

Fall 2012

# Syncretism in the study of Quanzhen Taoism : from essence to argument

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SYNCRETISM IN THE STUDY OF QUANZHEN TAOISM:  
FROM ESSENCE TO ARGUMENT

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for graduation with Honors in Religion.

Whitman College  
2012

*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by John Abercrombie has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Religion.

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May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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## Introduction

In 1220, Quanzhen Patriarch Qiu Chuji (Changyang) began a three year journey across northern China heading west to meet the foreign ruler Chinggis Khan. Qiu was an old man of 72 years, though at the time rumored to be over 300, and he expressed concern that the journey might strain him more than he could take.<sup>1</sup> Realizing, however, “that a refusal was out of the question,” the old hermit Qiu set out to meet with the Khan and discuss methods of longevity at the Khan’s request.<sup>2</sup> The journey was long, difficult, and dangerous, as it was conducted during war times in a country filled with bandits. Qiu’s retinue is escorted by hundreds of Mongol soldiers to ensure his safe arrival.<sup>3</sup> The *Xi you ji*, an account of the journey, depicts Qiu interacting with many communities, often being asked to pray for a town or intercede with nature to bring about more favorable weather.<sup>4</sup> He officiates rituals, initiates new followers, and establishes monasteries. An account of the establishment of a monastery in an outlying town indicates the great sway of Qiu’s authority and the true power of his movement.

Ground was chosen to build them a monastery. The work was carried out entirely by voluntary labour and contributions. Neither strength, skill nor funds were stinted, and in less than a month the Hall of Saints, the monks’ cells, the kitchens to the east, the cloisters to the west, and cloud-chambers on either side – were all completed...<sup>5</sup>

Within China in the 1220’s, the Quanzhen school was rising towards the height of its success. Even though this account comes from the *Xi you ji*, a Quanzhen text, its bias does not overly exaggerate the degree of popular support that the movement garnered.

Based upon the text of the *Xi you ji*, Qiu and his followers were establishing an identity

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<sup>1</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, “*Xi you ji*,” *The Travels of an Alchemist*, trans. Arthur Waley, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), p.54.

<sup>2</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, p.51, see also p.53.

<sup>3</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, p.76

<sup>4</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, p.55-6, 58-9, 122, 140-2,

<sup>5</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, p.75.

as a distinct school connected to his individual reputation and of the movement's followers which he represented. Quanzhen's institutional presence within China after receiving the Khan's endorsement creates an establishment that is truly greater than anything seen before for a Taoist movement. So vast was the movement that Yao Sui estimates between two and three million became followers.<sup>6</sup> As a result of Qiu Chuji's journey to the Khan, the *Xi you ji* records,

Ever since the Master's return Taoists had been assembling in huge numbers from every direction and the opponents of our religion became every day less active. In the Capital there was a general conversion to the faith and its tenets became household words, so that the gates of our doctrine were opened to the four quarters of the earth in a manner never before witnessed.<sup>7</sup>

As indicated by the above quotation, the Quanzhen school and its followers identified as Taoists and were recognized as such by the community at large, but this is just one broad label for the group within which it incorporated many different practices and doctrines. Within the *Xi you ji* Qiu Chuji goes by a number of titles which indicate some aspects of Quanzhen identity that were important during the early days of Quanzhen. The titles attributed to Qiu Chuji within the *Xi you ji* include *xian sheng* (senior), 'Father and Master', 'The Adept', 'the holy *xian*', and immortal.<sup>8</sup> Even with all of these titles, there is only one title which Qiu himself repeatedly asserts and that is the title of 'mountain hermit'.<sup>9</sup> These attributions show the layers of identity which early Quanzhen founders such as Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji presented to the world. These titles reference respect for an old man, the creation of new lineages resulting from entry into the

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<sup>6</sup> Tao Chung-yao, "Ch'iu Ch'u-chi and Chinggis Khan." *Harvard Asiatic Studies*, Vol.46, No.1 (June, 1986), p.217.

<sup>7</sup> Li Chih-ch'ang, p.136.

<sup>8</sup> Li Chih-ch'ang, p.101-2.

<sup>9</sup> Li Chih-ch'ang, p.112, 114.

Quanzhen school, the importance of solitary and ascetic practice, and the end goal of Quanzhen in immortality and holiness.

The Quanzhen movement arose in the multi-religious environment of China in the twelfth century with competing groups known as the Three Teachings, namely, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and despite the many aspects of Quanzhen identity which the movement argued for, scholars on the movement have focused largely on the doctrine of the unification of the Three Teachings. This is a doctrine which can take many forms and be used to support many different things within the religious world of China. Did all the movements originate from one figure in different forms or from a shared intuition among multiple people? Should all of the schools be encouraged to remain separate, work with each other in their present forms, or are none of the forms appropriate, requiring a new school altogether? This doctrine fit within a wider discourse over how to address and conceive of all the traditions and the response chosen had wide ranging consequences.

Scholars of the Quanzhen movement, as noted by Paul Katz, have mainly focused on two aspects of early Quanzhen: “its links to the imperial state (particularly the Mongol Yuan dynasty) and the doctrines formulated by its leaders (especially its emphasis on interior alchemy [*neidan*] and the supposed blending of the so-called “Three Religions” or *sanjiao* thought).” He advocates following the studies of recent scholars to “research the importance of Quanzhen practices as well as its links to popular culture.”<sup>10</sup> However, as far as scholarship in English goes, the issue of “*sanjiao* thought” has not been put to rest. This thesis will examine both the institutional actions and the interpretive strategies

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<sup>10</sup> Paul R. Katz, “Writing History, Creating Identity: A case study of *Xuanfeng qinghui tu*” *Journal of Chinese Religions* Vol.29 (2001), p.161.

employed by Quanzhen patriarchs in relation to other traditions within China. By institutional actions I refer primarily to the establishment of monastic establishments and efforts by the early patriarchs at proselytizing. By interpretive strategies I mean the ways of interpreting texts, history and historical figures, and the tools used to establish a relationship between the Three Teachings of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century China. The interpretation featuring most prominently within the formation of Quanzhen institutional identity is the “doctrine of the unification of the Three Teachings.” I will examine this doctrine and its relation to the institutional identity of Quanzhen in hopes of creating a nuanced understanding of Quanzhen’s stance within a larger field of inter-religious discourse.

### Syncretism

Syncretism is a term that has been used to describe the actions of the early patriarchs of Quanzhen. Used loosely it means the borrowing of doctrines and practices by one tradition from another tradition. David Gellner offers this definition: syncretism is “the unsystematic (or unsystematised) combination within a single tradition of elements which their originators intended to be kept apart.”<sup>11</sup> This definition indicates some of the problems arising from the use of syncretism within the discussion of early Quanzhen. In order to make any sense, the definition necessitates “originating” founders of originally ‘pure’ movements with intentions that scholars can know. However, it is not really possible to know what the Buddha intended his school to look like, nor which elements of foreign religions he intended to keep apart from his. In addition to this problem, because of this stress on the intentions of hypothetical founders, syncretism brings about

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<sup>11</sup> David N. Gellner, “For Syncretism. The Position of Buddhism in Nepal and Japan Compared” *Social Anthropology* (1997), p.278.

discussion of whether or not a specific tradition was ‘bastardized’ through borrowing, implying that a good tradition stays static as the founders created it. However, I follow scholars such as Jonathan Walters in the view that there is no ‘essential’ Taoism, Buddhism, or Confucianism to grasp onto. All of the traditions in China are part of long and complicated discourses involving continual change. With this in mind, if syncretism is used merely to describe the static nature of a movement then it says very little about a given movement because every tradition is produced in dialogue with other traditions in some way or another. Within the study of early Quanzhen, syncretism has been used in just such a descriptive mode, and for this reason, the label “syncretism” is at best inadequate and at worst pejorative, because it stems from an assumption that non-syncretic traditions both exist and are preferable to movements which are ‘bastardized’.

The discussion of syncretism within Quanzhen scholarship as predicated upon static essences has lent itself to a discussion of essences within the Quanzhen tradition itself. Scholars, such as Bartholomew Tsui, have attempted to classify teachings as either primary or secondary, core or periphery. The discussion of Quanzhen syncretism has turned the strategies of interpretation and identity construction that the founders of the Quanzhen tradition employed, such as the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings, into obstructions to an identity within one of the Three Traditions. In this way, elements from different traditions and interpretations of those traditions must be manipulated to support a ‘Taoist’ or ‘non-Taoist’ essence.

In attempting to move beyond the current framework of this debate, this study benefits from the theoretical framework of Ananda Abeyasekara and attempts to use critical strategies of ethnography to engage historical traditions. Rather than viewing

syncretism as a category which a movement can ‘be’, as in Quanzhen is “a syncretism,” I view the actions of early Quanzhen thinkers referring to competing traditions as arguments used to legitimize practice and the institution of Quanzhen as a whole within a the multi-religious environment of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries in China. To help keep this clear that the term syncretism will be meant to analyze arguments made by the Quanzhen founders, I conceive of syncretic arguments as part of a greater field of “embodied arguments.” This term “embodied arguments” refers to the authorizing discourses as well as actions that are utilized within the world to inform both doctrines and practices at a given time. These strategies include institutional undertakings, such as building monasteries, as well as interpretive strategies used by individuals in specific traditions to understand texts and history.<sup>12</sup> By using this term, I wish to move beyond essentializing arguments in the study of Quanzhen and towards an appreciation of the nuances of competition within which Quanzhen thinkers found themselves. By keeping in mind the arguments which Quanzhen thinkers were utilizing in their self-understanding and teachings, syncretism can function as a lens to analyze the strategies and discourses employed. In the end, this results in moving away from syncretism as an identity or threat to identity, and towards an understanding of the syncretic arguments of the Quanzhen founders to legitimize their movement within a multi-religious environment.

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<sup>12</sup> I take this from Ananda Abeysekara, “The Saffron Army, Violence, Terror(ism): Buddhism, Identity, and Difference in Sri Lanka” *Numen*, Vol.48(2001), p.42, who himself cites Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 15, p.222, and Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 9-10, 122-123.



## Syncretism and the Essence of Quanzhen

Early studies of the Quanzhen movement in the west often resisted labeling Quanzhen as a Taoist group. Igor de Rachewiltz wrote of Quanzhen that,

The term "Taoist" applied to sects like Ch'üan-chen (Quanzhen) is actually incorrect, since its doctrine was a syncretism of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. However, since its followers regarded themselves as Taoists, and they were likewise called "Taoists" by their enemies to distinguish them from the Buddhists and the Confucianists, I shall also do so in this article.<sup>13</sup>

Louis Komjathy has similarly noted that past scholars have characterized Quanzhen as “Bastardized Buddhism” or as a “political patsy.”<sup>14</sup> How is it that a movement can identify as Taoist and have the reputation as a Taoist organization and yet not be labeled as such by scholars? Rachewiltz’s quote above indicates that something in the nature of syncretism results in the disparity between his views on the movement and the views of those contemporary with Quanzhen’s founding. The assumption is that a movement which incorporates aspects of all three major schools of the day cannot itself rightfully claim a single one of these titles. The rightful claim of a title requires that its ‘essence’ remain rooted in one tradition and if Quanzhen thinkers did not root primarily in the teachings of the Taoist school then they were not truly Taoists. Through an examination of scholarly attempts to characterize the movement in terms of its essence or core within a larger debate of syncretism we can get a better view of the terms of this debate and the consequences thereof.

