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When Emperor Wu Met Bodhidharma: A Reading of Mid-Tang Religious Policy

ABSTRACT:

From the early eighth century on, those concerned with the practice and theory of statecraft paid recurring attention to emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 (r. 502–549). They cast him as a “Buddhist” ruler and used him as an ideological cipher to debate the imperial religious policy of their own times. Their discourse was dominated by critiques of the Liang ruler, in particular his material and ritual support for the Buddhist church. To counter such critiques, defenders of Buddhism’s role in imperial statecraft sought novel argumentative strategies. They attempted to divorce emperor Wu’s practice of Buddhism from what they defined as fundamental doctrine. Through evaluations of emperor Wu’s religious merit, they now established moral and metaphysical criteria for imperial legitimacy, bringing into question the limits of spiritual and temporal authority. This paper uses the shift in mid-Tang accounts of emperor Wu to shed light on contemporary struggles for political and social control between the imperial state on the one hand, and the Buddhist church on the other.

KEYWORDS:

emperor Wu of Liang; Tang; imperial religious policy; medieval political thought; Buddhism; merit.

On February 15, 732, Dayun 大雲 Monastery in Huatai 滑臺, in present-day Henan, was the setting for a public exposition of the life of Bodhidharma, identified by *chan* lineages as the first patriarch in China. It included an account of Bodhidharma’s arrival from southern India and his encounter with emperor Wu 武 (Xiao Yan 蕭衍, 464–549), ruler of the sixth-century state of Liang 梁 for half a century:

[Bodhidharma] crossed the waves from afar and reached emperor Wu of Liang. Emperor Wu asked the Dharma Master: “We have fashioned temples, ordained people, fashioned images, and copied *sūtras*. What merit do We have?” “You have no merit,” [Bodhi] dharma replied. With his mundane state of mind, emperor Wu

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failed to understand these words of [Bodhi]dharma, who was subsequently sent on his way.¹

The purported narrator of this account was Shenhui 神會 (d. 758). Since 730, he had launched a campaign of reform in the Buddhist clergy that would gain prominence in the 740s and 750s. He sought to derive authority for his reformist ideology in its early stages by claiming his teacher, Huineng 慧能, as the sixth Chinese patriarch in a direct line of descent from Bodhidharma.² The text in which Shenhui's exposition appeared was *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論. It was attributed to an otherwise unknown monk Dugu Pei 獨孤沛, who claimed to be a disciple of Shenhui.

Various accounts of the encounter have received attention in modern scholarship. There have been two recurring points of focus, both concerned with the early history of *chan* lineages. One has been the information to be gained on the life and thought of Bodhidharma. The other has been the function of biographies of Bodhidharma in general, and accounts of his meeting with emperor Wu in particular, in sectarian struggles between different *chan* lineages.³

In the present paper, I will neither extend those discussions nor challenge their basic interpretation of the anecdote that originated with Shenhui. Instead, I will aim to expand the contexts in which we might read that anecdote and its descendants. For the figure of emperor Wu was not only used in sectarian debate, but also played an important part in evaluations of the relationship of the imperial state to Buddhist doctrine and practice.

¹ Dugu Pei 獨孤沛, *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論, in Hu Shi 胡適, *Shenhui heshang yiji* 神會和尚遺集 (Taipei: Hu Shi jinianguan, 1968), pp. 261–62.

² For Shenhui's reform movement and its ideological context, see Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript with Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1967), pp. 23–38; John McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: U. Hawai'i P., 1986); Bernard Faure, *The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1997); John McRae, "Shenhui as Evangelist: Re-envisioning the Identity of a Chinese Buddhist Monk," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 30 (2002), pp. 123–48; John Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng, The Sixth Patriarch* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 46–68.

³ Typical statements of these concerns appear, respectively, in Sekiguchi Shindai 關口真大, *Daruma no kenkyū* 達摩の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1967), pp. 114–26; and in Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, "Goroku no rekishi: zen bunken no seiritsu shi teki kenkyū" 語録の歴史、禪文獻の成立史的研究, *THGH* 57 (1985), pp. 379–81; McRae, *Northern School*, p. 16. As Griffith Foulk has argued, the idea of a homogeneous "Chan" school did not develop until at least attempts at sectarian synthesis in the early ninth century. To reflect this, I will refer to "*chan*" ideologies and practices, not in the sense of a monolithic school of thought but rather as a collection of different schools that broadly took meditation practices as their primary focus. See Theodore Griffith Foulk, "The 'Ch'an school' and Its Place in the Buddhist Monastic Tradition," Ph.D. diss. (University of Michigan, 1987), pp. 212–44.

Two contexts, in particular, will have a close bearing on what follows. The first is political. Accounts of an encounter between emperor Wu and Bodhidharma drew on discourses on merit, *gongde* 功德. Shenhui focussed on four material expressions of merit: the construction of temples (*zao si* 造寺, in Shenhui's terms); the ordination of monks (*du ren* 度人); the production of consecrated images (*zao xiang* 造像); and the copying of scriptural texts (*xie jing* 寫經). Debates over all of these were current in the early-eighth century and continued into the ninth century. I will suggest that they were, among other things, expressions of a struggle for political and social control between the imperial state and the Buddhist church.⁴ This was their point of continuity with contemporary accounts of emperor Wu, which were concerned with just this issue.

The second might be described as a discursive context. Emperor Wu had been a richly interesting and powerfully charismatic historical figure, whose political, social, and cultural import extended well beyond his patronage of the Buddhist church. Yet already by the mid-seventh century, he had been reduced to the trope of a "Buddhist" ruler; his name alone could evoke a whole rhetorical type.⁵ As such, he was made to serve a range of contemporary agendas in the debates over the relationship between the Buddhist church and the imperial state. By at least the early-eighth century, though, anti-Buddhist critiques of the Liang ruler had come to dominate this discourse. Emperor Wu served as a minatory example to those who might support the imperial state's patronage of the Buddhist church.

