

The Rise of Chongxuan Daoism:  
The Daoist Use of Buddhist Madhyamaka in the Early Tang Dynasty

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout Chinese history, Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians exchanged religious ideas, concepts, and visions. These vibrant and dynamic cross-religious exchanges challenge the commonly held conception of religions as distinct and isolated entities and reveal the possibilities that arise when traditions adopt and adapt the tools of others. The “Big Three”—Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism—engaged in such exchanges for centuries.

In the early Tang Dynasty, the cross-religious exchanges between Buddhists and Daoists were particularly vibrant due to a compelling imperial interest in promoting productive religious debate. From its beginning, the Tang dynasty identified itself with Daoism. The first Tang emperor, Emperor Li Yuan (Gaozu 566-635), “associated his ancestry with Laozi and regarded him as the ancestor of the imperial family.”<sup>1</sup> Li Yuan and subsequent Tang emperors relied on Daoism to affirm this ancestral claim to Laozi.

Although Buddhism arrived in China with a set of effective conceptual tools that theoretically prepared the tradition to assert itself within the early Tang, the Chongxuan Daoist trend, which had roots in Buddhist Madhyamaka, integrated and universalized the Daoist teaching. Influential Chongxuan representatives, such as Cheng Xuanying, utilized the Madhyamaka logical tools to resolve a central paradox in the Daoist tradition. Through exchanges in the court debates and commentaries on “classic” texts, Chongxuan Daoism legitimized the rule of the Li emperors and established its ultimacy in the religiously competitive environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Cuma Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan (twofold mystery) in the early Tang (618-720),” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (2013), 9, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/comparative-analysis-buddhist-madhyamaka-daoi/st/docview/1417070255/se-2>.

This paper provides a background of the Madhyamaka tradition as it applies to the historical context of the early Tang dynasty in order to contextualize the later discussion of the Daoist use of the Madhyamaka tools in conceptualizing the origin of the Dao.

## **BUDDHIST MADHYAMAKA**

### *Core Concepts and Tools of Madhyamaka*

The three major concepts in the Madhyamaka tradition are emptiness, the two truths, and the tetralemma. In Mahayana Buddhism, emptiness begins with the idea that everything lacks an inherent nature or *svabhava*.<sup>2</sup> There are two vital characteristics of *svabhava*. First, it “cannot be artificially manufactured,” meaning it cannot arise suddenly or be spoken into existence.<sup>3</sup> And second, *svabhava* cannot “depend on another.”<sup>4</sup> This dependence is also referred to as relational origination.<sup>5</sup> Relational origination posits that humans only make sense of the world and differentiate between things through the process of logical opposition.<sup>6</sup> In relying only on logical opposition to define and differentiate things as related to one another, humans neither define the *svabhava* of an object nor the *svabhava* of the object of relation.<sup>7</sup> In turn, humans cannot claim to know the *svabhava*—or inherent nature—of anything. Since all objects and beings arise dependent on one another, everything is inherently empty because the *svabhava* of one thing cannot be tied up to the *svabhava* of another.<sup>8</sup> In short, there is no “substantial, permanent, and unchanging being.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, all objects and beings arise dependent on one another. Therefore, by

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<sup>2</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 46.

<sup>3</sup> J. W. Dippmann, “The emptying of emptiness: The chao-lun as graduated teachings,” ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (1997), 90, <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/emptying-emptiness-chao-lun-as-graduated/docview/304386953/se-2>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 105.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 19.

simple logic, if A exists because B exists and B exists because A exists, when A ceases to exist, so does B, and when B ceases to exist, so does A. While this conception of emptiness forms the foundation of Buddhist thought, particularly Mahayana Buddhism, Madhyamaka draws from this understanding of emptiness.

The idea of the “two truths” forms another “fundamental tenet of Madhyamaka Buddhism” and elaborates on the Buddhist conception of emptiness.<sup>10</sup> Although the two truths drew on older Buddhist conceptualizations, the Madhyamaka teachings fully developed the concept within Buddhism. The two truths consist of conventional and ultimate truth.<sup>11</sup> Conventional truth is the “ordinary or unenlightened understanding of [dharma] as real existences.”<sup>12</sup> This truth includes all the practical and doctrinal aspects of Buddhism. In contrast, ultimate truth is the “enlightened people’s understanding of [dharma] as empty in essence and non-originating.”<sup>13</sup> Notably, since all the doctrinal aspects of Buddhism fall under conventional truth, it is only through the existence of conventional truth that “the significance of the ultimate [can] be taught.”<sup>14</sup> As such, the teachings do not suggest a superiority of one truth over another. With this conception of emptiness and with the two truths to elaborate and better explain the nature of that emptiness, Madhyamaka teachings taught the use of the tetralemma as the way to *achieve* that emptiness.