Scholars such as Rachewiltz, Komjathy, and Bartholomew Tsui all note that the Quanzhen movement incorporated elements of other traditions within itself. However, they all frame it in a negative way, equating syncretism with bastardization. Even though

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<sup>13</sup> Rachewiltz, Igor de. “The Hsi-yu lu by Yeh-lu Ch’u-ts’ai.” *Monumenta Serica, Vol. 21* (1962), p.12.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Komjathy, *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p.17.

opponents of the Quanzhen school when it was founded did not combat it on the basis of this ‘syncretism’, this debate about whether or not Quanzhen can be labeled Taoist based upon its explicit incorporation of other schools within its teachings is a common theme amongst scholars of Quanzhen. The attempt to define its identity based upon its actions or teachings amounts basically to viewing the three schools of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism as mutually exclusive categories and the study of many of its teachings amounts to a defense or denial of the “Taoist Credentials” of the movement.

Bartholomew Tsui presents the most comprehensive discussion of early Quanzhen thinkers’ doctrine of the Three Teachings in *Taoist Tradition and Change*, showing how many scholars have removed Quanzhen’s Taoist identity based upon the syncretic nature of the movement. In contrast, he argues that the Quanzhen school was essentially Taoist. Thus, even as Tsui presents needed clarification of the actions and teachings of the group missed by past scholars, he falls into the trap created by the very nature of this debate and searches for an essence of Quanzhen and its Taoist identity. While his attempt to realign the views of scholars with those of people during Quanzhen’s founding, it stays within the confines of a debate which masks much of the weight behind the arguments its founders utilized in regards to other traditions. This search for essences which is built into the syncretism debate skews the view of Quanzhen on both sides of the debate and limits our understanding of the true power of the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings to authorize the school as a whole in the multi-religious environment of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century China.

The Problems of “Syncretism” Within this Debate

Early scholars of the Quanzhen tradition took for granted the “syncretic” nature of the movement. However, most introductory discussions of Quanzhen simply use the term “syncretic” as a catch-all term meaning it incorporated elements from the other traditions around it. Labeling the movement as a syncretism of the Three Teachings, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, arose from discussions which note its similarities and borrowings from many traditions and also from the acknowledgement that early Quanzhen thinkers utilized a doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings. As seen in the debate depicted above, the borrowings and interpretations which Quanzhen thinkers engaged in often was characterized by scholars in a pejorative way and this has stuck in most of the English discussions of Quanzhen syncretism to this day.

One of the main problems with syncretism as a label within this debate arises from the nature of the term, which emphasizes essences in two complementary forms. The first search for an essence is predicated upon the idea that a movement has a core or essence that defines it in opposition to all other movements. For instance, one could argue that Buddhism has at its core the teachings of the Buddha and, based upon an interpretation of these teachings, teaches first and foremost an end to suffering as no other teaching does. This form of essentialism factors into the Quanzhen debate with scholars arguing either that the core of Quanzhen is its syncretism or its Taoist identity and practices. Within this debate, syncretism and a Taoist identity are mutually exclusive and the reason they are mutually exclusive brings out the second form of essentialism within this debate.

The second form of essentialism within discussions of syncretism in Quanzhen is predicated upon the idea that there is a ‘pure original form’ of any given tradition which

can be rooted in a set of teachings from a particular figure which do not change from the form the teachings took at the inception of a tradition. This argument can amount to the Catholic Church saying that it is the only true Christianity or that Quanzhen is not true Taoism because it incorporates doctrines and teachers explicitly from traditions other than the Taoist one. Both of these essentializing assumptions must be brought into question in order to understand the Quanzhen founders' syncretic arguments.

The writings of scholars on Quanzhen in relation to its identity have either denigrated its place within one of the Three Traditions or have attempted to re-establish it within these traditions, but all have had to address its standing within the traditional divisions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The way past scholars of Quanzhen discussed the unity of the Three Teachings was to look for cores or essences of the Quanzhen movement. For instance, Sun K'o-kuan remarked, "The core of the thinking of the Complete Perfection is really the union of the Three Teachings into one." Likewise, Tsui remarks, "Ch'en Ping thinks that the distinguishing characteristic of the Complete Perfection Sect is its proposal for the unity of the Three Teachings."<sup>15</sup> These two quotes refer to the core and the distinguishing characteristic of Quanzhen, but both Sun K'o-kuan and Ch'en Ping are looking for the same thing, a singular trait which makes Quanzhen what it is. The core of a teaching amounts to saying that it is the doctrine which sets Quanzhen apart from all other movements.

This view springs from many aspects of the school, in particular stele inscriptions which were the source of early scholars' knowledge of Quanzhen. One stele inscription

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<sup>15</sup>Bartholomew, Tsui. *Taoist Tradition and Change: the story of the Complete Perfection Sect in Hong Kong*. (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture, 1991), p.28.

refers to the first five assembly halls erected by Wang Chongyang and his followers. The author of the stone inscription wrote,

Whenever (Wang Chongyang) called an assembly, he named it by the name of San-chiao (sanjiao, the Three Teachings). He must have done it with a purpose in mind. For our master was a disciple of Tzu-ssu (one of Confucius' distinguished disciples) and Bodhidharma. From this, it can be seen that he was full of the spirit of the void and of subtle understanding, tranquil and in possession of the truth of interpenetration. He did not rest on any one of the (three) teachings.<sup>16</sup>

This inscription appears to have been written by a follower of Wang Chongyang because he refers to Wang as “our master,” and this shows that, in the eyes of this follower, no single school or teacher functioned as the sole source of doctrines and teachings. Based upon this inscription, scholars that want to argue for a core of Quanzhen teachings must argue that no one tradition could account for the new movement's identity. Wang Chongyang followed the teachings of Confucius and the Ch'an Buddhist patriarch Bodhidharma and did not “rest on any one of the (three) teachings,” so the core could not simply be Buddhist or Confucian and there is no indication that it was Taoist. If one assumes that each tradition gains its essence from a distinctive teaching attributed to a single founder then Quanzhen must not have had an essence in the normal sense. In order to identify a doctrine that the school did “rest on” as its core, scholars argued that Quanzhen's core was this very syncretism of the Three Teachings.

Other steles were used to give further evidence that Quanzhen's core was syncretism and not Taoism as individuals in the twelfth and thirteenth century thought. For instance, Hsin Yuan highlights the similarities of Quanzhen teachings with those of other schools and its ability to teach ‘the good’. Hsin writes of the school, “Its emphasis on humility and deference resembles that of Confucianism; its diligence and endurance is

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<sup>16</sup> Tsui, p.29.

like that of the Moists; its compassion like that of the Buddhists.”<sup>17</sup> Once again reference to figures of the Taoist tradition are absent while there is an indication that some form of borrowing and harmonization of different traditions was taking place. Tsui argues that most of these stele inscriptions were written by Confucian scholar-officials and that because of this, “Virtues compatible with Confucian values were often extolled while practices uncomfortable to the writers were suppressed.”<sup>18</sup> The practices that Tsui refers to are internal alchemical practices, practices which manipulate the energies within the body through intention driven meditation in order to attain longevity or immortality. He presents a probable explanation for why internal alchemy was not discussed as part of the tradition and in fact some scholars argued that internal alchemy was not part of Quanzhen at all.<sup>19</sup> Scholars such as Louis Komjathy, Stephen Eskildsen, and others have shown that internal alchemy was in fact a large part of practice and any masking of these practices by scholar-officials at the time could indeed indicate a bias in the sources.<sup>20</sup> For this reason, Hsin’s stele cited above gives a picture of some basic teachings which Quanzhen founders most likely did teach, but certainly not all. Just as his interpretation of the other traditions which allowed for comparison required simplification and essentializing views of the other teachings, he pulls out the best or most important aspects of the Quanzhen school as he sees it which happen to emphasize virtues that benefit society.

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<sup>17</sup> Tsui, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Tsui, p.17.

<sup>19</sup> Tsui, p.10.

<sup>20</sup> See Komjathy, *Cultivating Perfection*, and Stephen Eskildsen, *The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

Another figure, Wang Huan of the Jin Dynasty, gives the first indication that Quanzhen was more than just ethical structures and social virtues. He writes in the

*Ch'ung hsiu t'ai ch'ing kuan chi,*

Let him lead his disciples in the manner of the Complete Perfection Sect (Quanzhen): Have a high regard for the teaching and inculcate a respect for the master, and by their examples transform their neighbors. Like the disciples of the Complete Perfection, they are faithful to their practices day in and day out...they nevertheless never depart from the real virtues of filial piety, respect for the elder, loyalty and fidelity.<sup>21</sup>

Here Wang Huan, along with emphasizing social virtues, also gives a view into how important 'practice' was amongst followers of Quanzhen, noting that they practice "day in and day out." However, this view, as the view expressed in the previous stele, presents a value loaded judgment of the movement. He argues that the importance of practice might actually be a detriment to what is truly valuable to society, namely the values of "filial piety, respect for the elder, loyalty and fidelity" traditionally associated with Confucianism. This presentation gives a sense that there are competing values which Quanzhen has incorporated within itself. On the one hand Wang Huan argues that practices engaged in by the followers of Quanzhen were important to its followers, so much so that they were a defining feature of their lives. On the other hand these are not "real virtues" and instead, according to Wang Huan, are distractions from what is truly important in life. In some way, Quanzhen has managed to incorporate both some sense of practice and acceptable social virtues in ways that many Confucian officials deemed acceptable and thus the school's teachings are worthy of study. This shows another way in which syncretism possibly factored into the Quanzhen school, enabling it to appeal to literati and Confucian officials through incorporation of virtues which they appreciate.

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<sup>21</sup> Tsui, p.12.

Further characterizations of Quanzhen on stele inscriptions reflect the ability of the movement to utilize many teachings in creative ways that actually served to gain respect from figures within other schools. For instance, Yuan Chueh of the Yuan Dynasty wrote that “this teaching is fast approaching that of the Buddha”<sup>22</sup> and Hsin Yuan claimed, “I have learned a lot from it and am pleased to talk about it.”<sup>23</sup> These depictions give every indication that Quanzhen possessed teachings pleasing to Confucian scholars and many officials primarily associated with other schools. However, instead of scholars of Quanzhen examining the ways in which the movement created this space for itself, they emphasized only that this made the movement somehow ‘un-Taoist’. For instance, Ch’en Huan argued in a way that must have influenced Rachewiltz’s views noted above, “Since it resembled neither Confucianism nor Buddhism, it was usually branded Taoist. In fact, it should simply be called Complete Perfection. If it must be considered as Taoist, it could at most be called a reformed branch of Taoism.”<sup>24</sup> Noting the distinctions being made between Quanzhen and other schools, he reluctantly identifies the movement as Taoist, but not a “real” Taoist school. He follows thinkers of the time in calling Quanzhen “borrowed from the Taoists and Buddhists,”<sup>25</sup> delegitimizing any claim to the title Taoist and making the movement appear a hodgepodge with no real essence or integrity while the other traditions allegedly do have integrity. This reflects the impact of the second essentialist assumption within the syncretism debate that there was in fact a true Taoist tradition living out the true teachings of Laozi.

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<sup>22</sup> Tsui, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> Tsui, p.11.

<sup>24</sup> Tsui, p.8, quoting Ch’en Huan (1941).

<sup>25</sup> Tsui, p.12-13.