Those who still sought a role for the Buddhist church in imperial statecraft therefore had to find a new argumentative strategy to counter the persistent critiques of imperial patronage of Buddhism in general, and of emperor Wu's rule in particular. They attempted to shift the

⁴ The basic contours of Tang religious policy have been surveyed elsewhere. The standard modern studies in English include: Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the Tang* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1987); Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia U.P., 1995); and T. H. Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang: Religion & Empire during the Golden Age of Chinese History* (London: The Wellsweep Press, 1996). Among the many works in Chinese and Japanese on this subject, I have particularly benefited from the overview offered in Zhou Qi 周奇, "Tangdai zongjiao guanli yanjiu" 唐代宗教管理研究, Ph.D. diss. (Fudan daxue, 2005), which traces long-running attempts by the imperial state to control many of the activities discussed in what follows.

⁵ I have given an episodic history of the formative stages of this process in Mark Strange, "Representations of Liang Emperor Wu as a Buddhist Ruler in Sixth- and Seventh-century Texts," *AM* 3d ser. 24.2 (2011), pp. 53–112. For the development of tropes in representations of the Liang state more broadly, see also Xiaofei Tian, *Beacon Fire and Shooting Star: The Literary Culture of the Liang (502–557)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2007), pp. 365–66, 415–25.

terms of the existing discourse on emperor Wu. They diverted criticism from Buddhist doctrine and practice in what they now defined as its fundamental, orthodox form. As a corollary, they represented emperor Wu's interpretation of Buddhism as corrupt: his overwhelming concern with expressing his piety in material ways had made him both a bad ruler and a bad Buddhist, they claimed.

Exponents of this argument formulated it in two ways. I will characterize one as moral and the other as metaphysical. They differed over two questions: what was the fundamental purpose of Buddhist doctrine? And what practical role might Buddhism play in the imperial state? Those who made the moral argument identified themselves above all with the apparatus of the imperial state and their concerns appealed as much to Confucian models of statecraft as to Buddhist doctrines of compassion and self-sacrifice. They concerned themselves with a ruler's obligation to care for his people. They judged that emperor Wu's patronage of the Buddhist church had hindered, not supported, him in fulfilling that obligation. But in this argument, Buddhist doctrine might still be applied to imperial statecraft if it were used to serve the common weal. By contrast, those who presented the metaphysical argument had close affiliations with the Buddhist church; most, including Shenhui, were ordained Buddhists. Their concern was to maintain the authority of the Buddhist church by asserting its privileged access to the supra-mundane. Rulers like emperor Wu, and those who served them at court, might demonstrate their piety through material means; but it was only members of the Buddhist church, or even of certain Buddhist lineages, who were in touch with the ultimate insights that lay at the heart of orthodox doctrine. In this view, Buddhism complemented the temporal powers of the imperial state.

This novel account of emperor Wu no doubt fulfilled the agendas of competing *chan* lineages, as others have suggested. But the fact that it attracted the notice of those not immediately involved in these sectarian struggles suggests that it was also part of a wider attempt to respond to, and repudiate, long-standing attempts by secular authorities to intervene in Buddhist institutions and practices. So this paper will use the particular case of emperor Wu to explore a radical intervention in debates over the political roles of the Buddhist church in the eighth and the ninth centuries.

POLITICAL CONTEXTS: MERIT-MAKING AND THE STATE

Eighth- and ninth-century authors who used emperor Wu as the trope of an imperial patron of Buddhism did so in a context of a fluctuating relationship between the court and the Buddhist church. As Shen-hui's anecdote suggests, the concept of merit emerged as a particular point of discussion both in the political debates of the time and, as a way of contributing to those debates, in accounts of emperor Wu's rule. This was likely the result of an overwhelming tendency to conceive of merit in material terms. That in turn created tensions over the allocation of resources. Of recurring concern were attempts by the imperial state to regulate material expressions of merit and to appropriate them for its own ends.⁶

The Language of Merit

In the eighth and ninth centuries, references to merit either alluded to the store of karmic credit that might result from acts of piety; or they worked metonymically to denote the physical objects produced by such acts. In both uses, a focus on the material suggests itself in crude terms from frequent descriptions of merit as having been "created 創," "fashioned 造," "produced 爲," "erected 立," "established 樹," or "brought to completion 成就." In Daoist contexts above all, it was "cultivated 修."⁷ This language and its implications were shared by both members of the imperial court and religious laymen more generally.⁸

It follows that merit was closely associated with the construction of monastic buildings. In the late-seventh century, for example, Wu Zetian 武則天 commissioned the "ornamentation 莊嚴" of Shaolin 少林 Monas-

⁶ In the eighth and ninth centuries, the term *gongde* 功德 also appeared outside Buddhist and Daoist contexts to denote military success and political achievement. It was often applied to the rule of members of the imperial family and was central to discussions of imperial ancestral rites. Although such uses of the term stand in a broad linguistic relationship to its uses in Buddhist and Daoist contexts, their specific political significance has little bearing on the focus of this paper and so will not receive further attention. In the following section, I have drawn on overviews of material conceptions of merit in Chinese Buddhism in John Kieschnick, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2003), pp. 157–219; and Wendi L. Adamek, "The Impossibility of the Given: Representations of Merit and Emptiness in Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 45.2 (2005), pp. 135–80.

⁷ Another indication of a focus on the material is reference to the external marks or characteristics of merit, *gongde xianghao* 功德相好. See, e.g., the uses of this term by Guo Shaoyu 郭少聿 in 767 and by Bai Juyi 白居易 in 840; Dong Gao 董誥 et al., eds., *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983) 440, pp. 6a–7a, esp. 7a; Bai Juyi, *Bai Juyi ji* 白居易集, Gu Xuexie 顧學頤, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1999) 71, p. 1496.