The tetralemma is an argumentative tool that employs four-cornered negation and can be applied to any pair of oppositional terms or dyads.<sup>15</sup> Through consecutive affirmation and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Friederike Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying: Daoism, Buddhism, and the Laozi in the Tang Dynasty*, New York: Online edition, Oxford Academic (2021), 15, <https://doi-org.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oso/9780190876456.001.0001>.

negation, “all possible extremes and dualities” are negated.<sup>16</sup> As with the two truths, “the soteriological goal of [the tetralemma] lies in breaking through the multiple layers of discrimination and laying bare the fallacies inherent within conventional thinking.”<sup>17</sup> Upon arriving at the final statement of the tetralemma, the concept cannot be affirmed or negated any further, and, at that point, an adept has arrived at emptiness.<sup>18</sup> However, while the tetralemma process may *move* an adept from conventional to ultimate truth, the tetralemma tool as a concept is inherently part of conventional truth. In combining this tetralemma logical tool with the theory of two truths, Madhyamaka provided an incredibly effective way of conceptualizing and establishing true emptiness. The tetralemma logic will be demonstrated in more detail below within the discussion of Cheng Xuanying’s use of the tool.

#### *Madhyamaka’s Founding in India*

Understanding the context of Madhyamaka’s origins in India contextualizes its usefulness and application within China. Madhyamaka emerged in India in the 2nd century CE as a philosophical branch of Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>19</sup> The prominent Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna developed Madhyamaka—or, more accurately, fused the theory of two truths with the tetralemma—to further explain existing Buddhist concepts and to illuminate new concepts. It relied on conceptual tools to clarify and add nuance to the circulating Mahayana scriptures, particularly the core doctrines of the Prajnaparamita literature—also known as the “Perfection of Wisdom” literature.<sup>20</sup> In introducing new philosophical tools and argumentative styles, Nagarjuna demonstrated the possibility of transcending all extremes and dualities.<sup>21</sup> By utilizing

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<sup>16</sup> Dippmann, “The emptying of emptiness,” 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 232.

<sup>18</sup> Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 2.

<sup>20</sup> Dippmann, “The emptying of emptiness,” 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 81.

the tetralemma and the two truths, he demonstrated that the origin of suffering stemmed from a clinging to conventional truth. As such, Nagarjuna redefined nothingness. Without diving into all the complexity of its founding context, it is important to note that Madhyamaka originated to refine existing Buddhist teachings by refuting arguments logically. Since the tradition grew out of a competitive religious environment, the tradition would come to allow both Buddhists and Daoists to ground their arguments in a sound philosophical structure.

### **MADHYAMAKA IN CHINA**

#### *Initial Function of Madhyamaka in China*

Madhyamaka entered China in the 4th century, primarily through the translationary and commentarial work of the Buddhist monk and translator Kumarajiva.<sup>22</sup> By incorporating Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka tools in these translations, Kumarajiva introduced Buddhist concepts with a sensitivity to the existing Daoist and Confucian traditions.<sup>23</sup> Madhyamaka's novel understanding of emptiness added nuance to medieval Chinese conceptions of emptiness.

Daoism, by contrast, was a relatively splintered tradition prior to the Tang.<sup>24</sup> Within the "politically unstable and fragmented Six Dynasties, Daoist traditions developed in response to, and in competition with, each other."<sup>25</sup> To compete with another Daoist tradition, a tradition would engage in a "sophisticated mixture of adopting some elements from preceding traditions and joining them with cosmological extensions."<sup>26</sup> As traditions competed through such "battle[s] of cosmologies," "a great diversity of teachings arose."<sup>27</sup> While all these traditions declared themselves Daoist, many of them only really shared an understanding of the Dao as the

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid,19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Friederike Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism*, N.M: Three Pines Press (2009), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

origin of all.<sup>28</sup> Towards the end of the Six Dynasties, Daoist Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (543-578 CE) called for a consolidation and unification of the splintered Daoist traditions.