From this portrayal of Quanzhen simply as a moralistic movement with a mixture of doctrines borrowed from all three traditions, Tsui enters the syncretism debate with a desire to prove that the Quanzhen movement is at its core Taoist. Just like the previous scholars in the syncretism debate, Tsui does not view the borrowings engaged in by Wang Chongyang as a form of legitimation or authorization and instead views them only as a threat to an essential Taoist identity. For this reason, Tsui says of emphasizing the unity of the Three Teachings,

Another way of minimizing Wang (Chongyang)'s Taoist heritage was to emphasize the degree to which the Three Teachings (of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) were harmonized in his teaching...[By] emphasizing this aspect, Ch'en subtly shifted the concerns of the Ch'uan-chen (Quanzhen) Sect to a general spiritual welfare and away from anything specifically Taoist, making it easier to fit Wang into his preconceived image.<sup>26</sup>

Within a search for essences, any reference to syncretism becomes a threat to identity. Tsui, as others on the subject before him, wants only to look at the affect syncretism has on an essential identity instead of how the Quanzhen thinkers utilized the other traditions within their teachings. He devotes a large portion of his second chapter to the issue of the unity of the Three Teachings espoused by various Quanzhen thinkers. Tsui selects passages from the writings of Quanzhen thinkers in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries which directly address the Three Teachings and their relationship and then summarizes the stances on the Three Teachings into three categories. The first is that "the teachings are three nowadays, but their origin is just one." The second is that "the three teachings lead to the same result." The third is that "all three teachings should be learned and used together." In terms of these three ways Quanzhen utilized the unity of the Three Teachings, the first two stances need not challenge a Taoist identity at all and the third

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<sup>26</sup> Tsui, p.9.

only matters if the means of using all Three Teachings changes the school's core away from a Taoist essence, if there is even one to move away from. For instance, if Wang Chongyang argues that the three distinct traditions have a common origin that argues nothing about how he views the rankings of the Three Schools or which one he belongs to. The same can be said for claiming that the three schools lead to the same result. The biggest challenge to a 'pure' Taoist identity is the claim that all three teachings should be used together. But this in and of itself does not tell us how they should be used or by what they should be used, a single school or society as a whole.

Following this summary of Quanzhen thinkers' presentation of the Three Teachings, Tsui goes into a discussion of syncretism. He says, "When the selected elements are more or less successfully integrated into a whole, it is called syncretism." However, he acknowledges that the three schools have interacted and borrowed from each other since their formation or introduction in China and thus all three teachings were syncretic by the Song Dynasty. In order to make a more meaningful use of the term, Tsui attempts to redefine the term syncretism as

A system which has achieved more or less balanced borrowings from two or more other systems, so that it differs essentially from all the systems from which it borrowed. The crucial word here is "essentially." If a teaching is essentially Taoist, it cannot be called a syncretism of the Three Teachings despite the protestation of the founders... The founders may say that the Three Teachings teach the same truth, but this is different from an objective understanding of the systems.<sup>27</sup>

Here Tsui reveals outright the assumptions he has to hold in order to participate in this debate. If he wants syncretism to mean anything at all to distinguish Quanzhen from any other movement in Chinese history, he must utilize a means of looking for the 'essence' of Quanzhen teachings. In order to identify this essence, Tsui first argues that the

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<sup>27</sup> Tsui, p.31-2.

references to the unity of the Three Teachings were not systematic and in fact represented, as shown above, three different stances on this doctrine. Because he finds examples of three different views on the Three Teachings within a number of texts, Tsui argues that this could not be central to the concerns of the movement. He says, “When the last two examples differ so widely in their explanation of why the three teachings have only one origin, it is obvious that they were just ad hoc attempts to foster such an opinion. No serious arguments were offered to answer why and how the three teachings were originally one.”<sup>28</sup> It is hard to say exactly what a serious argument would look like for this doctrine. Perhaps it would be rooted in “objective understanding of the systems” instead of interpretations, but regardless these arguments could not appear in the quotations which Tsui selected because his selections represent the end views on the Three Traditions as a result of an interpretation. The steps to arriving at the three stances of Quanzhen thinkers in regards to other schools remains masked.

While Tsui does present a good sample of references to the Three Teachings within Quanzhen writings, he does so only to dismiss it as not part of a core identity of the movement. This led him to quickly determine that the three different presentations of the doctrine were unsystematic and thus unimportant. However, the second and third stances (that the teachings lead to the same result and that they should be used together) can actually fit well together if the use of the Three Teachings together leads to the result that one wants. If all Three Teachings lead to the same result and all of their methods could be harmonized then the two seemingly separate stances combine into one. Likewise, the first view (that the teachings have the same origin but are now separate) may be an observance of the present state of affairs but not a support for it, instead

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<sup>28</sup> Tsui, p.31.

possibly feeding into an argument against what someone like Wang Chongyang sees in the Chinese religious world. It is the analysis of these discourses that scholars like Tsui, Sun K'o-kuan, and Ch'en Ping, have breezed over in an attempt to essentialize the identity of the Quanzhen movement.

Another reason that the Quanzhen thinkers' teachings on the Three Teachings are allegedly insignificant is that, "Their endorsement did not result in a systematic programme of cultivation synthesized from elements taken from the Three Teachings."<sup>29</sup> This way of looking for a core of Quanzhen actually continues into one of the most recent studies of Quanzhen by Louis Komjathy, where he says,

When speaking of early Quanzhen Daoism, emphasis should be placed on its ascetic, alchemical, and mystical characteristics as primary. Other, secondary characteristics include communal, altruistic, ritualistic, reformist and 'syncretistic' tendencies. However, these are secondary characteristics because they are not part of the principal or conscious motivations of Wang Chongyang and the first-generation adepts...<sup>30</sup>

Komjathy argues against even focusing on the Quanzhen founders' discourses on the Three Teachings because they were not important enough to the founders. In order to grant the discussion of certain aspects of the tradition they must be "principal or conscious motivations" which are somehow higher in standing than any other aspects of the tradition which are somehow unconscious, even if they take the form of conscious arguments within creative discourses. Tsui falls right within the parameters of this argument. He at once notes that Wang Chongyang "encouraged his followers to read the *Heart Sutra*, the *Classic of purity of Lao Tzu*, and the *Classic of Filial Piety*" and at the same time must deny the significance of this in order to promote Quanzhen as essentially

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<sup>29</sup> Tsui, p.34.

<sup>30</sup> Komjathy, p.23.

Taoist.<sup>31</sup> Tsui and Komjathy could have asked how discourses of syncretism functioned within the school to bolster its teachings or identity in the greater multi-religious environment of twelfth and thirteenth century China but instead were driven away from this analysis by assumptions about the core of the Quanzhen teaching and the essence of identity.

#### Conclusion and Alternative to the Present Debate

Within the debate on syncretism and Quanzhen identity as it has been carried out to date, either syncretism says nothing or the presence of syncretism is a threat requiring only uncritical acceptance or hyper-critical denial. In many ways scholars emphasizing the Confucian virtues within Quanzhen are not wrong. Neither is Tsui wrong for noting the elements of practice taken from the internal alchemy tradition. The problem arises from the debate over essences. This results in scholars denying that Quanzhen practitioners were truly Taoists. It also leads Tsui to say of stele inscriptions emphasizing social virtues, “On the part of the Taoist sponsors, they would acquiesce in such ‘aberrations’ since they accepted the fate that Confucianism was ranked higher on the social scale.”<sup>32</sup> Based upon this formulation, no matter which side of the identity debate a scholar falls on, emphasizing social virtues of Quanzhen amounts to an ‘aberration’ of a truly Taoist movement. Either Wang Chongyang and his followers were expressions of Confucian morality or they were “Taoists through and through.”<sup>33</sup> Within this debate there is little room for ambiguous motivations, either Wang’s motivations were Confucian or Taoist but not both. Within the frameworks of this debate it will never truly be settled because its assumptions are faulty and it cannot account properly for the

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<sup>31</sup> Tsui, p.29.

<sup>32</sup> Tsui, p.17.

<sup>33</sup> Tsui, p.29.

realities of Quanzhen teachings. As we shall see below, thinkers such as Wang Chongyang incorporated these Confucian elements, Taoist elements and elements taken from the Buddhist tradition. The polarized nature of this debate and the search for an ‘essence’ of Quanzhen is really the driving force behind a skewed view of the school itself.

How is it that these arguments and actions in relation to other traditions can regain their autonomy from essentialized debates? Jon Walters argues that a first step in re-invigorating the term syncretism is to stop “treating syncretism as a category – an ‘ism’ – ... [and] focus on *processes* of religious synthesis and upon *discourses* of syncretism. This necessarily involves attending to the workings of power and agency.”<sup>34</sup> Walters explains that the only way speaking of the incorporation of other traditions is valuable is to attend to the specific means utilized and circumstances surrounding acts of syncretism and in this way not simply talk about borrowing as significant in itself. Following Walters, this means steering clear of ideas such as “influence” where Buddhism “influences” Taoism, because this view masks the active agents and focusing instead on individuals within traditions acting in specific circumstances. Walters argues that, “Neither Christianity nor Buddhism is agentic in history; history is made by Christians and Buddhists”<sup>35</sup> and this is especially clear when trying to define those traditions because “‘Buddhism’ and ‘Christianity’ describe wide ranges of often-opposing thoughts, practices, institutions and civilizations.”<sup>36</sup> This applies equally to “Taoism” or any other tradition for that matter. The umbrella term for a tradition tends to give a sense of static

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<sup>34</sup> Gellner, p.278, quoting Shaw and Stewart (1995: 7)

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan S. Walters, “Multireligion on the Bus; Beyond ‘Influence’ and ‘Syncretism’ in the Study of Religious Meetings” *Unmaking the Nation; the Politics of Identity and history in Modern Sri Lanka* (1995), p.31.

<sup>36</sup> Walters, p.32. This view is influenced by Collingwood’s “Scale of Forms”

and constant teachings which are not truly there, or a sense of an unvarying unified understanding within any of these traditions, neither of which matches reality.

Looking at processes of incorporation and authorization moves us beyond essential categories which are misleading and unresolvable. In an effort to examine the specifics of individuals engaging in acts of interpretation and incorporation within a multi-religious environment, categories such as syncretism must be used in an analytical rather than descriptive mode. Gellner identifies four categories through which to analyze the means of interaction between traditions. These are, bricolage, syncretism, synthesis, and complementarity. Avoiding a lengthy discussion of these categories, under Gellner's formulation the categories most helpful in understanding the actions of early Quanzhen adepts are synthesis and complementarity. He defines synthetic traditions as those which are "made up of elements of different origin, but combine them in a systematic way, with an internal logic that relates and explains them." Complementarity he defines as situations in which "several traditions coexist, often in a structured hierarchy, but also often in open or tacit competition."<sup>37</sup> While complementarity characterizes most interactions between the Three Teachings in areas of debate and mutual borrowing, it is also so vague that it cannot be used without extreme care to just how the hierarchies are structured and the forms of mutual benefits are characterized.

In order to maintain the analytical force of a discourse on syncretism, focusing on how thinkers established identity and authorized their particular understandings, I view the strategies employed as "embodied arguments," taken to mean the authorizing discourses as well as actions that are utilized in a conspicuous manner at a given time.

These strategies include institutional undertakings, such as building monasteries, as well

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<sup>37</sup> Gellner, p.288-9.

as interpretive strategies used by individuals in specific traditions to understand texts and history.<sup>38</sup> Moving towards “embodied argumentation” gives the added benefit that it does not limit debates solely to those between different Traditions but lends itself more easily to discussing debates within a given Tradition, which early Quanzhen patriarchs actively engaged in through its doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings. It also avoids traps of essentialism while concentrating on the specifics within a given time period and debate, which Walters also advocates. In Ananda Abeyasekara’s words,

[T]o understand religion, violence, and culture, as nonessential, “historical” ideas, that is, as discursive traditions, or as ‘embodied arguments,’ we must, then, explore those micro spaces in which categories like religion and violence come to be invested with, and divested of, fleeting authoritative meanings.<sup>39</sup>

In an attempt to provide just such a view into the historical trends into which the Quanzhen movement fits, the arenas in which these “embodied arguments” play out must be highlighted. The Quanzhen movement attained its initial identity as syncretic from many scholars based upon its borrowing in philosophy, use of scriptures, and institutional forms. Understanding the specifics of these “embodied arguments” enables a more specific view of the Quanzhen movement’s identity.