⁸ Compare secular references to merit, which drew on a different set of verbal collocations: here, merit was "recorded 紀," "written down 書," "narrated 論述," "inscribed 勒," "eulogized 頌," or "glorified 誇大"; or it was "apparent 著" (or absent), "brought to completion 成就," or "replete 具完."

tery on Mount Song, part of a large program of monastic construction during her reign. She referred to the work done at the monastery as “this merit 此功德.” Later writers described the buildings that she commissioned in the same terms.⁹ In the early-eighth century, emperor Ruizong 睿宗 seems to have made a similar connection between the generation of merit and the construction of two Daoist temples, the Observatory of the Gold Immortal Princess 金仙觀 and the Observatory of the Jade Perfected Princess 玉真觀, for his daughters. In 711, Wei Zhigu 魏知古 (647–715), a policy advisor in the Palace Secretariat, noted in a memorial of remonstrance that “Your Majesty has constructed temples for the princesses and prays for blessings and assistance 祈福祐 on the basis of having established merit 樹功德.”¹⁰ A similar discourse circulated outside the imperial court, too. The regional official Yu Di 於顛 (fl. c.805), for example, cited an unattributed scripture to state that such merit-making acts as “fashioning *stūpas* and temples 造塔廟” and “constructing images 建形像” would ensure that “blessings will not be fruitless or elusive 福不唐捐.”¹¹

At the same time, there was an association between merit and the creation of consecrated images. This found canonical authority in

⁹ Letter by Wu Zetian, written in 683; Ye Feng 葉封, *Shaolin si zhi* 少林寺志 (1748 edn. *Zhongguo Fosi zhi congkan* 中國佛寺志叢刊 [Yangzhou: Guangling shushe, 2006]), “yilin 藝林,” pp. 3a–b, esp. 3b; cf. Wang Chang 王昶, ed., *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (*Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 edn., Taipei: Xinwen feng chuban gongsi, 1982) 60, pp. 1b–2a, esp. 2a. Inscription by Pei Cui 裴灌 (d. 736), dated 728; *ibid.* 77, pp. 15a–20b, esp. 18a; cf. *Shaolin si zhi*, “beiji 碑記,” pp. 1a–4b, esp. 3a, which omits reference to the construction of the “merit” of a Hall of Universal Illumination. Stephen Teiser has explored the implications of the term “ornament 莊嚴,” in his “Ornamenting the Departed: Notes on the Language of Chinese Buddhist Ritual Texts,” *AM* 3d ser. 22.1 (2009), pp. 201–36. Teiser’s findings bear closely on the present paper’s discussion of material conceptions of merit, though the liturgical texts that supply his principal point of focus differ in their social concerns from the court-centred discourse under consideration here.

¹⁰ Liu Xu 劉昉 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; hereafter, *JTS*) 98, pp. 3061–62; Wang Pu 王溥, comp., *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1955; hereafter, *THY*) 50, pp. 871–72. For biographical sketches of the two imperial princesses and the background against which their ordination as Daoist nuns took place, see Charles D. Benn, *The Cavern-Mystery Transmission: A Taoist Ordination Rite of A.D. 711* (Honolulu: U. Hawai’i P., 1991), pp. 5–20; on the establishment of temples in their names, see esp. 12–14. In the late-8th c., Lu Changyuan 陸長源 (d. 799), a vice censor-in-chief, also made reference to merit in connection with the imperially-decreed construction of Purple Yang Observatory 紫陽觀 in Yudu, in present-day Jiangxi, during the Tianbao period (742–756); *Maoshan zhi* 茅山誌, in *Daozang* 道藏 (1445 edn.; rpt. Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1924–26), vol. 156, j. 23, p. 9b.

¹¹ This appeared in a record of the Lotus Cloister 法華院 in Changsha commandery 長沙郡, in present-day Hunan; Li Fang 李昉 et al., eds., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966; hereafter, *WYTH*) 817, p. 8a. Yu Di was most likely quoting from the *Lotus sūtra*, which reads “with such power as is possessed by the Bodhisattva Who Contemplates the Sounds of the World, if there are sentient beings who venerate and worship the Bodhisattva Who Contemplates the Sounds of the World, their blessings will not be fruitless or elusive”; *T*, vol. 9, no. 262, j. 7, p. 57A10–11.

such works as *Foshuo zuo fo xingxiang jing* 佛說作佛形像經, most likely translated into Chinese in the third century and still popular in Tang. Here, the Central Indian king Udayana is seen to have discussed with the Buddha the “blessings and assistance 福祐” derived from pious acts and to have asked in particular what blessings he might obtain by producing an image of the Buddha. The Buddha responded with a long list of the physical, moral, and even social and political rewards for such an expression of piety.¹² These associations between merit and the production of images remained pervasive in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹³ For example, the tomb inscription of the eminent Daoist priest Yin Wencao 尹文操 (622–88), dated November 9, 717, records that emperor Gaozong 高宗 had commissioned Yin to “cultivate merit 修功德” in a temple to Laozi. When members of the imperial family visited the temple, they saw images of Laozi and other celestial figures, suggesting that Yin had interpreted Gaozong’s reference to “merit” in material terms.¹⁴ Almost a century later, in 811, Bai Juyi similarly noted that emperor Xianzong 憲宗 had commissioned a painting of the Daoist Venerable Lord of the Daluo, or Grand Veil, Heaven 大羅天尊 to “accomplish basic merit 成本功德” through good causes.¹⁵ Lay Buddhists outside the court drew on the same language and implications.¹⁶

Merit was associated not only with the production of things, but also with the ordination of Buddhist monks and the performance of ritual. This theme recurred throughout the eighth and ninth centuries in a wide range of contexts, above all in Daoist settings.¹⁷ But the same

¹² *Foshuo zuo fo xingxiang jing* 佛說作佛形像經, *T.*, vol. 16, no. 692, pp. 788A26–28, 788B1–788C15. A translation by Robert Sharf, “*The Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images*,” appears in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of China in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1996), pp. 264–67. On its date of composition and its popularity during Tang, see *ibid.*, pp. 262–64. Note, too, Daoshi’s 道世 citation of this work in his Buddhist encyclopedia of 668, *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, under a section on construction and repair (*xiuzao* 修造); *T.*, vol. 53, no. 2122, *j.* 33, p. 540C4–21. The same theme received expression in Daoist scriptures, too. See, for example, the following discussion of *Taishang dongxuan lingbao yebao yinyuan jing* 太上洞玄靈寶業報因緣經.

¹³ Lei Wen 雷聞 has provided a useful overview of the role of images in sacrifices performed by the Tang state as well as the appearance of imperial portraits in Buddhist and Daoist temples; *Jiaomiao zhi wai: Sui Tang guojia jisi yu zongjiao* 郊廟之外, 隋唐國家祭祀與宗教 (Beijing: Sanlian shuju, 2009), pp. 101–8, 115–29.

