

Article

“Erudite Discussion” vs. “Aimless Statement”: An Investigation into the Debate Strategies of Buddhism and Daoism in the Tang Dynasty

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Abstract: This paper explores the argumentative strategies employed by Daoism and Buddhism in their debates during the Tang dynasty (618–907). Despite being significant in Chinese intellectual history, these debates, particularly the strategies behind them, remain understudied, and two gaps remain. First, the argumentative strategies of the two teachings are yet to be fully examined. Secondly, few studies have examined why Daoism was consistently defeated in the debates. This paper aims to address the two gaps. The paper first examines the argumentative strategies of the two teachings. Overall, the strategies employed by Buddhists were far superior to those employed by Daoists. Buddhists excelled in exposing contradictions and illogical reasoning in their opponents' arguments. In contrast, the strategies employed by Daoists were often weak, superficial and aimless, primarily serving to undermine Buddhism, whether as a branch of Daoism or a foreign religion. The second part of the paper identifies three reasons for the disparities in argumentative strategies between the two teachings. Firstly, Buddhist doctrines and scriptures underscored the significance of debates, whereas Daoism, both from philosophical and religious perspectives, often overlooked or even discouraged their significance. Secondly, Buddhists actively learned from previous sources and debates, while Daoists displayed limited inclination to do so. Thirdly, Buddhists possessed extensive knowledge of various schools, including Daoism, while Daoists exhibited limited proficiency beyond their own tradition.

Keywords: Buddhism; Daoism; the Tang dynasty; intellectual history



Citation: Lan, Xing, and Xi Chen. 2024. “Erudite Discussion” vs. “Aimless Statement”: An Investigation into the Debate Strategies of Buddhism and Daoism in the Tang Dynasty. *Religions* 15: 1497. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121497>

Academic Editor: Friederike Assandri

Received: 2 October 2024

Revised: 4 December 2024

Accepted: 4 December 2024

Published: 9 December 2024



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1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief Review of Published Literature and Research Gaps

This paper aims to comparatively examine the argumentative strategies employed by Daoism and Buddhism in court debates during the Tang dynasty and then analyse the reasons behind their contrasting strategies.

Overall, the dissension between Daoism and Buddhism, which began around the 4th century or even earlier, holds significant historical and cultural importance in China, as it generated constructive arguments and encouraged the development of both teachings. As Friederike Assandri demonstrates, the court debates of the two teachings “became an important arena of interplay for political authorities and religious communities and of competition between the religious communities” (Assandri 2009, p. 16). Likewise, Livia Kohn (1995, p. 3) clarifies that the debate between the two teachings played a significant role in the adoption of Buddhism into Chinese culture.

However, according to Assandri (2009, p. 18), the debate between the two teachings has yet to receive adequate scholarly attention. As demonstrated in Anna Seidel’s chronological review of Daoist studies (Seidel 1989), few studies prior to the 1990s have adequately noted the debate between Daoism and Buddhism. Fortunately, as noted by

Joachim Gentz (2017), there has been a rise in interest in this area since that time. For instance, Franciscus Verellen examined the Buddhist apologetic tradition in the late Tang dynasty (Verellen 1992). More recently, Liu Linkui (L. Liu 2016) examined the procedure of the debate between the two religions in the reign of Emperor Gao of the Tang dynasty; Thomas Jülch (2017) examined Fa Lin's apologetic mission in the early Tang dynasty; and Chen Chao (Chen 2022) examined the function of *Yixialun* 夷夏論 (The Discussion of Foreigners and Chinese) in the debates between the two teachings. More importantly, original sources concerning the debates have been translated into Western languages. For instance, Livia Kohn fully translated *Xiaodao lun* 笑道論 (Laughing at the Dao) into English in 1995, while (Assandri 2015) translated *Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng* 集古今佛道論衡 (A Collection of Debates between Buddhism and Daoism throughout History) into German in 2015.

Despite the aforementioned progress, two research issues in this field remain understudied. Firstly, most studies typically focus on the procedure and influence of the debates while barely considering the argumentative strategies of the two sides. If this remains understudied, we cannot fully understand how Daoists consistently lost these debates. A second gap, closely related to the first, lies in the limited research exploring why Daoism, despite its abundance of talented intellectuals, was so weak in debates. This paper aims to address the two gaps.

1.2. Points of Clarification Prior to the Main Discussion

Before the main discussion, the paper aims to clarify two points. The first is why the study focuses on the debates in the Tang dynasty, and the second is the reliability of the main reference of the study: *Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng* composed by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667).

1.2.1. Why the Study Focuses on the Debates in the Tang Dynasty

Although the court debates between the two teachings spanned many centuries, they were most intensive during three periods: the Northern and Southern dynasty (420–589), the Tang dynasty (618–907) and the Yuan dynasty (1276–1368). This paper specifically focuses on the debates that occurred in the early Tang dynasty because they were less subject to prejudice, and they were the most well-structured and organised.

The debates outside the Tang dynasty were evidently influenced by the bias of the judges, who were often the ruling sovereigns or imperial members. Their partiality not only led to inferences in the debates but also guaranteed victory to their favoured side. For instance, as Daoxuan documented in his *Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng* (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 72–75), in the year 520, Emperor Ming of the Northern Wei (reign 515–528) issued a debate about whether Siddhartha Gautama and Laozi lived in the same era. Jiang Bin 姜斌, a Daoist priest, employed *Laozi kaiting jing* 老子開天經 (The Scripture of Laozi Created Heaven) to argue that Siddhartha Gautama was Laozi's servant and therefore younger than Laozi.¹ Tanmo 曇謨, a Buddhist monk, referred to *Zhoushu Yiji* 周書異記 (The Strange Notes of Zhoushu) and *Hanchao neifa lu* 漢朝內法錄 (The Collection of Inner Methods of the Han Dynasty) to claim that Siddhartha Gautama lived far earlier than Laozi. Although none of the references of the two sides was sufficiently convincing, Emperor Ming, who was partial to Buddhism, doubted and challenged Jiang's argument, leading to its failure.