Although there is no evidence of Emperor Wu's use of Madhyamaka tools to support his unification agenda, the emperor did foster a culture of court debates to integrate the Daoist tradition on a larger scale.<sup>29</sup> The example of Emperor Wu reveals the pre-Tang codifications of Daoism and the role of the court debates and imperial interference in that process.

### *Rise of Chongxuan Daoism*

As China entered the early Tang dynasty under the founding emperor Li Yuan, the Daoists faced increasing pressure to unify.<sup>30</sup> As imperial rulers “established administrative control over religious communities” by “appointing overseers of the clergy and regulating ordination,” Buddhism and Daoism deepened their ties with the emperor.<sup>31</sup> However, in contrast to the “power struggles, wars, and intrigues [that] dominated the political life” of the Six Dynasties, a unified empire ruled the early Tang.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Tang emperors' association with Laozi increased their desire to legitimize their ancestral claim. In turn, a heightened desire to legitimize their origins increased the pressure of consolidating the Daoist tradition. In the early Tang, Chongxuan Daoism, also known as Twofold Mystery Daoism, emerged as the best representative trend for the Daoist Li emperors

### **POLITICAL AND INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE EARLY TANG**

The Li's imperial agenda to legitimize their ancestral claim generated the unique political and intellectual environment of the early Tang. Although the emperors were Daoist and could

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 7.

declare Laozi their ancestor, they could not “presuppose the superiority of Daoism,”<sup>33</sup> especially since “they made an effort to spread their support to both groups.”<sup>34</sup> Beyond legitimizing the ancestry claim, the emperors also had to prove their direct connection to the Dao and their role within the Mandate of Heaven by demonstrating their position as a sage. Emphasizing the imperially sponsored court debates became an effective way to legitimize the ancestral claim because the exchanges allowed Daoists to compete against and potentially defeat the Buddhists.<sup>35</sup> These court debates also strengthened the emperors’ position within the Mandate of Heaven since the Daoist emperors summoned *all* traditions to the court and facilitated these exchanges.

### *Nature of the Court Debates*

In the early Tang, imperial court debates became the primary forum for exchanging and borrowing religious concepts.<sup>36</sup> Debates were often held in front of an audience of hundreds or even thousands of people,<sup>37</sup> with the Emperor serving as its host.<sup>38</sup> Within these debates, “exchange happened very fast,” and “ideas and arguments were tested, rejected, and reformulated” quickly.<sup>39</sup> In addition to providing “an opportunity to explain their teachings,” these court debates also allowed the traditions to defend themselves against accusations by other traditions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Friederike Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang: An Introduction to Daoxuan’s Ji Guijin Fo Dao Lunheng,” in *From Early Tang Court Debates to China’s Peaceful Rise* (Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 15, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n0hp.5>.

<sup>37</sup> Friederike Assandri, “Understanding Double Mystery: Daoism in Early Tang as Mirrored in the FDLH (T 2104) and Chongxuanxue,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (2005), 430, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15406253-03203005>.

<sup>38</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 12.

<sup>39</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 12.



The debates adhered to a standardized procedure and ordinarily centered around the presentation, analysis, and critique of a text.<sup>41</sup> The texts presented were so-called “classic” texts and included major texts from every tradition.<sup>42</sup> The core “classic” of the Daoist tradition was the *Daode jing*, sometimes referred to as the *Laozi*.<sup>43</sup> In court, the representatives from each tradition “used the classics as a kind of toolbox” and an evidence-bank from which to draw “quotations” and “valid proof.”<sup>44</sup> The collective acknowledgment of the authority and legitimacy of the classic texts in each tradition not only set standards of conduct but encouraged the sharing of texts. In turn, the sharing of texts provided opportunities to exchange applicable concepts across religious traditions.

The general nature of the Chinese religions and the language used in these classic texts also contributed to the porousness and possibility for exchange between the traditions. As Isabelle Robinet states in her chapter on language and its role in Chinese commentaries and court debates: “the Chinese tradition overall has favored a multiplicity of possible meanings.”<sup>45</sup> Borders between Chinese religions are porous, and the classical texts reflect that openness. Robinet conceives books as open entities, “a relationship” that promotes dialogue and “relational play between the book and the reader.”<sup>46</sup> The more open a text is, the more interpretations and dialogue it provides. According to Robinet, Chinese classical texts—those employed in court

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<sup>41</sup> Assandri, “Understanding Double Mystery,” 430.

<sup>42</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 26.