¹⁴ *Gu Louguan ziyun yanqing ji* 古樓觀紫雲衍慶集, in *Daozang*, vol. 605, *j.* A, p. 7b.

¹⁵ A number of Bai Juyi’s contemporaries recorded the production of images of the same figure in the early-9th c. For Bai Juyi’s encomium, see Bai, *Bai Juyi ji* 56, pp. 1196. A date of 810 is given in Bai Juyi 白居易, *Bai Juyi ji jianjiao* 白居易集箋校, Zhu Jincheng 朱金城, ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1988) 56, p. 3257.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *WYTH* 781, pp. 8b–9a; 782, p. 9a. Note, too, a reference to merit (and, as a corollary, “ornamentation 莊嚴” and “fields of blessings 福田”) in the ostensibly secular context of an inscription for an imperial portrait; *WYTH* 785, pp. 7a–b.

¹⁷ See, e.g., emperor Xuanzong’s references to this understanding of merit in a series of im-

association also made itself felt in an account of the piety of a female lay Buddhist written by Wang Wei 王維 (d.759). In it, Wang described the “merit of ordaining people and offering purification feasts 度人設齋功德,” though this ultimately had a political focus – both acts were performed to confer sagacity and long life on the emperor.¹⁸

These associations of merit with material things and ritual performance were often underpinned by the prospect of securing a cosmic response, or “blessings 福.” Here was justification for material patronage of Buddhist and Daoist institutions and their material paraphernalia. It was founded on canonical principle. For example, in *Ekottarāgama-sūtra*, translated into Chinese in the late-fourth century, the Buddha was reported to have explained that laypeople would increase their merit and receive “incalculable blessings 福不可計” through seven acts. All seven were based on such material support of the clergy as the building and furnishing of monasteries.¹⁹

The same theme also received expression in Daoist scriptures. It was articulated with particular force in *Taishang dongxuan lingbao yebao yinyuan jing* 太上洞玄靈寶業報因緣經, a work that combined elements of Lingbao Daoist and Buddhist doctrine.²⁰ It identified merit as “the foundation of blessings 福基” in the future and outlined nine ways of creating such merit. All demanded material or ritual expressions of piety. They included “fashioning images 造像,” “copying scriptures 寫經,” “establishing temples 置觀,” and “ordaining people 度人.”²¹ Rul-

perial edicts; *Maoshan zhi*, in *Daozang*, vol. 153, j. 2, pp. 2b–10a passim, esp. 9a; Song Shou 宋綬 and Song Minqiu 宋敏求, eds., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 唐大詔令集 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1959) 67, p. 377; Dong et al., eds., *Quan Tang wen* 265, p. 18b.

¹⁸ Wang Wei 王維, *Wang youcheng ji jianzhu* 王右丞集箋注, Zhao Diancheng 趙殿成, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961) 20, pp. 361–66, esp. 362. For other expressions of this understanding of merit by lay Buddhists and Daoists, see *ibid.* 16, p. 285; Bai, *Bai Juyi ji* 69, p. 1455; *WYTH* 472, pp. 7a–b; 815, p. 7a. A discussion of purification feasts as a means of generating merit during Tang appears in Zhanru 湛如, *Dunhuang Fojiao lüyi zhidu yanjiu* 敦煌佛教律儀制度研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), pp. 306–17.

¹⁹ Among the Buddha’s *dicta* in the 3d-c. *Foshuo zhude futian jing* 佛說諸德福田經, too, the construction of Buddhist buildings appears as the first of “seven types of great donations termed ‘fields of blessings.’” John Kieschnick has noted that, in a chapter on “giving rise to blessings 興福” in the 6th-c. *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, the most common way of generating merit is through the construction of *stūpas*, monasteries, and Buddhist images. See *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 (*Ekottarīkāgama-sūtra*), trans. Jutan Sengqietipo 瞿曇僧伽提婆 (Gautama Samghadeva), *T.*, vol. 2, no. 125, j. 35, p. 741C2–26; *Foshuo zhude futian jing*, trans. *Fali* 法立 and *Faju* 法炬, *T.*, vol. 16, no. 683, p. 777B2–8; Huijiao 慧皎, *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, *T.*, vol. 50, no. 2059, j. 13, pp. 409B5–418A24; and Kieschnick, *Impact of Buddhism*, p. 161.

²⁰ Composed between the mid-6th and early-7th cc., *Taishang dongxuan lingbao yebao yinyuan jing* remained in circulation in the mid-8th c.; one Dunhuang manuscript witness to the work was dated 753.

²¹ *Taishang dongxuan lingbao yebao yinyuan jing* 太上洞玄靈寶業報因緣經, in *Daozang*, vols. 174–75, j. 7, pp. 7a–b. There are recurring references to blessings secured through producing

ers and senior ministers appeared prominently as concrete examples of how such material expressions of piety and the establishment of blessings might attract recompense. So we hear about the ruler of an unnamed state who “established temples and ordained people 置觀度人,” “copied scriptures and fashioned images 寫經造像,” and “constructed various merits 建諸功德.” As a result, his state was seen to attract a “sympathetic response 應感” from deities. In another case, this cosmic response resulted in the cultivation of the “true Way 正道.”²² Similarly, laypeople who performed such pious acts as “extensively producing scriptures and images 廣造經像” or “establishing temples and ordaining people 置觀度人” were promised rebirth as rulers of this world or of the spiritual realm.²³

The same idea of obtaining religious recompense through material expressions of piety remained current in the eighth and ninth centuries. A number of officials serving under Wu Zetian sought to atone for their misdemeanors in office by making donations of land or property to monasteries.²⁴ In 710, emperor Ruizong is recorded as having sought blessings for the empress dowager by ordering the construction of a Daoist temple.²⁵ And in an encomium for a painted image of the bodhisattva Guanyin, the court official Yu Shao 于邵 (ca. 713-ca. 793) made the connection with particular clarity: “the merit of the Buddha is the way to bring about blessings 佛功德所以俾福也.”²⁶ Outside the court, too, lay Buddhists commonly presented merit as a cause of blessings both in the present and, more often, in the afterlife.²⁷

images, copying scriptures, constructing temples, and ordaining people; *ibid.* *j.* 5, pp. 8b-9a; *j.* 7, pp. 12a; *j.* 8, pp. 5a-b, 8b-9a.