In another instance, in the year 569, Emperor Wu of Zhou (reign 560–578) summoned Daoists, Buddhists, Confucianists and officials to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism (Tang 2011, p. 303). Zhen Luan 甄鸞 (535–?), an official and secular intellectual, submitted a text titled *Xiaodao lun*, and the text pointed out thirty-six contradictory or baseless doctrines of Daoism. Although Zhen's arguments were reasonable, Emperor Wu, who was hostile to Buddhism, disparaged and even burned Zhen's work in the court.

In yet another example, the four debates in the Yuan dynasty were even more biased. As Buddhism became the national religion of the Yuan dynasty, the judges of these debates, who were often imperial members, exhibited undue partiality towards Buddhism. According to *Dayuan zhiyuan bianwei lu* 大元至元辨偽錄 (The Record of Distinguishing the False

during the Era of Zhiyuan of the Yuan dynasty) authored by Xiangmai 祥邁 (fl. the 13th century), in the debate that occurred in 1258, Kublai, despite being a judge of the debate, bluntly joined in the debate and commanded Daoist debaters to demonstrate magic powers, leading the Daoists to immediately concede their position (Xiangmai 1992, pp. 776–77). These examples illustrate how the prejudice of sovereigns greatly influenced the outcomes of debates.

In contrast, the court debates during the Tang dynasty were notably fairer, better planned and more substantive. Although the ruling house of the Tang dynasty, for the sake of their authority, acknowledged Laozi as their ancestor and ranked Daoism first among the three teachings, they did not unconditionally support any Daoist belief or scripture. According to *Fozu Tongji* 佛祖統紀 (Comprehensive Records of Buddhas and Buddhist Masters) by Zhipan 志磐 (fl. the 13th century), Emperor Gao (reign 649–683) declared *Laozi huahu jing* 老子化胡經 (The Scripture of Laozi Converting the Barbarians) as a falsified work and prohibited it in 668 (Zhipan 2012, p. 924). Additionally, the religious policy in the Tang dynasty was inclusive, with most sovereigns, except for Emperor Wu (reign 840–846), actively seeking support from Buddhism (Kamata 1986, pp. 189–90). This inclusive policy guaranteed fairness and order during debates. For instance, the ruling emperor or imperial members often encouraged Buddhist debaters to give their best in the debates from the beginning (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 177, 259). When Daoism was at a disadvantage during the debates, the ruling emperor or other imperial members, who attended or hosted these debates, never interrupted the debate nor reinforced the Daoists but allowed Buddhist debaters to continue to challenge or even mock their opponents. Moreover, when Daoist debaters lost in debates, the ruling emperor never attempted to challenge the result and often praised Buddhist intellectuals for their performance. For instance, when Daoist debaters lost the debate in 657, Emperor Gao commended the erudition of the Buddhist participants and even advised Daoist intellectuals to read Buddhist scriptures (Daoxuan 2018, p. 257). Such a fair environment allowed both sides to fully engage in the debates, and these debates are therefore considered the best examples for my research.

The second reason for focusing on this period is that most court debates in the Tang dynasty followed a well-designed format and a clear criterion for victory. According to Assandri's study of the formal proceedings of the court debates of the Tang dynasty, each question in the debate required an immediate answer, and failing to give a response would result in defeat (Assandri 2009, p. 25). In contrast, court debates in other dynasties lacked such a clear procedure, resulting in scattered arguments from both sides.

1.2.2. The Reliability of Daoxuan's *Ji Gujin Fo Dao Lunheng*

The second issue to clarify is the reliability of Daoxuan's *Ji gujin Fo Dao lunheng*, which is the main reference for the following discussion. The text is the most comprehensive source concerning the debates of the two teachings, although only Liu Linkui and Assandri have examined its reliability. Liu Linkui argued that the text is highly genuine because it has an uninterrupted transmission line (L. Liu 2016, pp. 83–87). However, Assandri (2009, p. 17) contended that the text was probably selective because she found that a debate between the two teachings discovered in other sources was undocumented in Daoxuan's work. While concurring with Assandri's conclusion that Daoxuan has probably ignored some events, I argue that the text is adequately genuine for three reasons. First, Daoism was the national religion of the Tang dynasty, and any misrepresentation of Daoists or Daoism would have been considered intolerable. Second, if Daoxuan's work had misinterpreted the speeches of Daoist debaters or concealed the failures of the Buddhists, the Daoists would have pointed out this problem as a counterargument. Third, Daoxuan clarified that his work had skipped some parts he believed to be trivial or meaningless (Daoxuan 2018, p. 261). Based on these three points, I contend that the text is highly trustworthy.

2. The Argumentative Strategies of the Two Teachings

This section aims to compare and analyse the different argumentative strategies of the two teachings in court debates. Many studies have noted that the Buddhists regularly overwhelmed the Daoists in these debates, but few of them have determined why this was the case, except for a brief summary by Assandri (2009, pp. 25–26). To address this gap, I examined the sources of these debates and found the argumentative strategies of the two teachings to be totally different. Overall, the Buddhist strategy is sharp and lucid, whereas in contrast, the Daoist strategy is weak and trivial. Here, I would like to broaden Assandri's discussion to develop my argument.

2.1. Buddhist Strategies

In court debates, Buddhists adopted two main strategies. The first was to argue that their opponents' statements violated Daoist classics, and the second was to point out their opponents' arguments were illogical. In addition to the two main strategies, Buddhist debaters often utilised three other tactics. The first was to separate Laozi from post-Han Daoists in order to avoid offending the authority of Li's clan. The second was to argue that Daoism threatened the authority of the administration, and the third was to mock Daoist debaters to undermine their confidence.

2.1.1. Arguing That Their Opponents' Statements Contradict Daoist Classics

First and foremost, an effective strategy adopted by Buddhist debaters was to point out that their opponents' arguments violated Daoist classics.