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Wagner, “Exploring the Common Ground: Buddhist Commentaries on the Taoist Classic Laozi,” *Commentaries – Kommentare* (1999), 95, [https://www.academia.edu/26284677/Exploring\\_the\\_Common\\_Ground\\_Buddhist\\_Commentaries\\_on\\_the\\_Taoist\\_Classic\\_Laozi](https://www.academia.edu/26284677/Exploring_the_Common_Ground_Buddhist_Commentaries_on_the_Taoist_Classic_Laozi).

<sup>44</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 26.

<sup>45</sup> Isabelle Robinet, “Later commentaries: Textual polysemy and syncretistic interpretations,” *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching* (1998), 123, <https://web-s-ebshost-com.dartmouth.idm.oclc.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=8b702aee-4a03-49a4-82b9-c1eca773af75%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZW9hvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZTlzaXRl#AN=8616&db=nlebk>.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 121.

debates—drastically varied in format, grammar, and meaning.<sup>47</sup> The particular obscurity of the *Daode jing* left room for varying interpretations and, therefore, led to lively exchanges between the traditions.

Although all traditions could participate in this literary sharing, the Chinese Buddhists theoretically had the upper hand because of their logically developed tradition. The Chinese Buddhist argumentative experience goes back to Nagarjuna in India: “What made Nagarjuna particularly prominent was his extraordinary use of the rules of debates and special forms of argument to invalidate the teachings of non-Buddhist and Abhidharma schools.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, the Buddhist tradition could draw from their “long history of religious and philosophical factional debates.”<sup>49</sup> Chinese Buddhists also managed the rules of debate by translating and presenting certain Buddhist texts. One such text was brought back by the Buddhist scholar Xuanzang (602-664 CE). After traveling and studying in India, he brought back an Indian Buddhist essay on the Seven Points of Debate.<sup>50</sup> This “manual” contained “very detailed lists of possible mistakes” and explained the “correct proposition of a thesis.”<sup>51</sup> This generational experience of the Buddhists starkly contrasts the relative inexperience of the Daoists. The Daoists “were not acquainted with [the] various logical reasoning and philosophical methods” from which the Buddhists consistently drew.<sup>52</sup> In the face of this Buddhist advantage, the general porousness of the traditions and texts allowed other traditions to adopt and employ those same strategies.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 126.

<sup>48</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 17-18.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>50</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 21.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ozkan, “A comparative analysis: Buddhist madhyamaka and Daoist chongxuan,” 7.

Within the court debate context, Chongxuan Daoism quickly emerged most capable of defending the Daoist teachings against the Buddhists and, therefore, best at legitimating the imperial ancestral claim.<sup>53</sup> Since Chongxuan grew out of the Madhyamaka tradition, the trend also possessed many of the same Madhyamaka ideas that gave Buddhists the initial advantage in the debates. The more the Daoists utilized these Chongxuan tools, the better they competed against the Buddhists.<sup>54</sup> The more successfully they competed against the Buddhists, the more the emperors recognized Chongxuan as vital to unifying the Daoist tradition.<sup>55</sup> In turn, Chongxuan came to signify a rising and strengthened Daoism.<sup>56</sup>

The philosophical intensity of these debates naturally highlighted core differences between the two traditions, with the most prominent point of contention revolving around the origin of the Dao.

### **ORIGIN OF THE DAO**

#### *Central “Paradox” in Daoism*

The “unbridgeable difference” that emerged between Buddhism and Daoism in these court debates pertained to the subject of the Dao.<sup>57</sup> Daoists hold the Dao to be the ultimate non-being and, at the same time, the origin of all being.<sup>58</sup> This question carried philosophical and political significance. From the Buddhist perspective, the statement presented an unsolvable “paradox” in the Daoist tradition.<sup>59</sup> In “defying logical and rational analysis,”<sup>60</sup> the Buddhists “attacked the subject repeatedly.”<sup>61</sup> As author Friederike Assandri describes in her book *Beyond*

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<sup>53</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Assandri, “Understanding Double Mystery,” 431.

<sup>56</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 27.

<sup>58</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 100.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 27.