²² *Ibid.*, *j.* 6, pp. 7a-9a; *j.* 7, p. 10b. For similar references to political and personal salvation through such expressions of piety, see *ibid.*, *j.* 6, pp. 11a-13a; *j.* 9, pp. 6b-7a, 8a. The same dynamic applied to members of the imperial family, senior ministers, Daoist priests and priestesses, and worthies, see *ibid.*, *j.* 1, pp. 5a-8b *passim*.

²³ *Ibid.*, *j.* 2, p. 1a. This received concrete expression in the personal history of the king of Fragrance Land 香積國王. Originally a woman from a poor family who devoted herself to the Way, the king turned into a man and rose in social status. He “constructed various merits 建諸功德” and performed a range of pious acts, including “making offerings to Daoist priests 供養道士” and “copying scriptures and fashioning images 寫經造像.” This eventually resulted in his rebirth into the family of the king of Fragrance Land and accession to the throne; *ibid.*, *j.* 5, pp. 7a-b.

²⁴ Zhang Haifeng 張海峰, “Tangdai Fojiao yu falü” 唐代佛教與法律, Ph.D. diss. (Huadong zhengfa daxue, 2012), pp. 139-41.

²⁵ Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956; hereafter, *ZZTJ*) 210, p. 6659. See also Wei Zhigu’s reference to “praying for blessings and assistance” in his memorial on emperor Ruizong’s construction of Daoist temples for two imperial princesses, sampled above; *JTS* 98, p. 3062; *THY* 50, p. 871.

²⁶ *WYH* 781, p. 5a.

²⁷ Some examples: Li Wenan’s 李文安 inscription of April 27, 722, for a stone statue of

Although such arguments often focused on individual benefits, they could also assume a universal, political focus. Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 was therefore able to suggest that the cultivation of merit by Li Hanguang 李含光 (683-769), later considered the thirteenth Shangqing patriarch of the Maoshan lineage, would “attract a sympathetic response 感應,” bring “day-to-day blessings 日用之福” to the common people, and ultimately create the conditions for peace and moral propriety in the empire.²⁸ And when, in 767, emperor Daizong 代宗 questioned the existence of the Buddhist concept of recompense, three of his ministers (all devout Buddhists) retorted: “How might the fortunes and longevity of the state be realized if not through the accumulation of actions that will accrue blessings 福業?” They found evidence for their claim in the recent suppression of successive rebellions and invasions: they argued that Tang’s survival, even in the face of such threats, was definitive proof of how valuable it was for the state to attract recompense through pious acts.²⁹

State Regulation of Merit

Such material understandings of merit, particularly in the context of state politics, stand in a clear relationship to burgeoning competition between the imperial state and the Buddhist church for control over merit-making activities. After a period of generous imperial patronage

the Buddha, in Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 73, pp. 26b-27b; a statement by Wang Wei bequeathing his estate to the Buddhist church, Wang, *Wang youcheng ji jianzhu* 17, p. 320; a stele inscription for the Central Indian monk Subhakarasiṃha (637-735) by Li Hua 李華 (715-778), in *Xuanzong chao fanjing sanzang Shanwuwei zeng Hongluqing xingzhuang* 玄宗朝翻經三藏善無畏贈鴻臚卿行狀, *T.*, vol. 50, no. 2055, p. 291B22-23; and Bai Juyi’s record of the reconstruction of Mount Xiang Monastery, near Luoyang, dated August 30, 832, Bai, *Bai Juyi ji* 68, p. 1442. There is further evidence for this understanding of merit in the Dunhuang ritual texts collected in Huang Zheng 黃徵 and Wu Wei 吳偉, eds., *Dunhuang yuanwen ji* 敦煌願文集 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1995). Chen Xingyu 陳星宇 has sketched the relationship between merit and posthumous blessings in these texts in her “Gongde sixiang yu Dunhuang jianwang yuanwen” 功德思想與敦煌薦亡願文, *Qiqihaer daxue xuebao* 齊齊哈爾大學學報 (2014), pp. 53-57, esp. 56-57, on the idea and mechanisms of transferring merit. But these documents emerged from a social context that lies beyond the scope of this paper’s focus on the politics of the imperial court.

²⁸ *Maoshan zhi*, in *Daozang*, vol. 153, j. 2, p. 8a. See also Xuanzong’s edict in *ibid.* j. 2, p. 9a. But note, too, his claim in an edict of September 6, 714, that some members of the Buddhist and Daoist clergy “give fraudulent accounts of misfortunes and blessings 妄陳禍福”; Wang Qinruo 王欽若 and Yang Yi 楊億, eds., *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960; hereafter, *CFY*) 159, p. 11b; *THY* 49, pp. 860-61 (which gives a date of August 27, 714). On the relationship of merit to recompense as it was understood during Xuanzong’s reign, see Tejima Isshin 手島一真, “Kudoku to hō no ichi kōsatsu: Tō Gensō chō no Sankyō seitsū saku ni kanshite” 功德と報応の一考察, 唐玄宗朝の三教斉一策に関して, *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 印度學佛教學研究 48.1 (1999), pp. 235-39, esp. 236, for a distinction between personal and political understandings of merit.