For instance, in the debate that occurred in 657, the Daoist debater Li Rong 李榮 started the debate with the topic *liudong* 六洞 (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 261–62).² The Buddhist debater Huili 慧立 asked Li Rong whether *dong* refers to “omniscience” or not, and Li Rong readily agreed that it did, without providing any further explanation. Huili then inquired whether Laozi is omniscient, to which Li Rong responded that Laozi was a highly revered sage, and therefore, undoubtedly omniscient. Having lured Li Rong into his trap, Huili swiftly quoted an entry from Chapter 13 of the *Daode jing*, stating: “I come across a great disaster because I have a self. Now, if I did not have a self then what disaster could be fall me?” (Laozi 2008, p. 29). Based on this, Huili argued that Laozi could not be omniscient because Laozi had experienced a great disaster because he had a self. Li Rong failed to find a response and even begged Huili to stop questioning him. Huili continued his challenge and ultimately won the debate.

In another debate, in the year 658, Li Rong presented an argument “Dao generates all things” as the topic (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 250–51). Huili, the Buddhist debater, questioned Li Rong whether Dao was sentient. In response, Li Rong quoted Chapter 25 of the *Daode jing*, stating “Humans imitate the earth; earth imitates heaven, heaven imitates the Dao” (Laozi 2008, p. 53) as evidence that Dao was sentient, as it was the law of earth and heaven. Huili questioned why Dao does not merely generate benevolent sovereigns but also allows the existence of evil sovereigns, thereby concluding that Dao was unwise and incapable of generating all things. Li Rong was unable to give any response and had to leave his seat. According to Assandri's study (Assandri 2009, p. 25), Li Rong's failure to give an immediate response could have resulted in his defeat.

2.1.2. Illogical Arguments

Another strategy employed by the Buddhists is to highlight their opponents' illogical arguments.

For instance, during a debate in 625 hosted by Li Yuan (reign 618–626), the Buddhist debater Huicheng 慧乘 faced the Daoist debater Li Zhongqin 李仲卿 (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 179–80). At the start of the debate, Huicheng asked Li Zhongqin whether Dao is the earliest and largest entity in the world, to which Li agreed without further explanation. Building upon this initial question–answer exchange, Huicheng further asked Li Zhongqin if Dao is the ultimate law that could never be emulated. Once again, Li Zhongqin im-

mediately concurred with Huicheng without making any attempt to defend his position. Huicheng then employed Chapter 25 of the *Daode jing* to challenge Li Zhongqin. The chapter states that “Humans imitate the earth; earth imitates heaven, heaven imitates the Dao, and Dao imitates her nature (ziran 自然) itself” (Laozi 2008, p. 53).³ Huicheng referred to this chapter to argue that Li Zhongqin’s statement contradicted the *Daode jing* because the chapter clearly shows that Dao follows nature. Attempting to reconcile this contradiction, Li Zhongqin explained that Dao is nature, and nature is Dao. Huicheng then questioned whether nature could follow Dao if Li’s assumption was true. Li Zhongqin replied that nature could not follow Dao because the two are the same. Hearing Li Zhongqin’s response, Huicheng then pointed out the logical weakness in Li’s argument. As Huicheng argued, if Li’s assumption that “Dao follows the nature, and nature is Dao” was true, then heaven could also be earth because earth follows heaven. Li Zhongqin failed to address this challenge and lost the debate.

In the debate of 658 (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 267–68), Li Rong started the debate by raising the issue of *Benji* 本際 (the first cause).⁴ Yibao 義褒 asked whether Dao is based on *benji*, or *benji* is based on Dao. Li Rong replied that Dao and *benji* promote each other. Following Li Rong’s response, Yi Bao clarified that if Dao is based on *benji*, *benji* is clearly the foundation of Dao. Conversely, if *benji* is based on Dao, Dao should be the foundation of *benji*. Li Rong, without questioning Yibao or providing any instruction, clarified that the two concepts were the foundation of each other. Yi Bao, however, referred to the *Daode jing* to challenge Li Rong’s argument. Chapter 25 of the *Daode jing* clarifies that “Dao follows nature”. Referring to the thread, Yibao argued that nature should imitate Dao, if Li Rong’s supposition is true. Li Rong, however, replied that Dao followed nature, while nature did not follow Dao. Yibao then challenged why Dao and *benji* could be the foundation of each other, but Dao and nature could not. Li Rong failed to answer Yi Bao’s question, resulting in an immediate loss in the debate.

2.1.3. Three Technique Tactics

In addition to the two strategies above, Buddhists also employed three tactics to achieve victory.

The first was to separate Laozi from post-han Daoists and assert that post-han Daoists had misread and misinterpreted Laozi. Although the ruling house of the Tang dynasty was inclusive of all religions, this did not mean that the ruling house of Li Tang would tolerate any negative comments about Laozi. Therefore, when challenging Daoists’ arguments, Buddhists never challenged Laozi but separated him and his work from religious Daoism. By doing this, the Buddhists not only maintained the authority of Laozi but also deemed post-han Daoists as believers of malicious beliefs. For instance, in the year 637, Emperor Tai issued an imperial edict to elevate Daoism above Buddhism (Daoxuan 2018, p. 193). Dissatisfied with this decision, Zhishi 智實, a Buddhist, appealed that Buddhism should be ranked higher than Daoism. In the appeal, Zhishi first praised Laozi and emphasised that Laozi had set a precedent for governing the country and managing the household. Then, Zhishi argued that the Daoists in the Tang dynasty were not the disciples of Laozi because they had discarded the *Daode jing* and learnt the malicious doctrines of “Three Zhangs”, which conventionally refers to Zhang Ling 張陵 (34–156), the founder of *Tianshi Dao* 天師道 (Dao of the Celestial Masters), along with his son Zhang Heng 張衡 (?–177) and grandson Zhang Lu 張魯 (?–216) (Zhang 2022, pp. 156–57).