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<sup>38</sup> I take this from Ananda Abeysekara, “The Saffron Army, Violence, Terror(ism): Buddhism, Identity, and Difference in Sri Lanka” *Numen*, Vol.48(2001), p.42, who himself cites Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 15, p.222, and Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, pp. 9-10, 122-123.

<sup>39</sup> Abeyasekara, p.41-2.



### **Strategies of Three Traditions (Sanjiao) Discourse**

Within the larger debate on syncretism as applied to Quanzhen, Bartholomew Tsui along with most other scholars acknowledged the mutual borrowing between the three traditions throughout Chinese history. Just like I noted in the discussion of syncretism as a descriptive tool above, all traditions are a result of borrowing in some way or another and this is particularly true of the history of borrowing and interpretation within China. This has led scholars to argue that Quanzhen's arguments on the Three Traditions are insignificant. Arthur Waley argues that such a "synthesis of the three religions...was not attempting anything new,"<sup>40</sup> and thus when looking for the one thing that made it special you must look elsewhere. However, this is to argue that every reference to a unification of the Three Teachings entails equal consequences and that there is a core or essence which sets a movement apart rather than a combination of elements formulated in new ways. This line of thinking centers only on the ability of syncretic actions to form identity rather than on how they function to legitimize wide-ranging doctrines and practices. Rather than functioning solely to establish identity, the syncretic actions within Quanzhen, as well as other traditions throughout Chinese history, functioned to give authority and legitimacy to practices within a multi-religious environment. In order to move away from a search for the core or essence of a tradition based upon its texts, organizations, or practices, I will highlight some key methods of interpretation utilized throughout Chinese history since the introduction of Buddhism to China which will later inform the methods used by Quanzhen patriarchs to create their particular stance on the Three Teachings as well as their philosophical understandings. In particular, arguments by textual appropriation and interpretation, interpretations of

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<sup>40</sup> Arthur Waley, *The Travels of an Alchemist*. USA: Greenwood Press, 1976, p.19.

history, and appropriation of institutional models carry over into the embodied arguments Quanzhen thinkers make for their own school.

Rachewiltz remarked that Quanzhen “followers regarded themselves as Taoists, and they were likewise called ‘Taoists’ by their enemies to distinguish them from the Buddhists and the Confucianists.”<sup>41</sup> His use of the term “enemies” in the context of Quanzhen is appropriate because the environment around the Three Teachings and all of the movements that they encompassed was incredibly contentious, from the fifth century CE all the way through to the time of Quanzhen’s founding and beyond. To follow Walters and Abeysekara, it is these areas of debate and contention and the means utilized within them that should receive attention in order to understand the means available to Quanzhen thinkers.

#### Textual Interpretation

When Buddhists arrived in China they entered a world in which Confucian and Taoist thought were deeply entrenched in the political arena. They were constantly vying for official support from the emperor, trying to get their texts on the examinations for officials, oftentimes through debates of their usefulness to the governance of the Empire in the form of political philosophy.<sup>42</sup> The arena for gaining Imperial support in North China was through public court debates held amongst the literati followers of these schools, highly publicized events that affected the fate of the movements for long periods of time. In fact, this tradition of debates on doctrine, internal coherence of a teaching, and political utility of the teaching was still alive and thriving by the time of the Quanzhen sect’s peak. Debates just like those of sixth century CE Northern China and the T’ang

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<sup>41</sup> De Rachewiltz, “Xi-yu lu,” p.12.

<sup>42</sup> See T.H. Barrett, *Taoism Under the Tang* (London: Wellsweep Press, 1996), p.26-32 and Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Dao*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.7.

court debates actually brought about the censure of the movement as a result of debates in 1258 and 1281 CE. Within these debates, thinkers from all the different traditions had to adapt to challenges brought against them by the opposing sides. Paradigms of textual interpretation and adaptations of doctrine prefigure those used by Quanzhen when it established its own doctrine on the Three Teachings.

The interpretation of texts was a primary avenue for establishing legitimacy for Buddhists upon their arrival in China. When Buddhists entered the contentious environment of Chinese traditions they were criticized on many levels as the outsider that did not belong within China. The *San P'o Lun* by Chang Jung lays out a representative presentation of the faults of the Buddhist teaching. According to Chang Jung, Buddhism destroys the country by consuming without producing, destroys the family because it abandons filial piety, and destroys the individual by making him shave the head, lose filial piety, and practice celibacy.<sup>43</sup> *The Disposition of Error*,<sup>44</sup> a fifth century CE text involving the Buddhist character Mou-tzu, is a Buddhist response to such criticisms which also shows other areas of critique against Buddhists which arose in debates in the early days of their arrival in China. Along with the criticisms associated with filial piety, this text also indicates criticisms related to xenophobia and doctrines such as the immortality of the soul and karma.

All throughout the *Disposition of Error*, the author uses traditional texts for support, drawing from such thinkers as Mencius, Confucius, and Laozi. This use and re-interpretation of the opposition's texts was a way Buddhists attempted to re-interpret the

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<sup>43</sup> Kenneth Ch'en, "Anti-Buddhist Propaganda During the Nan-ch'ao" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* Vol.15, No.1/2 (June, 1952), p.173.

<sup>44</sup> "The Disposition of Error" (c. 5th Century BCE) in *Readings in World Civilizations, Vol 1*, 2d. ed., ed. Kevin Reilly (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 165-70

indigenous Chinese traditions rather than subverting them wholesale. Mou-tzu instead shows how this textual tradition actually supports the value of Buddhist practices and doctrines. This pattern of reinterpretation rather than abandonment of past thought was a trend within most of the polemical discourse between the Three Schools. Thus, when the questioner asks about violations of filial piety such as harming the body, leaving home, and not having children, the Buddhist Mou Tzu notes cases within the Chinese classics that indicate the same occurrence. By so doing he implicates past virtuous men, whom Confucius praises, in acts which violate traditional norms of filial piety.

Texts provided the material for legitimation within this environment of competing traditions and it was through competing interpretations of texts that the traditions could debate and argue for or against a movement. For instance, in *The Disposition of Error*, the questioner argues against the foreign tradition of Buddhism by calling it “the arts of the barbarians” and arguing that barbarians are less intelligent and cultured than the Chinese. Mou Tzu responds first by citing Confucius, saying, “If a gentleman-scholar dwells in their midst, what baseness can there be among them?” He then targets the notion that China is under the center of heaven by citing “the Commentary” which says, “‘The north polar star is in the center of heaven and to the north of man.’ From this one can see that the land of China is not necessarily situated under the center of heaven.” Not only does Mou Tzu question assumptions on foreigners and the superiority of China, he then says, “According to the Buddhist scriptures, above, below, and all around, all beings containing blood belong to the Buddha-clan.” This notion that followers of the Buddha become part of a universal clan challenges traditional ties of loyalty to the empire and mirrors the new ties formed when a Buddhist takes the precepts, changes his name, and

joins a monastery. Mou Tzu's interpretation of Confucian texts followed by Buddhist texts shows that he can draw upon many different traditions, the Confucian and Taoist traditions which have already been generally accepted as legitimate for interpretation, and then extends this legitimacy to Buddhist texts which he has shown to be in harmony with other schools of thought.

This re-interpretation of texts to support the practices and identity of a tradition carries over heavily into Quanzhen, a movement whose identity was based on a conscious synthesizing interpretation of other tradition's texts. Wang Chongyang developed an ideology of textual interpretation which allowed for just the same form of re-interpretation as those utilized in the *Disposition of Error*. Though their circumstances were different than the Buddhists fighting against hostile literati, early Quanzhen adepts engaged in similar strategies because, as noted above, the atmosphere of religious competition was always contentious and it required great efforts to establish the legitimacy of any movement. Every movement had to find ways to authorize itself amongst other groups and appropriating another tradition's texts to legitimate one's own was one accepted method to accomplish this.

Appropriating the literature of another tradition for one's own applies to legitimizing a tradition but also delegitimizing past scholar's attempts to essentialize a movement based upon the texts associated with it. For instance, Bartholomew Tsui, after noting that Quanzhen encourage the study of the *Heart Sutra*, the *Dao de Jing*, and the *Classic of Filial Piety*, remarks that, "The *Heart Sutra* belongs to Buddhism, the *Classic of Purity* belongs to Taoism and the *Classic of Filial Piety* belongs to Confucianism."<sup>45</sup> Just as scholars have essentialized traditions, Tsui illustrates how they have essentialized

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<sup>45</sup> Tsui, p.29.

the identity of a text. While Tsui claims that texts ‘belonged’ to a single tradition, after seeing the fluid way in which individuals used texts for multiple traditions, it is untenable to say that a text had any one school that it belonged to. What is evident from a look at strategies of inter-religious discourse is that the texts did not simply belong to one tradition but were appropriated for every tradition through competing interpretations. It is important to remember that, while a text may have originated within one tradition, it did not remain within it. Origin of a text does not mean ownership. These texts, just as any of the traditions, did not have a single core meaning or value but were rather subject to manipulation and re-appropriation. The texts did not argue for a single tradition. Individuals utilized them to make arguments.

Wang Chongyang’s *Fifteen Articles* elaborates on the proper means of reading a text in the Quanzhen tradition which easily lent itself to re-interpretation of any text to fit the goals of the movement. He says,

Extract their inner meaning in true harmony with your mind. Abandon the texts when you have extracted their meaning, their principle. And don’t hesitate to abandon this in turn when you have found its deepest ground... There are people who do not penetrate to the deepest intentions of the texts because they desire only to memorize many concepts and become widely read... Only by attaining the most fundamental inner meaning of the texts can you really harbor them in your depth.<sup>46</sup>

Here we have an argument that texts have a core or inner meaning but an acknowledgment that it connects to personal understandings in an individual’s mind. This formulation of how to read and use a text requires that a text be interpreted and matched with one’s understandings. Built into this form of textualism is the implication that many do not understand the texts properly. By saying that many people do not “penetrate to the

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<sup>46</sup> Wang Chongyang, “Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun (Chongyang’s Fifteen Articles on Establishing the Teaching).” *The Taoist Experience an Anthology*, ed. Livia Kohn (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p.87-8.

deepest intentions of the texts,” Wang Chongyang directly challenges the authority of others to utilize their own texts and at the same time affirms his own authority as the patriarch of the tradition which is interpreting texts through the proper lens. While Tsui wishes to minimize the importance of Quanzhen followers reading texts from all traditions because it threatens a Taoist identity, when looked at through this lens where texts are the material for legitimation it appears that Quanzhen followers were tapping into a long discursive tradition and not making an argument for identity but for authority. This view of texts has far reaching polemical consequences of which a better understanding will be possible upon examining *Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions*.

Wang Chongyang’s use of the *Heart Sutra*, a Mahayana Buddhist text, within *Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions* gives an indication of this scriptural re-interpretation. Wang utilizes the Buddhist *Heart Sutra* in order to defend his particular understanding of practice, one which starts through focusing and stilling the mind and then moves from this basis to internal alchemical practices. This is an understanding in line with the inner alchemy traditions which Quanzhen inherited from traditions coming out of the Song, but it does not fit common understandings of the text by the sects primarily associated with the *Heart Sutra*, namely Chan Buddhism.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Wang acknowledges that Buddhist schools only use this sutra as a text advocating the stilling of the mind and attainment of certain conscious states as the ultimate goal, and it is in this very circumstance that he re-interprets the text to point towards a Quanzhen style of practice. He says,

Now then, when engaging in cultivation, the internal and external should both be considered. I have not yet spoken of the greater transmission, but first I will speak of the lesser transmission. The *Xinjing* (Heart Sutra) says, 'First you manage the lesser, and then the greater. Before one can speak of the future, one must first speak about the present. The future is the fruit. The present is the effort.'<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Komjathy, “Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions,” p.297-8.