²⁹ *ZZTJ* 224, p. 7196. See also *JTS* 118, p. 3417.

of the Buddhist church under of Wu Zetian and emperor Zhongzong 中宗, during the eighth and ninth centuries the imperial state made recurring attempts to regulate the construction of monasteries, the production of consecrated images, the copying of *sūtras*, and the ordination of clergy – all activities understood to constitute merit at this time, as we have seen.³⁰

A statement of the state's intervention in these activities appeared in an edict that emperor Ruizong issued on August 18, 710, in which he ordered general scrutiny of the Buddhist clergy. In addition, he specifically demanded that regional officials end “any appearance of illicit ordinations 私度之色,” as part of a broader attempt to rectify popular customs and so cultivate a pool of morally proper men for employment in the imperial bureaucracy.³¹

Early in his reign, emperor Xuanzong consolidated his predecessor's attempt to circumscribe the reach of the Buddhist church and to direct its activities to the needs of the imperial state.³² Particularly prominent here was Yao Chong 姚崇 (651–721), who would become director of the Secretariat and *de facto* head of the imperial bureaucracy under Xuanzong.³³ In 713, Yao set out ten points of urgent con-

³⁰ Some sense of the background emerges from a powerful anti-Buddhist critique of 707 by the remonstrance official Xin Tipi 辛替否. He claimed (no doubt with a degree of hyperbole) that two decades of lavish imperial patronage of the Buddhist church had enabled it “to take over seventy or eighty percent of the empire's wealth,” so that Buddhist temples now matched imperial palaces in their splendor. In this context, Xin made critical reference to emperor Wu's worldly renunciations. See *JTS* 101, pp. 3155–58, esp. 3158; *CFYG* 545, pp. 4a–7b, esp. 7b; *WYH* 698, pp. 5a–8a, esp. 7b. (*THY* 48, pp. 850–1, offers an abridged version of the memorial and dates it to the seventh lunar month of 711, but in doing so apparently confuses it with another memorial that Xin Tipi submitted that year.)

³¹ *WYH* 465, pp. 5a–6b, esp. 6a; Song and Song, eds., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 110, p. 571. Wang Hongjun 王洪軍 has sketched imperial policies towards the Buddhist and Daoist churches in the late-7th and early-8th cc., including during Ruizong's rule. Wang is right to note that Ruizong's policies did not amount to a suppression of Buddhism; he cites examples of Ruizong's support for the construction of Buddhist temples and scriptural translation projects. See Wang Hongjun, “Xinyang yu zhengzhi zhi jian: lun Wu Zetian yu Zhongzong, Ruizong shiqi de zongjiao zhengce” 信仰與政治之間，論武則天與中宗·睿宗時期的宗教政策, *Dongfang luntan* 東方論壇 (2003), pp. 71–77, esp. 76–77. For a survey of early-8th-c. opposition to monastic construction and the production of images, see Yoshikawa Tadao 吉川忠夫, “Futsu wa kokoro ni ari” 仏は心に在り, in idem, *Chūgoku kodaijin no yume to shi* 中国古代人の夢と死 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1985), pp. 141–53.

³² Tonami Mamoru 磯波護 has discussed Xuanzong's early attempts to restrict the social reach of the Buddhist church in “Tō chūki no Bukkyō to kokka” 唐中期の佛教と國家, in Fukunaga Mitsuji 福永光司, ed., *Chūgoku chūsei no shūkyō to bunka* 中國中世の宗教と文化 (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 1982), pp. 627–53; and “Policy towards the Buddhist Church in the Reign of T'ang Hsüan-tsung,” *Acta Asiatica* 55 (1988), pp. 27–47. See also Fujii Kiyoshi 藤井清, “Tō no Gensō chō ni okeru Bukkyō seisaku” 唐の玄宗朝に於ける仏教政策, *Fukui daigaku gakuji gakubu kiyō* 福井大学学芸学部紀要 1 (1952), pp. 1–8; Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, 51–57.

³³ For Yao's biography, see *JTS* 96, pp. 3021–29; Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁,

cern in government, among which was the lavish imperial patronage of Buddhist and Daoist construction under previous reigns. Xuanzong agreed with Yao's criticism.³⁴ On January 27, 714, Yao Chong further argued against the "indiscriminate ordination of treacherous people 妄度姦人."³⁵ In response, Xuanzong ordered that officials correct the situation, resulting in the laicization of over 20,000 illicitly registered clergy.³⁶ On March 9, 714, he issued a further edict to tighten official regulation of spending on Buddhist and Daoist construction projects. He decreed that no additions be made to existing monastic buildings and noted that the repair of dilapidated buildings would only be approved if requested through formal channels and after inspection by an official.³⁷ On September 10, 714, in the context of reforms that sought to impose greater austerity on the court and the imperial bureaucracy, Xuanzong identified a number of corruptions of Buddhist practice that might mislead his people. He therefore proscribed the activities of shops that had opened to "copy *sūtras* 寫經" as well as the wider practice of "casting Buddha images 鑄佛," both of which he set in close association with such profanity as the handling and consumption of alcohol and meat. Xuanzong decreed that the worship of images and recitation of *sūtras* occur only in monasteries – presumably officially-approved monasteries – and that registered monks alone be allowed to copy *sūtras*.³⁸ In 722, he demanded the investigation and

Xin Tang shu 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975; hereafter, *XTS*) 124, pp. 4381–88.

³⁴ *ZZTJ* 210, p. 6689, *kao yi* 考異, quoting *Shengping yuan* 升平源. This work was attributed to Wu Jing 吳兢, though Sima Guang considered it unreliable and so excluded from his main account.

³⁵ Sources that carry Yao Chong's memorial identify as its immediate motivations the widespread ordination of Buddhist clergy at the request of members of the imperial family and the patronage of monastic construction in the reign of Zhongzong. Yet most versions of Yao's text contain no direct reference to either issue. The exception is *THY* where this contextual information has been incorporated into the memorial. See *JTS* 8, p. 172; 96, p. 3023; *CFYG* 313, pp. 1a–b, esp. 1b; *THY* 47, pp. 836–37; *XTS* 124, p. 4384; *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6695.

³⁶ Some records set the number of laicized clergy at 12,000, and *THY* gives a figure of over 30,000. In *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載, we find the claim that "eighty or ninety percent" of Buddhist monks and nuns were laicized at this time, though this seems like the product of either hyperbole or error. See Zhang Zhuo 張鸞, *Chaoye qianzai* (*Baoyan tang biji* 寶顏堂秘笈 edn., 1922) 1, p. 5a; *JTS* 8, p. 172; 96, p. 3023; *THY* 47, p. 837; *CFYG* 159, p. 11b; 313, p. 1b; *XTS* 124, p. 4384; *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6695; Zhipan 志磐, *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, *T.*, vol. 49, no. 2035, *j.* 40, p. 373b6–7. Tonami Mamoru discusses these discrepancies in his "Policy towards the Buddhist Church," p. 31, fn. 6. In an edict of August 5, 731, emperor Xuanzong claimed that no new ordinations had been made for over twenty years – for the whole of his reign, in fact. But in 738, he is reported to have decreed that ordinations be performed; *THY* 49, p. 861; Zanning 贊寧 et al., *Song Gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, *T.*, vol. 50, no. 2061, *j.* 14, p. 795c.