Moreover, in the debate in 660, Emperor Gao summoned Jingtai 靜泰 and Li Rong to discuss the story about Laozi becoming the Buddha. In the debate, Jingtai challenged the authenticity of the story while, at the same time, praising Laozi and the *Daode jing*. Jingtai argued that although the thought of the *Daode jing* was different from Buddhism, the text merited recognition for its serenity and simplicity. On the other hand, Jingtai criticized other Daoist scriptures as being composed by foolish individuals. In so doing, Jingtai was able to significantly weaken the prestige of religious Daoism while maintaining the authority of Laozi.

The second tactic was to argue that the Daoists had offended or even threatened the authority of the central government. For instance, in the debate in 660, Jingtai, the Buddhist debater, argued that Li Rong, his opponent in the debate, was the disciple of “mizei” 米賊 (rice thieves) (Daoxuan 2018, p. 287). According to *Houhan shu* 後漢書 (The History of the Latter Han) (Fan 1965, p. 2435), “rice thieves” referred to the followers of the Daoism of Five Pecks of Grains, a Daoist sect who had at times openly threatened the authority of central government, evidenced by revolts led by Zhang Chang 張昌 (?–304) (Fang 1996, pp. 2612–14) and Sun En 孫恩 (?–402) (Fang 1996, pp. 2631–34). Additionally, in the debate in 662, when Li Rong complained that the early Buddhists in China were foreigners, Lingbian 靈辯, the Buddhist debater, argued that some foreigners were loyal to the central government, while some Daoists were not (Daoxuan 2018, p. 305). Lingbian demonstrated that Jin Midi 金日磾 (134BC–86BC), a prince of Huns, was loyal to the Han dynasty, while Zhang Ling, a towering figure of Daoism who was born in Sichuan, revolted during the Wei dynasty (220–265).⁵ This counterargument left Li Rong speechless, causing him to lose the debate.

The third tactic was to mock Daoist debaters to undermine their confidence, particularly when Buddhists found themselves in a favourable position in debates. For instance, in the debate in 638 (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 200–2), Cai Huang 蔡晃, the Daoist debater, complained that the argument of Huijing 慧淨, the Buddhist debater, was unclear and requested Huijing to reclarify it. Huijing refused, attributing Cai Huang’s failure to understand the argument to Cai’s dull wit. To further mock Cai’s lack of intelligence, Huijing compared Cai to Śuddhipanthaka, a Buddhist figure who is too stupid to understand others’ discussions. In response, Cai Huang insulted Huijing by calling him a wild fox, eliciting Huijing to respond that, since no beasts were allowed in the imperial court, Cai Huang must be insane if he perceived humans as animals. Consequently, Cai Huang withdrew from the debate, signifying his defeat.

In summary, the argumentative strategies employed by Buddhists were sharp and effective. They skilfully dismantled their opponents’ arguments, which were illogical or contradicted Daoist classics; they revered Laozi; they demonstrated the Daoists to be a threat to central government; and they mocked their lack of wit. These strategies proved successful, as evidenced from the outcomes of the debates.

2.2. Daoist Strategies

In contrast to the sharp and effective strategies employed by Buddhists, Daoist debaters’ argumentative strategies were far inferior and superficial and can be classified into two main approaches. The first was to undermine Buddhism as a branch of Daoism, and the second was to belittle Buddhism as an alien religion. In addition, Daoists would occasionally provide trivial and meaningless arguments. Such strategies, however, achieved few positive outcomes in debates.

2.2.1. Claiming the Buddha Is a Branch of Daoism

The first strategy of Daoists was to claim Buddhism as a branch of Daoism. This strategy can be traced to the third century when Wang Fu 王浮 (fl. the third century), a Daoist priest, composed a text called *Laozi huahu jing* to describe how Laozi had traveled west where he eventually became the Buddha (Zürcher 2007, p. 77). From that point onwards, Daoist intellectuals recurrently employed the story to undermine Buddhism by showing it was a branch of Daoism. However, the argument was unconvincing because the story lacked evidence. Moreover, as a counterargument, Buddhist intellectuals composed some scriptures to assert that Laozi was a disciple of Buddha (Zürcher 2007, pp. 307–9). Despite this, the Daoists of the Tang dynasty continued to use this strategy to undermine Buddhism.

In the debate that occurred in 625, Li Zhongqing 李仲卿, the Daoist debater, adopted an entry written by Pan Dan 潘誕, a Daoist alchemist in the Sui dynasty (589–618), to demonstrate that the Buddha was a practitioner of Daoism (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 181–82).

The entry by Pan Dan is “Prince Siddhartha could not become the Buddha until he spent six years in searching for Dao” (悉達太子不能成佛六年求道方得成佛). Referring to this entry, Li Zhongqing interpreted the “Dao” in Pan’s entry as Daoism and argued that Daoism generated Buddhism. Based on this assumption, Li Zhongqing further inferred that Buddhist scriptures often underscored the vital role of Daoism, such as “seeking for the ultimate and true Dao” and “understand the great Dao”. However, Huicheng 慧乘, Li Zhongqing’s opponent, significantly refuted Li Zhongqing’s assumption in two ways. First, Huicheng argued that the Buddha lived earlier than Laozi, so the Buddha was unlikely to be a practitioner of Daoism. Second, Hui Cheng employed many sources, such as *Yijing*, the writings by Che Ying 車胤 (333–401) and Yin Zhongwen 殷仲文 (?–407), to clarify that the character *dao* had many lexical associations unrelated to Daoism. In conclusion, Li Zhongqing’s statement was proven indefensible under Huicheng’s reasonable counterarguments.