<sup>48</sup> Komjathy, “Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions,” p.297

Here, Wang denigrates the act of only engaging one part of the self. Either people practice cultivating the mind or the body, rarely do they do both. This refers to the one-sided concern of Buddhists who seek only to calm the mind and gain understanding and some Taoists who only engage in physical exercises without first calming the mind. The passages that Wang selects as support of his particular method of cultivation are completely out of context and, as the rest of the *Heart Sutra*, incredibly difficult to understand. Recalling the method of reading texts advocated by Wang to, “Extract their inner meaning in true harmony with your mind. Abandon the texts when you have extracted their meaning, their principle,”<sup>49</sup> it makes sense that he then goes on to offer an interpretation which fits the interests of his school and delegitimizes the interpretations of other Taoists and Buddhists.

After citing from the Heart Sutra, Wang Chongyang then says,

If, at the present time, your whole body is calm and joyful, you have the lesser transmission. All of this is the root of the greater transmission. The initial step towards realizing the Dharma Mind (*faxin*) is the lesser transmission, which bears fruit to produce the greater transmission. The lesser transmission is the root, while the greater transmission is the branch.<sup>50</sup>

Wang Chongyang argues in such a way as to maintain the legitimacy of the Buddhist teachings, but practicing only the methods of his contemporary Buddhists is an incomplete practice. His understanding of his contemporary Buddhists’ practice is that they calm the mind and allow one to understand the present moment, but they do not fulfill the goal of Wang Chongyang’s practice. The solution, according to Wang, is found in that missing aspect of Buddhist practice: the physical. However, if Taoists miss this initial practice of calming the mind which Buddhists advocate then they have no base for

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<sup>49</sup> Wang Chongyang, “Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun (Chongyang’s Fifteen Articles on Establishing the Teaching),” p.87-8.

<sup>50</sup> Komjathy, “Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions,” p.297-8

their internal alchemical practices. Most importantly for our purposes here is the fact that Wang Chongyang has managed to find a reference within the *Heart Sutra* to the ‘lesser’ and the ‘greater’ which allows him to speak of practices which he conceives of in terms of lesser and greater transmissions. Other interpretations are available which might be preferable from a Ch’an standpoint for instance, such as always being mindful of the present moment rather than the fruits of an action or one’s desire for the future. However, Wang illustrates here how Quanzhen thinkers utilized texts from different traditions in ways which maintained the authority of the text and transferred that authority to their own school’s practices.

By asserting his own “inner meaning” of the *Heart Sutra*, Wang Chongyang attempts to undermine the Buddhist’s authority to use their own text and place the authority with him and his followers in the Quanzhen movement. This authority of interpretation relies heavily upon the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings and will be further laid out in the following chapter. While I do not have access to these interpretations, it is probable that when Wang encouraged his followers to read the *Heart Sutra*, the *Classic of Purity (Dao de jing)* by Lao Tzu, and the *Classic of Filial Piety* by Confucius,<sup>51</sup> they did so in a similar fashion, showing that the avenues of interpretation opened up by accepting all of the figures created a system which stressed certain texts within each tradition as part of the Quanzhen textual corpus.

#### Philosophical and Scriptural Borrowing

While Buddhists and Taoists alike utilized other schools’ teachings throughout much of China’s history in order to show that their thought was permissible and beneficial to society, within this multi-religious environment there began a pattern of not

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<sup>51</sup> Tsui. *Taoist Tradition and Change*, p.28-33.

just re-interpretation but re-appropriation of texts. As a movement just starting to get its bearings in a world of competing traditions in the 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, Taoists had trouble succeeding in debates. It depended on which Emperor, but largely the Taoists were unsuccessful at gaining precedence. Their teachings had contradictions or were simply missing information to answer all of the challenges presented to them and it was also hard to say how they were helpful for effective governance. As Christine Mollier argues in her study of Dunhuang texts, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face*, “In response to the sophisticated eschatological and soteriological concepts imported by its foreign rival, Taoist theologians had to formulate and define their own ideas of the afterlife and human destiny, of moral precepts and ethical principles.”<sup>52</sup> In order to win support they had to develop their thought and meet the needs of the debates between the three schools. To do this Taoists borrowed heavily from Buddhist thought. To combat the Buddhist institutional and scriptural proliferation, Taoists formed the first Taoist canon in the fifth century CE and “progressively acquired all the attributes of an institutionalized, nationwide religion.”<sup>53</sup>

The incorporation of doctrines from competing traditions was the commonest means of enhancing a tradition’s standing in debates and fleshing out its coherence. A simple way to see this happening is the recognition that the Lingbao and Shangqing schools were “Mahayanic” in their emphasis of self-sacrifice for the benefit of humanity and in their incorporation of ideas of acquiring merit. This is just one example of a long list of doctrines and concepts re-appropriated from the Buddhist tradition for use by Taoists. Taking the text of *Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions* in the Quanzhen tradition

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<sup>52</sup> Christine Mollier, *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), p.7.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

for example, it is easy to see how ideas were borrowed without reference to a text but which can be traced to Buddhist origins. As identified by Louis Komjathy, Wang Chongyang utilizes concepts such as the precepts (which the Taoist tradition borrowed from Buddhists),<sup>54</sup> the ten evil deeds,<sup>55</sup> expedient means,<sup>56</sup> salvation of all beings through self-sacrifice,<sup>57</sup> the four forms of wisdom,<sup>58</sup> the five eyes/visions,<sup>59</sup> the six roots,<sup>60</sup> leaving home,<sup>61</sup> the eight flavors and eight forms of consciousness,<sup>62</sup> Ch'an stages of enlightenment,<sup>63</sup> the world as suffering,<sup>64</sup> and cosmology of the "three worlds,"<sup>65</sup> among other things. The very notion of the Three Teachings/transmissions/carts that Wang Chongyang utilizes to depict the other traditions of his day comes almost directly from the *Lotus Sutra's* parable of the three carts. Wang Chongyang's usage of Buddhist doctrines and norms indicates a deep knowledge and familiarity with the tradition which may be consciously taken from Buddhist thought or could be adopted without knowing it from Taoist teachers already part of schools which had incorporated these concepts for hundreds of years.

Within this line of appropriating ideas and doctrines and manipulating them for another tradition, Mollier argues that both Buddhists and Taoists plagiarized directly from the other tradition's scriptural corpus. In the fourth century CE the Shangqing revelations were received, followed shortly after by the Lingbao scriptures. The orthodox

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<sup>54</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 289.

<sup>55</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 289, 343-4, 346.

<sup>56</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 289.

<sup>57</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 289-90, 344.

<sup>58</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 300.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 300, 303.

<sup>61</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 305.

<sup>62</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 322.

<sup>63</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 324.

<sup>64</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 343-4.

<sup>65</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, 353.

understanding of the Lingbao and Shangqing schools towards their scriptures is that the Lingbao scriptures were divine texts of Lord Lao (Laojun) which argues for authenticity rather than acknowledging any borrowing from other traditions. In reality, as Mollier argues, both of these scriptures were “strongly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, [and] emphasized salvation through communal rituals into which were integrated Indian conceptions of hell, bodhisattvas, karma, retribution, and so forth.”<sup>66</sup> This borrowing from a competing tradition went both ways, with Buddhists as well as Taoists sometimes directly “pirating” whole texts, such as the Buddhist composition *The Sutra of the Three Kitchens* which is almost identical to the Taoist *Scripture of the Five Kitchens*. The first is attributed directly to the mouth of the Buddha; the second is a revelation from Laozi. Mollier notes that, “In general, the business was achieved just by a simple change of the narrative frame together with obvious terminological substitutions.”<sup>67</sup> This scriptural plagiarism reached its height in the mid-Tang which Mollier calls the “golden age” for cut and paste production of texts.<sup>68</sup>

This scriptural plagiarism was loudly acknowledged and denounced at the time of the texts’ production by some Taoists.<sup>69</sup> Texts began to be categorized as ‘apocrypha’ and their legitimacy challenged which was in itself a challenge to the legitimacy of the plagiarizing tradition because, as noted above, texts were deeply associated with the legitimacy of a school. To draw a movement’s scriptures into question drew into question the materials they could immediately claim as sources of their doctrines and practices.

Livia Kohn translates a work entitled *Laughing at the Dao (Xiao dao lun)* from 570 CE

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Mollier, p.12

<sup>68</sup> Mollier, p.15

<sup>69</sup> Mollier, p.10-11.

which, like many other works, deplors the act of Taoists using this method of copying and stealing the Buddhist texts in the name of Taoism. Both sides knew that their tradition was utilizing the other and it was highly debated whether or not this was a permissible action. In the eighth century CE the Lingbao scriptures were purged of their Buddhist apocrypha only to have that material resurface a few decades later. The Quanzhen movement itself did not engage in new textual production, as noted by Goossaert,<sup>70</sup> but it fits squarely within this tradition of appropriating texts from other traditions as a recipient of the canon of the Lingbao school.<sup>71</sup> As a result of this, after losing a debate in 1258 to Buddhists, as Arthur Waley notes, the Taoists “were convicted of stealing doctrines from [Confucians] as well as from the Buddhists” and, as part of the punishment for this, “forty-five ‘forged scriptures’ were ordered to be burnt and 237 Buddhist temples, which had been taken possession of by the Taoists, were returned to their former owners.”<sup>72</sup> The notion of a text ‘belonging’ to a school is at the heart of these punishments and shows how schools competed through debate for the ability to claim the authority of a given text. Rather than arguing about the identity of another tradition, the debates at the time sought only to remove from another tradition its ability to use borrowed texts for its own benefit as an institution.

#### Argument Through Historicism

When figures debated the authority of their scriptures on behalf of a given tradition, instead of a school denying that their scriptures were the same, Taoists and Buddhists alike decided to argue a form of historicism. According to the terms of the

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<sup>70</sup> Vincent Goossaert, “The Invention of an Order: Collective Identity in thirteenth-Century Quanzhen Taoism” *Journal of Chinese Religions* Vol.29 (2001), p.119.

<sup>71</sup> See Goossaert, “The Invention of an Order,” p.113.

<sup>72</sup> Li Chih-ch’ang, p.32.

debate, the text that came first was the more legitimate version. Both sides fabricated chronologies for their texts and at various times were caught in their lies which might result in the proscription of texts noted above. This line of historicism shares affinities with an earlier form of historicist argumentation that Taoists and Buddhists engaged in all the way up to the time of Quanzhen which argued over the relative antiquity of the teachers from each tradition. Because similarities between Taoist and Buddhist teachings were noted early on, in order to claim that their teaching was superior, Taoists tried to claim that Laozi taught before the Buddha, making Laozi's teachings more creditable. Taoists often collapsed the identity of Laozi and the Buddha, depicting the Buddha as just another incarnation of Laozi who preached to the Barbarians. This was recorded in the *Huahu jing*, an elaboration on the story of Laozi's western journey, an explanation which the Taoists filled into the tradition to elaborate on what happens to Laozi after he preaches the *Tao te jing*. This story could have varying degrees of denigration towards the Buddhist tradition but always affirmed the antiquity of Laozi as compared to the Buddha. At worst, it depicted the Indians as Barbarians and the teaching of Laozi to them as "a means of destroying evil" while the original teaching of Laozi in China was "a device to develop goodness."<sup>73</sup> Buddhists did similar things, even creating a counter-*huahu* narrative where Laozi is actually a manifestation of the Buddha's follower Kasyapa.<sup>74</sup> Both traditions constantly fudged the numbers on when their founder lived in order to give more authority to their tradition as well as lend more credence to the possibility that their text was composed before the other tradition's version.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Ch'en, "Anti-Buddhist Propaganda," p.171.