³⁷ *CFYG* 63, p. 14a; cf. *THY* 49, pp. 860–1; *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6696. The latter talks about Buddhist structures specifically, but other sources refer to both Buddhist and Daoist buildings.

³⁸ *CFYG* 159, pp. 12a–b; cf. *THY* 49, pp. 860–1 (where the edict is dated September 12,

confiscation of all lands belonging to Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples that exceeded official quotas. He also placed limits on the area of land that a monastery might own in perpetuity.³⁹ In 727, Xuanzong ordered the closure or destruction of Buddhist temples in general society, presumably institutions that had not received official approval; with small temples, he decreed that “their merit should be moved into nearby Buddhist temples 功德移入側近佛寺。”⁴⁰ In 729, he further ordered that a complete register of monks in the empire be compiled in triplicate every three years, with the professed intention of “having the true and the false differentiated 欲令真偽區分。”⁴¹

As a corollary to this regulation of the Buddhist church, Xuanzong initiated comparable activities under the immediate control of the imperial state. During the Kaiyuan 開元 period, for example, he ordered a series of searches for Daoist books for the imperial collections. In 732, two copies of *Daode jing* 道德經 were engraved on stone, together with a new commentary attributed to Xuanzong himself. In 733, the emperor ordered that a copy of that text should be kept in every home. In 735, a Daoist priest requested that the text of *Daode jing* with Xuanzong’s commentary be engraved on stone wherever Daoist rituals were performed on behalf of the state.⁴² Also during the Kaiyuan period, a definitive version of the Daoist canon was fixed on imperial command.⁴³ Xuanzong moreover supported the translation of esoteric

714); Song and Song, eds., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 113, p. 588; *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6703. Emperor Xuanzong would have found a precedent for his edict in emperor Taizong’s ban on the flourishing mid-7th-c. production of Buddhist images. Taizong had argued that such practices set profit over doctrine and precluded any possible “recompense with blessings 福報”; Daoxuan 道宣, *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集, *I*, vol. 52, no. 2103, j. 28, p. 329B16–24. For Xuanzong’s sumptuary decrees, issued on August 24 and 27, 714, see *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6702.

³⁹ *THY* 59, p. 1028.

⁴⁰ Presumably “merit” here refers to the material paraphernalia of these temples. See *Ji wen* 紀聞, quoted in Li Fang 李昉 et al., eds., *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961) 104, p. 703.

⁴¹ But in 830, the Department of Sacrifices still proposed that information about ordained clergy be submitted “to clarify which are true and which false 以明真偽,” suggesting that regulation of the clergy had advanced little since Xuanzong’s time; *CFYG* 60, p. 13a; 474, p. 15a.

⁴² Further copies of Xuanzong’s commentary were distributed throughout the empire in 755. For an overview of the dissemination of *Daode jing* during Xuanzong’s reign, see Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang*, pp. 55–56. A detailed study of Xuanzong’s commentary appears in Imaeda Jirō 今枝二郎, “Tō Gensō gosei *Dōtoku shinkei so ni tsuite*” 唐玄宗御製道德真經疏について, *Taishō daigaku daigakuin kenkyū ronshū* 大正大学大学院研究論集 11 (1987), pp. 1–32.

⁴³ Four copies of the whole canon were made in the 730s or early 740s under the auspices of the Office for Historiography. In 749, a further ten copies were made and Xuanzong ordered the Institute for the Veneration of the Mystery to copy and distribute the canon throughout the empire. A further five copies were commissioned in 751. See Chen Guofu 陳國符, *Daozang yuanliu kao* 道藏源流考 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2012), pp. 112–17; Barrett, *Taoism under the Tang*, pp. 60–61.

Buddhist scriptures and produced a commentary on *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*, which he ordered to be distributed through the empire.⁴⁴ In 738, he ordered that a number of Buddhist and Daoist institutions throughout Tang territory be selected for state support as so-called Kaiyuan monasteries.⁴⁵ As the result of a dream in 741, Xuanzong ordered the distribution of images of Laozi throughout the empire. In 744, there was a further distribution of Daoist and Buddhist images together with images of Xuanzong himself.⁴⁶

This concern with subordinating the activities of the Buddhist church to the imperial state was thrown into jeopardy by the rebellions of the mid-eighth century. To finance military conflict, the state opened ordinations to anyone able to pay for admission to the clergy. The state's first major attempt to raise money from the ordination of members of both Buddhist and Daoist clergies took place in 755. The sale of ordination certificates continued, with and without state support, for the rest of Tang rule.⁴⁷

At the same time, a decline in state finances in the post-rebellion period must have made any allocation of material resources to the Buddhist and Daoist churches a point of particular concern.⁴⁸ Attempts to

⁴⁴ There are variant dates for this commentary: Kaiyuan 23 (735/6) in *Zhenyuan xinding Shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教目錄, *T*, vol. 55, no. 2157, *j*. 14, p. 878C10-12; Kaiyuan 24 (736/7) in *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, *j*. 14, p. 795B21-23, and *Fozu tongji*, *j*. 40, p. 375A5; and Kaiyuan 19 (731/2) in the mid-14th-c. *Shishi jigū lüè* 釋氏稽古略 by Juean 覺岸, *T*, vol. 49, no. 2037, *j*. 3, p. 825C15. See also undated references in Shenqing 神清, *Beishan lu* 北山錄, *T*, vol. 52, no. 2113, *j*. 4, p. 600A12; *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, *j*. 5, p. 735A1-2; and *Fozu tongji*, *j*. 51, p. 452A16.