In a debate in 660, Jingtai and Li Rong were called to discuss the textual authenticity of *Laozi huahujing* (Daoxuan 2018, pp. 280–83). As discussed earlier, the scripture recounted that Laozi traveled to India and became the Buddha there. Jingtai employed some other sources, such as *Soushen ji* 搜神記 (Anecdotes of Spirits and Immortals) by Gan Bao 干寶 (?–336) and *Youming lu* 幽明錄 (Records of the Hidden and Invisible World) by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444), to clarify that the text of *Laozi huahujing* was groundless and untrustworthy.⁶ Li Rong disagreed and claimed that the introduction of the *Daode jing* mentioned that Laozi had met moving sands when moving forward towards the west. Jingtai countered by first arguing that the introduction to the *Daode jing* witnessed no supporting information concerning Li Rong’s claim but merely documented that Laozi said he would become a hermit and secondly by employing *Zhuangzi* and *Xijing zaji* 西京雜記 (Miscellaneous writings in the West Capital) to debunk the falseness of *Laozi huahujing*. According to *Zhuangzi* (Zhuangzi 1964, p. 48), Laozi probably died in Qin state. And *Xijing zaji*, which is believed to be written by Liu Xin 劉歆 (50 BC–23), documents that Laozi was buried in Huaili 槐里, a prefecture in Shaanxi province today.⁷ By doing so, Jingtai successfully refuted Li Rong’s argument and won the debate.

2.2.2. Undermining Buddhism as a Foreign Religion

The second strategy employed by Daoist priests in debates was to degrade Buddhism as an alien school, which was inferior or harmful. This argument can also be traced to the third century, and the most famous instance is *Sanpo lun* 三破論 (The Discussion of Three Destructions) by Sengshun 僧順 (fl. the 7th century) (Sengshun 2011, pp. 555–81).⁸ The strategy took effect during the reign of Emperor Taiwu of the Northern Wei (reign 423–452) and Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (reign 560–578) (Jiang 2015, p. 47). However, during the Tang dynasty, the strategy became less effective for three reasons. Firstly, Buddhism was introduced to China in the Eastern Han dynasty and became inseparable from Chinese culture by the time of the Tang dynasty. It had become unreasonable to criticise Buddhism as an alien religion by this time. Secondly, the Tang dynasty was accepting and protected many alien religions, such as Manichaeism, Nestorianism and Zoroastrianism. Thirdly, although the sovereigns of the Tang dynasty relied on Daoism, they also sought assistance from Buddhism. Denoting Buddhism as an alien religion was therefore unlikely to weaken its authority, but some Daoist debaters still attempted to adopt this strategy in debates, without success.

In 657, Emperor Gao summoned Buddhists and Daoists to discuss the doctrines of the two teachings (Daoxuan 2018, p. 260). At the beginning, Emperor Gao asked the Buddhists to choose a thesis and start the debate, while Zhang Huiyuan 張惠元, the Daoist debater, requested he be allowed to start the debate for two reasons. The first was that, as the domestic religion, Daoism should be the host, and the second was because Emperor Gao was the offspring of Laozi. Huili 慧立, the Buddhist debater, refuted the two arguments. First, he argued that all of *Sahā-lokadhātu* belonged to the Buddha; therefore, Daoism could not be considered to be the host of China. Next, Huili referred to an entry from *Shangshu* “Great Heaven has no partial affections; it helps only the virtuous” (Legge 1865,

p. 490) to argue that the sovereign would not be partial to Daoism. Emperor Gao concurred with Huili's argument and maintained that the Buddhists start the debate.

In a debate that occurred in 658, Yibao's thesis was the meaning of *Mohe bore boluomi* 摩訶般若波羅蜜 (Mahā-Prajñā-pāramitā) (Daoxuan 2018, p. 271). Zhang Huiyuan argued that the term is written in Chinese but maintained its Sanskrit pronunciation. He further argued that translating alien terminologies into Chinese was meaningless. Yibao responded that such works could benefit both Chinese and Indian culture, leading Zhang Huiyuan to question how alien culture could be beneficial to China. Yibao clarified that Buddhism had led to many benefits since it was introduced to China. According to Daoxuan's documentation, Zhang Huiyuan made no noteworthy response, leading another Daoist named Yao to take Zhang's place, implying Zhang's failure in the debate.

2.2.3. Trivial Arguments

Aside from the two approaches above, Daoists sometimes resorted to trivial arguments, which were often indefensible and led to tough responses from the Buddhists.

In the debate that occurred in 658, when Li Rong failed to answer Huili's objection, he cast a trivial argument in order to redirect the debate (Daoxuan 2018, p. 268). As Huili often called Li Rong *xiansheng* 先生 (master) in the debate, Li Rong claimed that Huili was his disciple because Huili called him master. This statement, however, seems constrained because *xiansheng* was a common honorific. To refute Li Rong's challenge, Huili first demonstrated that he was a disciple, but his master was not Li Rong but the Buddha. Moreover, Huili separated *xiansheng* and reinterpreted it into "earlier (*xian*) born (*sheng*)". As Huili countered, if Li Rong assumed himself as a *xiansheng*, Li should have been born earlier than Dao and should have been the founder of Daoism. Consequently, Li Rong failed to respond to Huili's objection and lost the debate.

In the debate that occurred in 660, Li Rong argued that almost all Buddhist scriptures were falsified works, and, worse still, these falsified works were mistranslated by Xuanzang and other Buddhists (Daoxuan 2018, p. 283). The groundless claim was countered by Jingtai, the Buddhist debater. At first, Jingtai enumerated how Buddhist scriptures were introduced to China. Jingtai then demonstrated that the translations of Buddhist scriptures by Lokaksema (fl. the 2nd century), Kang Senghui 康僧會 (?–280) and Kumarajiva (344–413) were clearly documented in official history. Additionally, Jingtai argued that secular intellectuals, such as Nie Chengyuan 聶承遠 (fl. the 3rd century) and Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433), have also translated Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. In contrast to Li Rong's baseless claim, Jingtai's counterargument was far more conclusive, leading to another Buddhist victory.

In conclusion, the debate strategies adopted by Buddhists and Daoists were starkly different. Buddhism's strategy was sharp and clearly targeted, while Daoism's was blunt and aimless. Overall, Buddhists commonly first searched for the flaws in Daoists' arguments and then developed their own counterarguments. In contrast, the Daoists lacked a clear target and struggled to find any persuasive argument. The stark contrast explains why the Daoists lost most debates against the Buddhists.