<sup>74</sup> Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao*, p.17.

<sup>75</sup> On this debate see Mollier, p.7-9. Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao*, p.11-14.

This historicism features prominently into the arguments of Wang Chongyang and his followers and an example of Quanzhen historical understandings will be examined in depth in the following chapter.

#### Quanzhen as a Product of these Trends

Scholars on Quanzhen when discussing syncretism as part of essentialized identities oftentimes noted that all three traditions had engaged in borrowing from other traditions which in many ways made the term syncretism pointless in discussing Quanzhen if it meant simply borrowing to some degree from another tradition. In fact, as Walters argues, if the concept is an ‘-ism’ as in a static identity used descriptively to designate such a tradition then it is unhelpful. However, by looking at the methods used within certain trends of multi-religious discourse, the arguments which Quanzhen thinkers utilized can say something about how they related to previous arguments in terms of the means used in arguing between traditions as well as the new avenues opened up by these arguments. This borrowing of texts and doctrines resulted from a discourse formulated by debates between supporters of different traditions and, rather than being an issue of identity which necessitates addressing the issue of essences, it is more fruitful to see these actions as arguments utilized for the purpose of legitimation. Questions of apocryphal texts or ownership of ideas was debated during the day and the scholarly assertion that a movement was Taoist or Buddhist because it had a particular teaching or text only plays into the debate of followers at that time who needed to legitimize their own movement. Without understanding these actions as constant acts of legitimation within a contentious multi-religious environment the force of these actions is lost in a

battle of scholarly polemics. It results in the debates noted above for Quanzhen and just what their essence was or if they were “syncretic enough.”

This discussion has in part attempted to undercut the second assumption of scholars within the debate on Quanzhen syncretism, namely that there is a pure original form of a tradition which is rooted in a set of texts and a particular founding figure. I have attempted to highlight the means of interpreting a text which undermine the idea that any text belongs to or is owned by a single tradition. Similarly I have attempted to show how the actions of individuals from different traditions within debates undermine the idea that a text has a single meaning through their competing interpretations. These lines of argumentation undercut the idea of any static or pure identities amongst the Three Teachings. Following this reasoning, to argue that Quanzhen, “could at most be called a reformed branch of Taoism”<sup>76</sup> because it did not deserve the same degree of Taoist identity that the Lingbao or Shangqing schools are granted is an unfounded claim if based upon degrees of syncretism or some form of claim to Taoist ‘purity’. The extensive borrowing from the Buddhist tradition within Taoist thought goes far back into its history as an institutionalized movement. For this reason Rachewiltz’s statement that Quanzhen was not properly “Taoist” makes little sense. This line of thinking makes it difficult to identify any movement since the start of the Taoist tradition as purely or originally Taoist and it does not fit with how the Chinese people at the time viewed these groups.

To follow this discussion of the methods of interpretation and appropriation within Chinese religious history, we will now look at the ways in which these trends get carried forward in different methods of interpretation for Quanzhen and some consequences this had within China’s multi-religious environment at the time. As will be

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<sup>76</sup> Tsui, p.8, quoting Ch’en Huan (1941).

seen through a case study of *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, the method of inter-religious interpretation in the form of the doctrine of the unification of the Three Teachings functioned in wide ranging ways to legitimize the movement and many of its practices. Quanzhen doctrines and practices developed out of a particular discursive tradition and brand of embodied argumentation which made possible many of its arguments for authority or legitimacy. It does not put their Taoist identity into question, it simply positions it within a different trajectory of thought and gives it more sources to draw upon for legitimacy. It also opens it up to certain confrontations and arguments.



## A Case Study of Syncretic Discourses

### *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions on the Gold Pass and Jade Lock and Yèlù Chucai's Xi*

#### *you lu*

When the early figures of Quanzhen Taoism, notably Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji, attempted to formulate a more doctrinal understanding of their school's stance in regards to the other traditions of their time, they utilized a doctrine called the "unification of the Three Teachings." As noted in the previous chapter, this placed them within a discursive tradition where the different schools of thought utilized the other traditions in various forms of interpretation and borrowing. It is this formulation that Wang Chongyang adopted and engaged with in order to formulate his own understanding of the path to follow. Qiu Chuji inherits this understanding as his disciple and continues to discuss the Three Teachings as ultimately one. Rather than discussing how the references to the unification of the Three Teachings indicate that Quanzhen "was a syncretism," it better fits the actions of Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji to ask how these references function within the tradition of inter-religious interpretation and appropriation which provides the background for the Quanzhen founder's arguments. If, as I argue, these arguments should not be looked at as sources of essences or cores of a movement, they can still be analyzed to show how they authorized practices and legitimized the early Quanzhen institution.

While I have yet to come across an introductory work on Quanzhen which failed to make reference to this doctrine,<sup>77</sup> this simple designation of unifying the Three Teachings brings with it many hidden interpretive problems. As will be shown by the

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<sup>77</sup> See for example Tao-Chung Yao, "Quanzhen – Complete Perfection." *Daoist Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Boston: Brill, 2000), p.569. Bartholomew Tsui deals extensively with this notion in Tsui, *Taoist Tradition and Change*, p.28-33.

polemics of Yēlù's *Xi you lu*, this doctrine shaped expectations of how one school's founders would treat the schools of the competing traditions. This is because different people held different assumptions on what unifying the Three Teachings meant and often assumed that what they expected it to mean matched what others were saying. Yēlù's expectations were let down and this contributed to a backlash and his calling Buddhists to action against Quanzhen. An examination of the representation of the Three Teachings within *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions* paired with the teachings of Qiu Chuji attributed to him in the *Xi you lu* shows that this doctrine meant an argumentative stance allowing for authorization of particular texts while maintaining a distinct institutional identity. This is a doctrine which plays into all of the debates presented above, most notably the historicist arguments and arguments by textual interpretation, and thus is a robust example of attempts at legitimation within this discursive tradition.

#### An Interpretation of the Three Teachers

For a better sense of what it meant for Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji to claim that “the teachings of the Three Sages are the same” it helps to examine how Wang Chongyang explicitly deals with the idea of the Three Teachings in various places. First, let us examine how he interprets the role of traditional patriarch figures within *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions* through the lens of historical relation and models of practice. Just as the *Disposition of Error* authorized Buddhism within China by showing that the writings of figures such as Confucius and Laozi were not at odds with Buddhist teachings, Wang Chongyang and his followers presented an historical narrative of these historical figures to legitimize the Quanzhen movement.

In its most basic form, *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions* lays out the patriarchs

thus:

Each person must recognize the patriarch, the ancestor, and the ranked tablet (*kepai*). The Great High [Lord Lao] is the patriarch. Sakyamuni Buddha is the ancestor. Kongzi (Confucius) is the ranked tablet.<sup>78</sup>

Wang Chongyang here sets up a requirement of his followers to explicitly recognize the traditional founders of each of the Three Teachings. Immediately, this authorizes the texts and practices attributed to each figure for use within the tradition. As Komjathy notes, this formulation positions Laozi as the founding figure, Sakyamuni as a successor, and Confucius as “ranked tablet,” an unknown reference but clearly later and lower in status. In contrast to historical narratives such as the one in the *Huahu jing*, these titles indicate that the Buddha “represents, transmits, and develops” the school created by Laozi, giving an impression of improvement rather than corruption.<sup>79</sup> The antiquity attributed to Laozi does grant him higher standing, but, in developing the teaching, the Buddha actually improves upon the teachings of Laozi. Because of this, it is possible at this point that Buddhist teachings are preferable in some ways to Taoist teachings. All of this is an act of creative re-interpretation of these figures whose chronological relationship was a constant source of debate and speculation, showing how Wang Chongyang engaged in the discourse of historicism. Many Taoists argued that the Buddha and Laozi were the same figure only with Laozi teaching first in China and travelling to India later where he was known as the Buddha. While Wang argues an earlier date for Laozi than the Buddha, he does not denigrate the Buddha’s teaching as inferior and designed for Barbarians as the *Huahu jing* does and instead uses history to argue that all three traditional founders are legitimate and thus what they taught is worthy of use.

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<sup>78</sup> Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions, p.342

<sup>79</sup> Komjathy, p.342.

Wang Chongyang further develops his view on the three teachers by explicitly ranking them and the teachings that they transmitted. While in many places Wang Chongyang refers to the schools according to greater and lesser vehicles, here he speaks of a first, second, and third dispensation. This, as the above description, marks Laozi as first, Sakyamuni Buddha second, and Kongzi (Confucius) third. Starting with the teachings of Laozi he says,

The first dispensation (*hui*) was the Great High [Lord Lao]. Refining [the eastern direction and] *jia* and *yi* [relates to] the Wood phase. This was the dispensation of empty calm. Lord Lao wore azure robes and saved three thousand Daoists in azure robes. He transmitted the venerable scriptures of Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) in thirty-six sections on the azure spirits and yellow scrolls. He also transmitted the Nine-Times Reverted Elixir and the Method of the Yellow Sprouts Threading the Knee.<sup>80</sup>

Here, Wang Chongyang accepts the orthodox understanding of the Lingbao and Shangqing schools that the Lingbao scriptures were divine texts of Lord Lao (Laojun) and shows his ties to these Taoist schools which borrowed most heavily from the Buddhist tradition (though they did not openly admit it). Wang Chongyang argues for the authority of Laozi and by choosing to explicitly describe the scriptures of the Lingbao school which were revelations from Laozi, Wang authorizes the use of those scriptures within his own school. However, he did not just argue for the use of a particular set of scriptures. By describing Laozi as saving three thousand followers, Wang also argues for Laozi as a kind of Bodhisattva figure who brings about the salvation of followers as the highest product of his actions, showing a degree of integration of Mahayana Buddhist ideals. He indicates likewise that within the Quanzhen school there were proper methods of practice to use, two of which he attributes directly to Laozi here. By connecting Laozi to the Wood phase of traditional Chinese elemental phases Wang Chongyang is

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<sup>80</sup> Perfected Chongyang's Instructions, p.336

indicating the formative period of a movement where it is underdeveloped and growing, once again placing Laozi at the beginning of the traditions, not meaning any sense of purity necessarily but only underdevelopment.

Having laid out Laozi's accomplishments in a Quanzhen historical narrative of the Three Teachers, Wang Chongyang then turns to the Buddha's role:

Severing ties to the world was the second dispensation. Sakyamuni Buddha transmitted this. Refining the southern direction and *bing* and *ding* [relate to] the Fire phase. His body was covered by a *kasaya* of burning fire and he guided three thousand *bhikkhus*. He transmitted the venerable sutras of the Greater Vehicle [Mahayana] in twelve sections. He also transmitted the Method of the Nine-layered Iron Drum and the Method of Reeds and Sprouts Threading the Knee.<sup>81</sup>

This is a more impressive portrayal of the Buddha than Laozi. He is clothed in a flaming Buddhist monastic robe and guiding, but interestingly not saving, three thousand followers. Tying the Buddha's teaching to the Fire phase means that it was the period of prosperity and highest success, attributing to him the greatest period of this hypothetical unitary teaching, just as the above citation indicated by placing him as a venerated successor. This historical narrative actually serves to mark off the Buddhist tradition as most successful even if it does not make any explicit argument for the superiority of the texts within this tradition. Wang Chongyang attributes to the Buddha the act of leaving the world and entering a school of training, two aspects of Buddhist practice which Quanzhen figures borrowed from heavily and which Wang advocated in *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*.<sup>82</sup> The Buddha is also explicitly linked to the Mahayana tradition which was popular in China and whose sutras Quanzhen utilized. Finally, just as with Laozi, Wang attributes two methods of cultivation to the Buddha, arguing once

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<sup>81</sup> Perfected Chongyang's Instructions, p.337

<sup>82</sup> Perfected Chongyang's Instructions, p.305. See also, Wang Chongyang, . "Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun (Chongyang's Fifteen Articles on Establishing the Teaching)," p.86-9.

again that this founder's teachings are legitimate and serve to authorize a practice based school.