*the Daode jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism*, “In a mystical tradition, such a paradox...could stand as the great mystery of the Dao...However, in the context of the Tang debates, where a competition for the best teaching was staged on logical grounds, a paradox presented a predicament.”<sup>62</sup>

Within this paradox, the disagreement between the Buddhists and Daoists centers on their understanding of the Dao as the *origin* of all being.<sup>63</sup> Buddhists and Daoists agreed that ultimate reality was non-being, essentially that ultimate truth must be a state of emptiness.<sup>64</sup> Buddhists envisioned this ultimate transcendent reality as completely separated from the process of becoming.<sup>65</sup> In other words, the religious and spiritual goal of attaining nirvana implies leaving behind the cycle of life and death and, therefore, the world of “becoming.”<sup>66</sup> Daoists, on the other hand, not only conceived of ultimate reality or non-being as something *part* of this world—and, therefore, not completely separate—but they actually thought of non-being as the very origin of “becoming” and creation.<sup>67</sup>

#### *Cheng Xuanying and Commentary of the Daode jing*

Cheng Xuanying’s commentary of the *Daode jing*, the most important Daoist text, addresses this central difference using Madhyamaka conceptual tools. Cheng was a Daoist monk who “was actively involved in the affairs of Daoism in the capital” under the early Tang.<sup>68</sup> Cheng opens his *Expository Commentary of the Daode jing* by acknowledging this supposed “paradox”

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<sup>62</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 102.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 101.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Friederike Assandri, “Conceptualizing the Interaction of Buddhism and Daoism in the Tang Dynasty: Inner Cultivation and Outer Authority in the Daode Jing Commentaries of Cheng Xuanying and Li Rong,” in *Religions* (2019), 3, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10010066>.

openly; he begins with the rhetorical question, “What is the Great Dao?”<sup>69</sup> Cheng then presents the “paradox”: on the one hand he states, “[Dao] is the connection to empty non-being...it is without beginning; dark, it is without peers. Ultimate dark—it is inscrutable...Confused and vast, it is without form,” but on the other hand he also writes, “[Dao] is the origin of creation and change.”<sup>70</sup> Buddhists incessantly challenged the Daoists on this point which compelled the Daoists to demonstrate how the Dao was the origin of all being.<sup>71</sup> Notably, Cheng relied on the Madhyamaka tetralemma and the two truths to address the identified disagreement.

### *Resolving the Paradox*

In his commentary, Cheng describes how the Great Dao is ineffable—it is too great and extreme to be expressed or described in words.<sup>72</sup> As Assandri describes, “rather than trying to find ways to make the Dao understandable within human capacities, [Cheng] declared that the teaching itself shares the characteristic of Dao and therefore cannot be grasped by words and reasoning.”<sup>73</sup> In section 21 of the *Daode jing*, Laozi states, “The Dao as a thing is indistinct and elusive.”<sup>74</sup> In his commentary, Cheng explicates Laozi’s statement:

Dao as a thing is not being and yet is being...It is not non-being and yet is non-being...Being and non-being are not defined; therefore he says ‘indistinct and elusive.’<sup>75</sup>

Here, Cheng uses the tetralemma to establish that being and non-being are both “indistinct and elusive.”<sup>76</sup> As mentioned above, the tetralemma is an argumentative tool that employs

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<sup>69</sup> Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 132.

<sup>74</sup> Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying*, 126.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

four-cornered negation and can be applied to any pair of oppositional terms or dyads.<sup>77</sup> In this case, the “duality” is the supposed paradox within Daoism—that the Dao is both the ultimate non-being and the origin of all being.<sup>78</sup> Cheng begins with the affirmation that the Dao, as a thing, is **being**. He then negates that affirmation by stating that the Dao is **not being** but **non-being**. Therefore, he affirms that the Dao is **either being or non-being**. After this third step, Cheng negates that statement by concluding that Dao is **neither being nor non-being**. Upon arriving at this final statement, the concept cannot be affirmed or negated any further. In this way, by using the tetralemma logic, Cheng demonstrates how being and non-being are essentially beyond grasp and, most importantly, empty.<sup>79</sup>

Cheng then employs the conception of the two truths to demonstrate how the Dao is simultaneously the origin of all being. In the same passage of his commentary, and in response to Laozi’s description of the Dao as a “thing,” Cheng states:

The reason he says ‘thing’ is that he wants to make clear that Dao is not separate from the things, and the things are not separate from Dao. Outside of Dao, there are no things, and outside of the things there is no Dao.<sup>80</sup>

Cheng suggests Laozi uses the word “thing” to demonstrate that Dao is not separate from the things. As described above, Daoists conceived of ultimate reality and non-being as *part* of this world.<sup>81</sup> Cheng associates the existence of “things” as a product of the Dao. Cheng implicitly utilizes the conception of the two truths to illustrate that the Dao’s creation of all things occurs *in* this world.<sup>82</sup> The final statement of the tetralemma—that the Dao is **neither being nor non-being**—only arises from the continual negation of the Dao. In turn, the Dao is the origin of

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>78</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying*, 126.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Assandri, *Beyond the Daode Jing*, 101.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

achieving that final stage of emptiness. In other words, in addition to being “indistinct and elusive,” the Dao is the origin of ultimate truth (non-being) and conventional truth.