3. The Reasons Behind the Different Strategies

The previous section analysed and compared the argumentative strategies utilised by both sides, which gives rise to an intriguing, yet understudied question: why was Daoism, despite its wealth of sophisticated beliefs and talented intellectuals, remarkably weak in debates? While Buddhism is renowned for its emphasis on training in logic and debating skills, limited research has investigated whether Sinicized Buddhism followed this tradition. Moreover, few attempts, if any, have elucidated the reasons behind Daoism's ineffectiveness in debates. To address the gap, I summarised three reasons behind the difference. Firstly, the two teachings diverged significantly in their attitudes towards debating. Buddhism underscored the importance of debates, whereas Daoism, both philosophically and religiously, either overlooked or even refuted their importance. Secondly,

the two teachings adopted contrasting approaches in handling previous criticism and supporting materials. As the debate between the two teachings rose and intensified in the third century, it led to an abundance of research materials by the time of the Tang dynasty. Buddhist intellectuals diligently reviewed these sources, while Daoists appeared indifferent to such sources. Thirdly, Buddhist intellectuals possessed expertise in various other schools, including Daoism, giving them an advantage that allowed them to draw on a diverse range of knowledge to enhance and defend their arguments more effectively. In contrast, Daoist intellectuals commonly confined their discussions solely to Daoism, rarely referencing Buddhist knowledge or other teachings during debates. Moreover, some Daoist debaters occasionally failed to understand their opponents' arguments or even the topics of debate due to their limited knowledge of Buddhism. Collectively, these three reasons led to the recurrent failures of Daoism in debates.

3.1. The Different Attitudes Towards Debates

The attitudes towards debates between Buddhism and Daoism are evidently different, which can be observed in their scriptures and trainings.

Etymologically, *Ānvīksikī*, the Sanskrit term equivalent to the Greek word *philosophia*, refers to “critical inquiry” or “investigation” (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 14). This suggests that Indian philosophy has placed a significant emphasis on debate since its inception. The rules and skills of debate were continuously systematised and refined, and the most notable figure is Akṣapāda Gautama (fl. the 4th century BC), the founder of Nyāya school. Gautama not only established the foundational rules for how the debate should proceed but also summarised various debating skills and techniques (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 173). For instance, he identified at least five types of fallacies that undermine the validity of arguments and inferences (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 185). Consequently, the Nyāya school contended that effectively winning a debate involves exposing the flaws in the opponent's arguments (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 185).

As one of the most influential branches of Indian philosophy, Buddhism also stresses the importance of debate and well-developed specific debating skills. For instance, the Sautrantika followers showed the dynamic and vibrant nature of philosophical debate within the Buddhist tradition (Whilliams 2002, p. 119). Additionally, Dignāga (480–540) differentiated the rules of reasoning, which determine formal validity, from the rules of debate, which focus on persuading others (Adamson and Ganeri 2020, p. 296).

When it comes to Sinicized Buddhism, Chinese Buddhists also underscored the training in debates. For instance, Yichu 義楚 (fl. the 10th century) summarised ten strategies of debating: *wen* 問 (questioning), *da* 答 (answering), *zheng* 徵 (quoting), *shi* 釋 (explaining), *nan* 難 (challenging), *tong* 通 (reconciling), *kai* 開 (involving), *bing* 並 (combining), *chao* 嘲 (deriding) and *xue* 謔 (mocking) (Yichu 1990, p. 99). As discussed above, Buddhist debaters often mocked their opponents when they had the advantage. From Yichu's summary, we can more clearly observe that mockery was a formal strategy rather than personal attacks driven by anger or other emotions.

The emphasis on debate is also witnessed in Buddhist scriptures, which frequently employ a question–answer format reminiscent of debate structures. A notable instance is the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, one of the most influential Buddhist scriptures. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* narrates that Vimalakīrti, a lay practitioner of Buddhism, posed critical questions to Buddha's disciples, such as Aniruddha and Upāli, and then engaged in a debate with Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva. Likewise, *Mañjuśrī Explains the Perfect Wisdom Sūtra* recounts a dialog involving the Buddha, Mañjuśrī, Śāriputra, Mahākāśyapa and other notable Buddhist figures. In this sūtra, the Buddha poses approximately forty critical questions to Mañjuśrī addressing Buddhist doctrines and the appropriate responses to inquiries regarding these teachings. Numerous other classics, moreover, such as *Lotus Sūtra*, *Sandhinirmocana Sūtra*, adopted this question-and-answer style and often posed some critical questions. Although the question–answer format, as summarised by Nāgārjuna, is employed not to present criticism but to “better elaborate on various meanings” (Nāgārjuna 2014, p. 1104), the format,

characterised by sharp inquiries and responses, is likely to foster a critical mindset among practitioners and cultivate their debating skills. This tradition has also shaped Chinese Buddhism, as evidenced by *Lihuolun* 理惑論 (A Discussion of Clearing up Confusion), a notable scripture in Chinese Buddhism, which adopted a debate-style format.

However, Daoist scriptures and trainings, both philosophical and religious, do not assign the same level of importance to debates. Compared to Mohism and *Mingjia* 名家 (School of Names), which emphasized the significance of debates, Daoist scriptures often overlooked or even discouraged the importance of debates. For instance, the *Daode jing* endorsed “Wise men don’t need to prove their point; men who need to prove their point aren’t wise” (Laozi 2008, p. 81), thereby negating the significance of debates. For another, Zhuangzi conveys the notion that “great discrimination is not spoken” (Zhuangzi 1964, p. 39), which also downplays the importance of debates. Additionally, Daoist religious scriptures seldom adopt the question-and-answer style found in Buddhist scriptures, as previously discussed. Although certain texts, such as several chapters in *Taiping jing* (Wang 1990), depict conversations between a master and a disciple, their conversations lack critical thinking but resemble more a lecture, as the disciple merely follows the master’s teaching.