Last in the line of transmission comes Confucius. Of him Wang Chongyang says,

Longhua [Confucius] was the third dispensation. He was a gentleman who resided in the study hall of the state of Lu. Refining the western direction and *geng* and *xin* [relate to] the Metal phase. He educated three thousand white-robed recluses. He transmitted the *Lunyu* (Analects) in ten scrolls. He also transmitted Threading the Nine Curves with the Illuminated Pearl and the Method of Reeds and Sprouts Threading the Knee.<sup>83</sup>

Coming last in the line of teachings and given credit for its Metal phase or period of decline, Wang equates Confucius with status, education, and reclusion. He depicts this reclusion differently than the reclusion of Sakyamuni Buddha, which indicates links to more traditional and political forms of Chinese reclusion, even what Alan Berkowitz calls “reclusion within the court” where one can be a recluse in the midst of political duties.<sup>84</sup>

Confucius gets credited with the *Analects* and, just like the other two teachers, he is associated with two methods of cultivation. Of all the teachings, Confucius' teaching is most sparsely described and least honored, but he still features in the historical narrative and this functions in just the same way to authorize particular texts within Quanzhen and allow him as a source of veneration.

By simplifying the histories of the three patriarchs, Wang Chongyang elaborates on the aspects of the Teachings which distinguish the identity of each founder's movement. The monastic robes one wears, the practices one does, the texts one reads, and the antiquity of the founder one reverences all contribute to the communal identity of the followers of the different teachings. This corresponds with the actual realities of religious practice during Wang Chongyang's time. Quanzhen does not attempt to do away with

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<sup>83</sup> Perfected Chongyang's Instructions, p.337

<sup>84</sup> For a discussion of the phenomenon of “reclusion within the court” see Berkowitz, p.101-103.

most of these distinctions and instead merely utilizes all of the founders within its own identity. Because the patriarchs are each meant to be “reverenced,” whatever actions Wang Chongyang attributes to them serve as ideals for what a follower too must do. They are exemplary figures and it is no accident that the aspects of their practice that Wang stresses in this section correspond to those which he incorporates within his own school. Wang interprets history just as others in the past had done, however, instead of denigrating a particular tradition as was often the case or attempting to delegitimize a particular tradition’s teachings, Wang creates here a history which allows for the mutual legitimacy of each founder’s teachings. This simple history does not authorize all practices or teachings within different traditions but instead presents a very specific version of each teaching centered around texts, practices of cultivation, and eremitism, which serves to legitimize the actions of Quanzhen followers.

Having established an interpretation of history and identified the three teachers who are important in this history, Wang Chongyang makes an explicit argument that all three teachers are valuable and should be followed. He exhorts his followers to,

Follow their Three Teachings and attain serenity. Leave behind all ordinary men and women who are [drowning] in the river of lust and boiling in [samsara]. They are driving and perishing in the ocean of suffering. They receive vexations and become lost in the Six Conditions [of rebirth]. They neither are born nor die; they simply come and go.<sup>85</sup>

In this exhortation Wang finally gives a direct statement of the interconnected nature of the Teachers. They each have a distinct role to play in an imagined history, and they each stand completely separate from one another in many ways. However, Wang claims his disciples must follow all of them, forming a synthesis of the teachings and eliminating their differences. Here he only separates his followers with those who have yet to leave

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<sup>85</sup> *Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions*, p.343.

home and are still wallowing in desire. He does not say whether or not other monastic groups likewise deserve his esteem, though those who do not follow all of the teachers clearly do not fit his ideal. Their teaching is missing something and this comes out even more clearly when Wang Chongyang says, “All followers who engage in internal practice according to the Three Teachings will completely cure each and every sickness and disease. Moreover, they will gain the ability to leap over [the cycle] of life.”<sup>86</sup> Only practice which is in line with all three teachers is effective.

While the means to this effective practice are generally through inner alchemy, Wang asserts that this is actually not possible with only an understanding of Taoist techniques. Much like the above formulations of the Three Teachings, Wang Chongyang wants to borrow from both Buddhist and Taoist traditions and get back to the ‘true practice’. Recalling the interpretation of the *Heart Sutra* above,<sup>87</sup> followers of Quanzhen teachings must utilize both mental and physical practices in order to attain success in the tradition. He criticizes the practices of Buddhists and Taoists alike who do not utilize all of the teachings for their cultivation, showing that any school which does not properly understand the unity of the Three Teachings is deficient. This further shows that a discussion of whether or not Quanzhen was at its core Taoist misses the arguments being made by Wang Chongyang and Qiu Chuji. While scholars like Bartholomew Tsui rightly note the importance of practices which originate in the Taoist tradition, Wang Chongyang criticizes Taoists for their practices showing that the Taoist tradition is also subject to the arguments Quanzhen founders were making on proper practice. The arguments are about legitimacy and authority which Wang Chongyang argues on the basis of proper practice

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<sup>86</sup> Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions, p. 365.

<sup>87</sup> *Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions*, p.297. See above, p.29.

and understanding, not on the tradition they previously followed. If a Buddhist or Taoist were able to understand Wang's teachings within their own school then that would be enough but he argues that none of the schools at the time offered that.

Within Bartholomew Tsui's three stances that he argues for in early Quanzhen writings on the unity of the Three Teachings, I earlier noted how these three stances could designate any number of meanings, not all of which contradicted one another. This historical narrative laid out by Wang Chongyang illustrates the incorporation of all three stances on the Three Teachings into a single line of argument. First, the Three Teachings were originally one, defined here as being part of a single line of transmission. Second, the Three Teachings lead to the same result. However, not all forms of those teachings lead to the proper result, just the forms which Wang Chongyang argues for, that of the Quanzhen school. Third, all Three Teachings should be followed together, which Wang explicitly states when referring to the teachings as he conceives of them. There is no contradiction between these formulations as Tsui argues there is. However, it is easy to see how the different views might contradict and one instance of this is recorded in an interaction between Qiu Chuji and Yelu Chucai which will illustrate the impact of Wang Chongyang's formulation in the larger sphere of multi-religious interaction.

#### Consequences of Three Teachings Interpretations

Beyond the historical narrative presented above dealing with the three teachers of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, another way of addressing the Three Teachings is through a metaphor. Interestingly, Yelu Chucai and Wang Chongyang both use the same metaphor within their respective writings and yet their differing ways of utilizing this shared metaphor leads to two very different stances and the development of enmity

between their schools. This common metaphor compares the Three Teachings to a tripod, an image drawn from the Buddhist *Huayen Sutra*.

Yelu Chucai is the author of the *Xi you lu*, a polemical text against Qiu Chuji and the Quanzhen school containing most of the critiques against the school which would later lead to its proscription in 1281.<sup>88</sup> It is important first to note that Yelu is in a difficult situation following Qiu Chuji's return from visiting Chinggis Khan. For one, Yelu was the author of the summonses which called Qiu to meet with the Khan and one of these summonses utilized the story of Laozi's western journey, connected with the Taoist polemic the *Huahu jing*, in order to motivate Qiu to continue travelling to meet the Khan. This is a narrative fraught with complications because it featured so prominently in the arguments between the Buddhist and Taoist traditions, as noted above, so the fact that a Buddhist used the narrative did open Yelu up to suspicion. In fact, the *Xi you lu* functions largely as a defense of Yelu's actions with regards to the Quanzhen patriarch Qiu Chuji. The text takes place in dialogue form and depicts a guest asking Yelu,

In your youth you studied Confucianism; later on you became fond of Buddhism...However, when in the past His Excellency Ch'iu (Qiu) made his journey to the north, you gave him your support, utterly ignoring the teachings of our Master and the doctrine of our Buddha. Did you not lose spirit then [and fail in your resolve]?<sup>89</sup>

Once again we get the image of combating traditions and the attempt to formulate an appropriate way of treating the schools. Yelu gets challenged that, as a Buddhist with Confucian learning, to support Qiu was to betray the other schools. This was most likely an extreme presentation of the relation between the schools that resulted from what Qiu's school did after visiting the Khan. The interactions between Yelu and Qiu are scrutinized

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<sup>88</sup> Rachewiltz, "Hsi-yu lu", p.3.

<sup>89</sup> Igor de Rachewiltz, "The Hsi-yu lu by Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai," p.26.

because after Qiu's visit to the Khan, Quanzhen's popularity skyrocketed as a result of the imperial edicts the Khan issued in benefit of the movement. These include the exclusive tax exemption of Quanzhen followers and the making of Qiu into the leader of all religions within North China which in all likelihood contributed to the appropriation of Buddhist establishments for Taoist use.<sup>90</sup>

It is in this context that Yelu attempts to argue that his actions were not improper but only misled by the comments of Qiu Chuji on the subject of the Three Teachings. Yelu claims within the *Xi you lu* that Qiu said to him "that since the teachings of the Three Sages are the same, one cannot make distinctions," and "What I most earnestly wish is to revive the neglected teachings of the Three Sages." Recalling the arguments made within *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, this seems like a reasonable thing to say for a patriarch of Quanzhen who draws authority from all Three Teachings and presents a specific interpretation of those teachings within his movement. It brings to mind the fact that other schools were not teaching the proper path espoused by the patriarchs which could be termed a form of neglect for the teachings. Interestingly, Yelu remarks that, "On hearing this, how could I not help him?" But his expectations were not met by the actions of Qiu and his followers after leaving the Khan and Yelu says, "Later he ate his words and, acting with partiality, destroyed images and seized lands, converted Buddhist temples into Taoist ones, and transformed Confucian temples into Taoist monasteries with the aim of driving out the two faiths."<sup>91</sup> As noted above when analyzing just what it meant for Quanzhen to unify the Three Teachings, the interpretations lying behind this doctrine could produce conflicts and contradictions and here a conflict arises.

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<sup>90</sup> Rachewiltz, "The Hsi-yu lu by Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai," p.28-9.

<sup>91</sup> Rachewiltz, "The Hsi-yu lu by Yeh-lu Ch'u-ts'ai," p.30.

Yelu now uses the metaphor of a tripod to clarify his own views on the unity of the Three Teachings. He says, “All that is needed is that the teachings of the Three Sages stand firmly in the world like [the legs of] a tripod, without oppressing and robbing one another, each of them living peacefully.”<sup>92</sup> Yēlù depicts the Three Teachings as the legs of a tripod, but he uses this image not to stress their unity, but rather their individuality as teachings and institutions. His reference to oppression and robbery hearkens to the motivation for the *Xi you lu*, namely the self-serving actions of Quanzhen followers and the stealing of Buddhist sites after Qiu’s travels to the Khan. Yēlù indicates that he wants all three legs to remain “firmly in the world” but as separate institutions, something which might not be the case if Quanzhen continues to advance in ways that undermine Buddhist efforts at gaining followers.