### *Dao in this World*

Following the conclusion that Dao is both the origin of ultimate and conventional truth, Cheng explains how:

one can move back and forth [between non-being and being], circulate freely, and become one with Dao. Thus, one can cause being to become non-being, and emptiness to become substantive. One can unite with what creates all being. Therefore the potential of ending [the cycle of] being born and dying lies entirely within oneself.<sup>83</sup>

The power to become one with Dao lies entirely in this world and within an individual. Reaching ultimate reality means uniting with what creates all being.<sup>84</sup> As such, Cheng used the Madhyamaka tetralemma and the two truths to reconcile the “paradox” and demonstrate how the Dao can be both endlessly mysterious and ungraspable, and at the same time, the origin of all things, both of the two truths, and non-being.

### *Imperial Legitimization and the Unification of Daoism*

The explanation of this “paradox” and the resolution of the philosophical debate, which Cheng Xuanying’s commentary demonstrates, proved highly practical for Daoists in the court debates and, therefore, the Li emperors. The imperial agenda—the desire for the emperors to legitimize their Daoist ancestry claim—and the intellectual environment they fostered as a result of that desire for legitimization acted not only as the driving force behind the philosophical explanation but allowed for the explanation to occur. Upon establishing that the Dao “was the beginning of all being,” the Daoists could then deduce that the Dao “must also have been prior to

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<sup>83</sup> Assandri, *The Daode jing Commentary of Cheng Xuanying*, 39.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

the Buddha.”<sup>85</sup> In this way, the resolution of the paradox proved the philosophical “soundness” of the Daoist tradition and demonstrated the primacy of Laozi. Both outcomes legitimized the emperor’s ancestral claim. Finally, as detailed above, this imperial legitimization, derived from the use of Madhyamaka conceptual tools in the Chongxuan tradition, ultimately strengthened the position of Chongxuan as the representative of a strengthened and consolidated Daoist tradition.<sup>86</sup>

### **CONCLUSION**

The Daoist ascendancy in the early Tang period reveals fundamental characteristics of Buddho-Daoist interactions and exchanges. Although the Buddhists entered China with a robust foundation in Madhyamaka philosophical thought, which theoretically gave them an advantage within the inter-religious exchanges, the consolidation of the Daoist teachings and the subsequent rise of the Chongxuan Daoist trend allowed the Daoists to explain a central paradox within their tradition. In utilizing the tetralemma and the two truths, the Daoists illustrated that the Dao is both eternal non-being and the origin of all being. This explanation further unified the Daoist tradition, demonstrated the primacy of Laozi, and established the ultimacy of the Daoist tradition. Ultimately, in affirming the primacy of Laozi and the ultimacy of Daoism, Chongxuan Daoism legitimized the ancestry claim of the Li ancestors.

### **SIGNIFICANCE AND FURTHER STUDY**

Exploring the dynamics between Buddhists and Daoists in the early Tang is significant for several reasons. First, examining a narrow chronological window such as the early Tang can provide meaningful ways to broadly conceptualize the constructive integration of religious ideas in Chinese intellectual and religious history. In addition to this narrow chronological window,

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<sup>85</sup> Assandri, “Inter-Religious Debate at the Court of the Early Tang,” 27.

<sup>86</sup> Assandri, “Understanding Double Mystery,” 431.



this paper also only considered the Daoist use of Buddhist concepts and not the reverse adoption of ideas. Second, while the early Tang was marked by the notable *ascendancy* of Chongxuan Daoism, the subsequent decline of Chongxuan Daoism throughout the later Tang and following dynasties should follow any study of the early Tang. A study of *why* Chongxuan declined should examine the changes in the political and intellectual environment, which leads to the final point of significance. As described, the imperial agenda was the driving force behind the ascendancy of Chongxuan Daoism. The Daoist use of Buddhist Madhyamaka tools during the early Tang dynasty primarily demonstrates the effects of a potent imperial agenda on the development of a religious tradition. In turn, this case study reveals meaningful outcomes that emerge when politics and religion intersect.

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