Furthermore, surviving Daoist texts hardly witness any training or structured courses on debate. Although some newly released Dunhuang texts, such as *Daojiao quanli danan* 道教詮理答難 (The Questions and Answers in Interpreting Daoist Doctrines) (Wang 2004, pp. 179–80) and some fragments now titled “Babing” 八並 (Eight Combination) (Cao 2017, pp. 1–3), show that one or two Daoist figures like Wang Xuanlan 王玄覽 (626–697) had noted Daoism’s weakness in debates and drawn insights from Buddhist knowledge to construct Daoist argumentation strategies, these documents were not included in the present *Daozang*. This indicates that the training in debating was not a mandatory component for Daoist practitioners.

The stark contrast in attitude towards debates probably explains why Buddhist debaters consistently displayed eloquence and sharp mindedness in court debates, while Daoists recurrently struggled with articulation and often appeared awkward and inexperienced. The lack of training in debating caused at least three disadvantages. First, when reviewing these debates, we discover that most Daoist failures stemmed from their inability to respond to their opponents’ challenges. Second, Daoist debaters were too inexperienced to recognize their opponents’ traps, consequently putting themselves in difficult positions. For instance, in the debate in 657, as discussed in Section 2.2.1, it was clear that Huili was setting a trap for Li Rong, a trap that Li Rong further ensnared himself in with every question from Huili. Had Li Rong been trained in debating, he would have recognized Huili’s trap and known how to better defend his arguments in responding to these questions. Third, the lack of experience resulted in naïve mistakes during debates. For instance, in one debate, Li Rong appealed to their shared identity as religious practitioners, requesting Huili to refrain from further challenging him, a request that Huili rejected (Daoxuan 2018, p. 262). In another debate, Li Rong even unintentionally abandoned his viewpoint and approved his opponent’s argument twice during the debate, a blunder that elicited derisive mockery from his opponent (Daoxuan 2018, p. 291). These examples reveal the role the inexperience of Daoist debaters played in their failures in debates.

3.2. Different Reactions to Previous Materials

The next reason lies in the contrasting approaches of the two teachings towards previous debates and related sources. As discussed above, debates between Daoism and Buddhism were first conducted in the 3rd century, not long after Buddhism was introduced to China. Concurrently, numerous secular intellectuals, such as He Chengtian 何承天 (370–447) and Zhen Luan, presented arguments to support either Daoism or Buddhism. This led to a significant level of materials charting the dissension between the two teachings. However, the reception and treatment of these materials differed significantly between Buddhists and Daoists. Overall, Buddhist intellectuals demonstrated a thorough

engagement with the existing materials. They diligently reviewed previous works, extracting favourable arguments to strengthen their own viewpoints, and simultaneously addressed the criticisms raised by their opponents. In contrast, Daoists paid little attention to these materials.

It is noteworthy that Buddhist intellectuals made concerted efforts to reconcile and address the objections from Daoist and secular intellectuals. I introduce three of the numerous instances observed in *Hongming ji* 弘明集 (The Collection of Enlightenment) and *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集 (The Extended Collection of Enlightenment). First, as *Hongming ji* notes, when Buddhism was introduced to China, Confucian scholars were dissatisfied with some beliefs of Buddhism, and Mou Rong 牟融 (?–79), a Buddhist practitioner in the Eastern Han, reconciled Confucianists' hostility and criticism in his *Mouzi lihuolun* 牟子理惑論 (Mou Zi's Discussion of Addressing Confusions) (Mou 2011, pp. 6–70). Second, when Daoist intellectuals composed *Laozi huahujing* and some similar texts to claim the Buddha as a disciple of Laozi in an attempt to undermine Buddhism, Buddhist intellectuals also composed some scriptures, as a countermeasure, to claim that Laozi was a disciple of the Buddha. For instance, *Qingjing faxing jing* 清淨法行經 (The Scripture of Peaceful Practice) narrates that Laozi and Zhuangzi are two disciples of the Buddha (Daolan 1929, p. 11).⁹ Third, Li Zhongqin wrote *Shiyi jiumi lun* 十異九迷論 (The Discussion of Ten Abnormalities and Nine Confusions) to challenge ten perceived shortcomings of Buddhism, and Falin 法琳 (fl. the early 7th century) wrote *Shiyu jiuze pian* 十喻九箴篇 (The Chapter of Ten Metaphors and Nine Admonishments) (Falin 1929, pp. 1–40) as a response, with each chapter examining and refuting one of Liu Zhongqin's questions, thus engaging in a point-by-point rebuttal.

Second, Buddhists also attached considerable significance to the favorable arguments put forward by secular intellectuals. For instance, *Gengsheng lun* 更生論 (The Discussion of Reincarnation) (Luo 2011, pp. 290–92) by Luo Han 羅含 (292–372) and *Shenbumie lun* 神不滅論 (The Discussion of Immortality) (Zheng 2011, pp. 297–305) by Zheng Xianzhi 鄭鮮之 (364–427) argued for the persistence of the soul after the body's death. Although the two essays did not explicitly mention Buddhism, the gist of both aligned with Buddhism's belief regarding the soul; therefore, *Hongming ji* collected the two essays to bolster Buddhism's authority. Moreover, Zhen Luan's *Xiaodao lun* debunked thirty-six contradictions in Daoist beliefs (Zhen 1929, pp. 1–20). Although the original text was immediately burned after its submission, Buddhist intellectuals compiled its fragments into an abridged version, which is available to us today.