The tripod must support something, but for Yēlù what it supports is most definitely not a singular school. In its place is the entirety of Chinese society which is held up by the different benefits of each distinct teaching. The teachings are anything but singular, it is their difference that makes them an effective tripod. He says,

If one hastens to transform their minds by means of the Mighty Benevolent One's (i.e., Buddha's) precepts of causality against killing, deceiving, stealing and licentiousness; to transform their deeds by means of Lao Shih's (i.e., Lao Tzu's) natural way of kindness and frugality; to transform their persons by means of Our Master's (i.e., Confucius') teachings on the relative duties of ruler, subject, father and son then, the doctrines of the Three Sages will be practiced in society [in the same harmonious relationship] as that of the weight and the beam [of a steelyard], and the people will yield to reform like grass bending to the wind and water flowing downwards.<sup>93</sup>

Each teaching is beneficial for some particular aspect that Yelu highlights and by this argument the highlighted teachings are distinct to that school which means they must be

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<sup>92</sup> Rachewiltz, p.36.

<sup>93</sup> Rachewiltz, p.37

allowed to thrive for the sake of society. Difference is stressed but Chinese society benefits and virtue returns to the land.

Turning to Wang Chongyang's use of the tripod metaphor, a very different picture emerges. He says,

The Three Teachings (*sanjiao*) are like a tripod. It has three feet, but its body is the same. Restored to unity, there is no duality or trinity." The Three Teachings are not separate from the perfect Dao. Thus the saying: 'From a single tree root, three branches grow.'<sup>94</sup>

In this formulation of the tripod analogy, the legs represent a teacher and their teachings which all meet in one body at the top. This is an almost identical image of the relation of the Three Teachings but if one recalls the way Wang Chongyang argued to unify the teachings within a single practice in the Quanzhen school, it indicates that in this case the thing being supported which draws upon all the teachings and founders is the Quanzhen school itself, not society as a whole. In this way, a singular school draws from all Three Teachings and restores them to unity in itself. Wang Chongyang has already argued a way in which all the benefits that Yelu Chucai desires from the traditions can come through unifying them all into a single institutional body and, not only that, he has argued that this is the only proper teaching while all of the other schools are missing aspects of the other traditions.

Wang Chongyang's and Yelu Chucai's mutual use of the tripod metaphor shows how these interpretations featured in the world resulting in misunderstandings and different views on how institutions ought to act in China's multi-religious environment. In terms of syncretic categories, Yelu argues here for a complementary function of the multiple traditions within China, envisioning them as mutually benefiting traditions of

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<sup>94</sup> *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, p.335.

thought rather than competing institutions vying for support. Wang's vision of Quanzhen is a synthesizing movement, one which takes the best of all and intends to win in the competitive world of distinct religious institutions. The *Xi you lu* ends on a call to action. Having realized that the views of Qiu Chuji and his followers are not favorable to Buddhist institutions it is time to notify others and chastise Yelu for not attempting to stop the Quanzhen movement. The guest in the *Xi you lu* accuses Yelu of missing his chance to promote the betterment of society saying that instead, "You rejected it [and did not act; [instead,] calm and self-satisfied, you put your hands in your sleeves and waited for [a period of] Small Tranquility."<sup>95</sup> This foreshadows the debates of 1258 and 1281 and the eventual proscription of Quanzhen.

The point here is that these arguments did not form the core of a teaching but were simply methods of argumentation which enabled visions of the world authorizing different actions from the traditions. If using Yelu's understanding of the Three Teachings, the actions of Qiu and his followers were an inexcusable betrayal of the other traditions. But if using the interpretation of Wang and his followers, these actions were part of a larger trend of interpretation that was central to how they used teachings and gained followers.

Looking at how Wang and his early followers embodied these arguments in the institutions of Quanzhen, the first thing to note is that this doctrine features into the names of Quanzhen's first five congregational establishments (*hui*).<sup>96</sup> All of them were declared in the name of the Three Teachings. This illustrates how the interpretations which authorized practice within Quanzhen teachings likewise figured to provide

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<sup>95</sup> Rachewiltz, "Hsi-yu lu," p.37.

<sup>96</sup> Tsui, p.28.

authority for the school. Bartholomew Tsui has criticized the stress put on the names of these establishments because he notes that not all steles or histories from the time made reference to how he labeled the establishments with the Three Teachings. For him this is just another argument against labeling this doctrine the core of Quanzhen. However, the fact that Wang and his followers did label the establishments with the Three Teachings is not under dispute. Instead of arguing that these labels were not significant to identity, it is better to look at the arguments engaged in through the institutional actions of Quanzhen which were a direct result of the doctrine.

At the end of *Perfected Chongyang's Instructions*, Wang Chongyang lays out succinctly the criteria for rejection from his school, what matters and what does not.

These three [kinds of] people are as follows: first, those who are unfilial; second, those who are irreverent and untrustworthy; and third, those who fail to abide by the precepts or do not do good deeds. I never instruct them. Aside from these types, however, regardless of man or woman, Buddhist or Daoist, official or commoner, to each I will transmit the divine law and bestow the precepts.<sup>97</sup>

Based upon this, if a figure approaches Wang Chongyang and asks to become a follower, these are the criteria which Wang lays out for deciding if he or she is worthy. The first reason for denying a student entry into the school is lack of filial piety, a virtue generally regarded as Confucian, and references to good deeds or meritorious actions show borrowing from Buddhist ideology. This is all fully in line with the ways Wang Chongyang regards the other traditions, having already established that each is valid for borrowing. More interesting is that he at once draws a distinction between people who identify as Buddhist or Taoist and at the same time regards this distinction as irrelevant. Passages such as this show the complicated nature of Quanzhen founders' arguments on the other traditions. It is important to note, however, that this quote says nothing about the

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<sup>97</sup> Perfected Chongyang's Instructions, p.366

identity which Wang Chongyang identifies with personally, nor does it say anything about the identity which followers will develop once accepted into his school. It does not state whether or not these followers are entering a Taoist or Buddhist school. The only indication is that anyone with enough devotion may enter this new school, something that challenged the authority of the Buddhist and Confucian schools in yet another way.

### Conclusion

The Quanzhen founder Wang Chongyang argued for unity through an imagined history centered around the lives of historical teachers, the Buddha, Laozi, and Confucius. Wang Chongyang at once highlights moral virtues in line with Confucianism and Buddhism, internal alchemical practices originating in the Taoist tradition, and founders from all traditions as arguments for these doctrines. These doctrines benefit from the history of borrowing and interpretation preceding the Quanzhen school and none need be seen as the core of the school. Use of historicism, textual interpretation, and appropriation all figure prominently in the ways in which Quanzhen sought to legitimize its organization. These were not arguments for a Taoist or Buddhist identity but simply for the authority to develop a teaching and institution within China's contentious multi-religious environment. Likewise, the syncretic strategies used by Quanzhen thinkers do not form the core of the school, but only one of many interpretive tools which leads into an argument for this new movement. Through many different strategies but notably through the unification of the Three Teachings, Quanzhen founders authorized teachings and institutions in relation to other schools of the time that led to both success and strife. When Wang Chongyang calls Buddhists to enter his school and Qiu Chuji engages in institutional expansions that directly challenge the authority of other schools, the

Quanzhen patriarchs lived out the contentious nature of the discourses they participated in, embodying their arguments in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Past studies in English on the subject of Quanzhen unity of the Three Teachings have engaged the doctrine in terms of defining the school as either Taoist or Buddhist, true Taoism or 'reform' Taoism. Scholars have sought to question the movement's "true essence" in terms of the other schools and either denigrated or defended it on these terms. They have also attempted to find the core of the teaching that distinguishes it from all other movements. This study has moved away from these debates and attempted simply to view the kind of argument that Quanzhen founders were attempting to make and the impacts this had on their image in terms of self-understanding and in the eyes of the greater public. The arguments that the Quanzhen doctrine on the Three Teachings made were very important in arenas of public authority and legitimacy and understanding them helps to understand the reasons for utilizing the doctrine and the inevitable problems it resulted in amongst other schools and scholars on the tradition.

Instead of viewing the unity of the Three Teachings as a distraction from or threat to an essential identity I have sought to look for the creative line of argumentation and the consequences arising from this doctrine. This transforms the history of textual appropriation, historicism, and institutional borrowings from a reason for dismissal into a discursive tradition opening up possibilities. Instead of diminishing the significance of the Quanzhen patriarch's unification of the Three Teachings it highlights the importance of such arguments in creating an identity within a greater system. The debate moves from one of Taoist identity or Confucian identity, pure or bastardized, into one of constant interpretation and transformation which excludes the possibility of an essence or core.

It is precisely these methods of interpretation and legitimation which past scholars such as Bartholomew Tsui and those he was in debate with missed because of their attempt to find the “core” or “essence” of Quanzhen. They looked right past the ways in which multiple teachings functioned within the embodied arguments of Quanzhen in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries because in order to affirm a Taoist or non-Taoist identity they needed to accept uncritically the title unity of the Three Teachings or to deny its significance in the school. Understanding that the unity of the Three Teachings meant a respect for and interpretation of all Three Teachings and Teachers, but at the same time an explicit rejection of institutions which did not share this interpretation, allows a view into how a school allegedly respecting all schools in the end disrespected the establishments of other schools leading to debates with the Buddhist community and proscription of their movement. It was a battle of institutions and interpretations which were made possible as a product of centuries of dialogue and argumentation within this distinctive multi-religious environment.

The early founders utilized the doctrine of the unity of the Three Teachings in ways that featured prominently in their image, and the utility of the doctrine as a proselytizing tool are significant. The first five congregational establishments/monasteries featured titles with reference to the Three Teachings. Not only could explicit reference be made to any of the three traditional figures, Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, when speaking to adepts and literati, but to any layman on the street who knew the significance of those names, they could be referenced and form part of the authority of the movement. It is little wonder that Yelu Chucai was disappointed by Qiu’s meaning when he utilized the unity of the Three Teachings because that meant a direct

challenge to Buddhist authority and institutional legitimacy, something which appears to have been waning at this time. Wang Chongyang was able to say, “regardless of man or woman, Buddhist or Daoist, official or commoner, to each I will transmit the divine law and bestow the precepts,”<sup>98</sup> and in this way welcome the world into his school.

Even if one were to ignore the institutional identity of Quanzhen and simply look at its form of practice, an appreciation of how the Three Teachings functioned within this area is important. While some scholars such as Louis Komjathy do not think it is important to analyze these issues, the use of the Three Teachings marks a conscious choice on the part of Wang Chongyang and his disciples. It seems like an understanding of internal alchemy and the methods used by Quanzhen Taoists could be understood without looking at this doctrine but something would be missing. Wang explicitly states that, “All followers who engage in internal practice according to the Three Teachings will completely cure each and every sickness and disease. Moreover, they will gain the ability to leap over [the cycle] of life.”<sup>99</sup> He is affirming that internal alchemy, the practice that is the very backbone or ‘core’ of Quanzhen practice and identity for scholars like Tsui and Komjathy, is not done rightly if not according to the Three Teachings. His interpretation relies upon the interpretation of all of the traditions and without appreciating this one cannot understand the strategies of interpretation and legitimation which grant authority to these practices.

Some scholars have offered the solution to the Quanzhen school’s complicated identity by saying Quanzhen should not be called Taoist but simply a category all its own. However, the discourses which Wang Chongyang and his followers entered into

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<sup>98</sup> Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions, p.366.

<sup>99</sup> Perfected Chongyang’s Instructions, p.365.

allowed for it to be recognized as Taoist by the surrounding community while still criticizing followers of other traditions and advocating the use of texts traditionally associated with other traditions. The problem of identity results from a different discourse within the syncretism debate that looks for essences and for this reason it does not adequately reflect the realities of the time. It makes the titles of the past confusing when they need not be and muddies the water around the Quanzhen founders' actions. Through looking at the specific arguments made and the environment in which they could be made, we get a better understanding of the movement as a whole.

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