. *Lüshi Chunqiu Jishi* 呂氏春秋集釋. Edited by Yunhua Liang 梁運華. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.
Zeng, Zhaoyu 曾昭燏, Baogeng Jiang 蔣寶庚, and Zhongyi Li 黎忠義. 1956. *Yinan Guhuangxiang Shimu Fajue Baogao* 沂南古畫像石墓發掘報告. Beijing: Wenhuabu Wenwu Guanliju 文化部文物管理局.
Zhang, Quanxiao 張全曉. 2021. Minmo wudangshan quanzhen daoshi wanglixue qiren qishu kao 民末武當山全真道士王理學其人其書考. *Shijie Zongjiao Yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 1: 118–30.
Zürcher, Erik. 2007. *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*. Leiden: Brill. First published 1959.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.