Contrarily, Daoist practitioners, when faced with Buddhist criticism, gave hardly any solid response. For instance, Zhen Luan's *Xiaodaolun* highlighted thirty-six points he found ridiculous and laughable in Daoist beliefs and rituals, such as “trees wither upon hearing the precepts” and “revival of the dead through fivefold purification” (Zhen 1929, pp. 1–20). Although this text was considered a threat to Daoism and immediately burned, there seems to be no solid counterargument to *Xiaodaolun* in the available Daoist sources. This exposes Daoists' indifference or inability to address criticism directed at Daoism. Furthermore, Daoists also showed indifference towards other sources that supported Daoism. Some Daoist and secular intellectuals, as discussed above, also presented arguments to challenge the authority of Buddhism, such as *Shiyi jiumi lun* by Li Zhongqin and the essay by Fu Yi 傅奕 (555–639) (X. Liu 1975, pp. 2715–17). Although some arguments against Buddhism were reasonable, few Daoists noticed such texts. Indeed, to date, these sources had not survived in Daoist texts but are ironically found in Buddhist texts.

3.3. The Proficiency of the Knowledge of Other Schools

The third reason for their different debating strategies is that Buddhist debaters were commonly well versed in various schools of thought, including Daoism, while Daoist debaters barely employed any knowledge beyond Daoism to develop or defend their arguments. This disparity meant that Buddhist debaters were already familiar with Daoist clas-

sics, terminologies and concepts, while Daoist debaters struggled to understand Buddhist terminology and concepts, putting them at an immediate disadvantage.

As discussed above, a common and efficient strategy adopted by the Buddhists was to argue that their opponents' argument contradicted Daoist classics. This strategy relied on a broad understanding of Daoist classics. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, in the debate in 657, when Li Rong clarified that Laozi was omniscient, Huili immediately quoted the thread "The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body" in the *Daode jing* to argue that Laozi was not omniscient. Had Huili not had a good knowledge of the *Daode jing*, he would have unlikely employed the thread of the *Daode jing* to counter Li Rong. Moreover, Buddhist debaters often employed the knowledge and belief of non-Buddhist texts to better develop or defend their arguments. As also discussed above, when Li Rong adopted *Laozi huahu jing* to argue that the Buddha was an incarnation of Laozi, Jingtai immediately referred to many sources, such as *Zhuangzi* and *Xijing zaji*, to demonstrate that Laozi had never been to India.

In contrast, Daoist debaters seldom showed proficiency in Buddhism during debates and rarely attempted to argue that their opponents' words violated Buddhist classics. Moreover, some Daoists had very limited knowledge of Buddhism, which caused them to be unable to grasp their opponents' arguments or even the debate topics. For instance, in a debate in 658, the topics presented by the Buddhist side were pañca-skandha and nava-parijñā (Daoxuan 2018, p. 249). Daoist debaters failed to comprehend the relevance of the two terminologies and consequently lost the debate. Additionally, Daoists seldom employed knowledge of other schools to better develop and defend their viewpoints.

By analysing these three reasons for the divergent debating strategies of Buddhism and Daoism, we gain a clearer understanding of why Daoism's performance in debates was unsuccessful.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper addressed two critical research gaps: the argumentative strategies utilized in debates by Buddhists and Daoists, and the reasons for the Daoists' consistent defeats in these encounters. The findings indicate that the outcomes of these debates are not determined by the inherent superiority of the beliefs themselves but rather by their superiority in the art of debating skills. Daoism's historical tendency to underestimate and discourage debate stands in stark contrast to Indian philosophy, where both Buddhism and non-Buddhism have traditionally viewed debate as essential for critical thinking and actively fostered the development of debating skills among scholars. This fundamental difference explains the rarity of well-matched arguments that engage deeply with the core beliefs of both teachings, resulting instead in the frequent victories of Buddhists.

Moreover, this study highlights intriguing avenues for further exploration regarding the debates between different schools in Chinese intellectual history. A particularly significant issue is the challenge to Buddhism posed by Neo-Confucianists during the Song dynasty, including influential figures like Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032–1085) and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107). Another notable issue is the debates between Buddhists and Western Christian missionaries in the late Ming dynasty. These two waves of debates manifest distinct interactions in Chinese intellectual history. Moreover, unlike the aimless and superficial arguments posed by Daoists, the argumentative strategies employed by these two groups were notably sharper and more critical. Despite their significance, these debates have been relatively understudied, suggesting that there is considerable potential for new insights and discoveries in the future.

Author Contributions: Writing: X.L.; Source collection, adjustment and editing: X.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The study does employ any research data but materials collected from the sources mentioned in references.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The lifespan of some figures of Buddhism and Daoism is untraceable in available sources, the present paper only marks those individuals whose lifespans are available.
- ² As far as I can see, we cannot read the definition of *liudong* 六洞 in Daoist texts, and the present study does not translate it to avoid a misinterpretation.
- ³ The translation of the *Daode jing* is based on Edmund Ryden's work with minor adjustments and additional explanations.
- ⁴ As far as I can see, we cannot read the definition of *benji* 本際 in Daoist texts, and the present study employs its meaning in Buddhism to translate it.
- ⁵ Lingbian's description about Zhang Ling is somewhat incorrect. Zhang Ling was not born in Sichuan but deployed there during the reign of Emperor Ming (reign. 57–75), and he died before the establishment of the Wei Dynasty. I contend that the figure in Lingbian's argument is not Zhang Ling, but rather his grandson, Zhang Lu, for two reasons. First, Zhang Lu was probably born in Sichuan. Second, Zhang Lu maintained a substantial military presence before ultimately capitulating to Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), who was the father of Cao Pi 曹丕 (187–226), the founder of the Wei dynasty.
- ⁶ I have examined the surviving *Soushen ji* and *Youming lu* but find no related narrations. As the two texts survive in fragments, probably the references that Jingtai mentioned have failed to survive.
- ⁷ The present *Xijing zaji* does not witness the entry, the entry that Jingtai mentioned is probably lost.
- ⁸ The only reference of *Sanpo lun* available to us today is *Shi sanpo lun* 釋三破論 (The Interpretation of Sanpo lun) by Sengshun.
- ⁹ *Qingjing faxing jing* fails to survive to date, and some fragments of the text are available in *Erjiao lun* 二教論 (The Discussion of Two Teachings) by Daoan 道安 (312–385).

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