⁴⁵ *THY* 48, p. 850; 50, p. 879; *Fozu tongji*, *j*. 40, p. 375A12. See also Benjue 本覺, comp., *Shishi tongjian* 釋氏通鑑 (*Shinsan Dai Nihon zokuzōkyō* 新纂大日本續藏經 edn.), vol. 76, no. 1516, *j*. 9, p. 98A13-14. Though the sources that I have drawn on here tend to agree that Xuanzong issued his edict in 738, Edward Schafer has claimed that the "weight of evidence" indicates a date of 741; "Notes on T'ang Culture, III," *MS* 30 (1972-73), p. 100. *Tang liudian* 唐六典, completed under the direction of Li Linfu 李林甫 in 739, claims that in the empire at the time there was a total of 3,245 monasteries and 2,113 nunneries for the Buddhists; and 1,137 and 550 respectively for the Daoists; Li Linfu 李林甫 et al., comp., *Dai Tō rikuten* 大唐六典, Hiroike Senkurō 廣池千九郎 and Uchida Tomō 內田智雄, eds. (Tokyo: Hiroike gakuen jigyōbu, 1973) 4, pp. 42a, 44b.

⁴⁶ *JTS* 9, p. 213; *THY* 50, p. 880; *CFYG* 53, p. 18b; *Fozu tongji*, *j*. 40, p. 375B24. See also J. J. L. Duyvendak, "The Dreams of the Emperor Hsüan-tsung," in F. D. K. Bosch et al., eds., *India Antiqua* (Leiden: Brill, 1947), p. 108; Schafer, "Notes on T'ang Culture, III," pp. 100-3.

⁴⁷ Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T'ang*, pp. 59-61; Lei, *Xiaomiao zhi wai*, pp. 121-26.

⁴⁸ David McMullen has traced a diminished program of state ritual in the post-rebellion period. By contrast, John Jorgensen has noted a dramatic increase in Buddhist construction projects at the same time. These were sponsored by members of the nobility as a direct response to the sense of insecurity that followed successive rebellions. See David McMullen, *State and Scholars in Tang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988), pp. 139-58; John Jorgensen, "The 'Imperial' Lineage of Ch'an Buddhism: The Role of Confucian Ritual and Ancestor Worship in Ch'an's Search for Legitimation in the mid-T'ang Dynasty," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 35 (1987), pp. 94-95.

increase imperial patronage of religious construction projects therefore met with sharp censure. In 764, for example, emperor Daizong was forced to abandon plans to expand the number of state-supported Daoist institutions in the face of arguments against their extravagance, though he spent lavishly on esoteric Buddhist construction projects over the following decade.⁴⁹

Such criticisms coincided with a consolidation of the post of commissioner for the cultivation of merit 修功德使 in the late-760s and 770s.⁵⁰ There is no clear record of when this post was first established, though Song Buddhist historians traced it to at least the reign of Zhongzong in the early-eighth century.⁵¹ There is a reference to this commissionership in 769. By 774, there existed the post of commissioner for the cultivation of merit for monasteries and observatories in the capital 京城諸寺觀修功德使. In 778, emperor Daizong established a commissioner for the cultivation of merit in the palace 內功德使. Buddhist monks had once assumed the functions of these posts, but they were now taken up by both members of the clergy and state officials.⁵² Both posts were abolished under emperor Dezong 德宗 in 779, on the advice of one of the current commissioners, and supervision of Buddhist monasteries passed to the Bureau of Sacrifice 祠部 and to local officials – as it had done in the late-seventh and early-eighth centuries,

⁴⁹ *JTS* 130, pp. 3618–20. Yet we hear elsewhere that members of the official bureaucracy were “quite unable to regulate” the emperor’s transfer of land and material riches in the capital region to the Buddhist and Daoist clergies. In 766, Daizong authorized the completion of Jin’ge Monastery on Mount Wutai at a purported cost of “millions of cash.” Six years later, he used thirty million cash from treasury funds on the construction of a pavilion in the grounds of the famous Da Xingshan Monastery in Chang’an. See *ibid.* 118, pp. 3417–18; *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, j. 1, p. 713B10–11; j. 21, p. 844A4–7; Zhao Qian 趙遷, *Da Tang gu Dade zeng sikong da bianzheng guangzhi Bukong sanzang xingzhuan* 大唐故大德贈司空大辨正廣智不空三藏行狀, *T.*, vol. 50, no. 2056, p. 293C14–16.

⁵⁰ This brief account of the post of commissioner for the cultivation of merit derives from the following studies: Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, “Tō chūki irai no Chōan no kudokushi” 唐中期以來の長安の功德使, *THGH* 4 (1933), pp. 368–406; Muronaga Yoshizō 室永芳三, “Tō Chōan no sayūgai kudokushi to sayūgai kudoku junin” 唐長安の左右街功德使と左右街功德巡院, *Nagasaki daigaku kyōikugakubu shakai kagaku ronsō* 長崎大學教育學部社會科學論叢 30 (1980), pp. 1–9; Tang Yijie 湯一介, “Gongdeshi kao: du *Zizhi tongjian* zhaji” 功德使考, 讀資治通鑑劄記, *Wenxian* 文獻 (1985.2), pp. 60–65; Ro Jaesong 慮在性, “Tō Tokusō to kudokushi” 唐德宗と功德使, *TS* 79 (1992), pp. 19–35; Zhou, “Tangdai zongjiao guanli yanjiu,” pp. 53–55; Liu Shufen 劉淑芬, *Zhonggu de Fojiao yu shehui* 中古的佛教與社會 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008), pp. 64–66; Zhang, “Tangdai Fojiao yu falü,” pp. 169–77; Liu Yao 劉耀, “Cong gongdeshi yizhi kan Tangdai huanguan dui Fojiao de xinfeng” 從功德使一職看唐代宦官對佛教的信奉, *Xinxiang xueyuan xuebao* 新鄉學院學報 32.7 (2015), pp. 29–32.

⁵¹ *Da Song Seng shi lue* 大宋僧史略, *T.*, vol. 54, no. 2126, j. B, p. 246A19–20; j. C, p. 250B11; *Fozu tongji*, j. 40, p. 372C1–2.

⁵² Tang Yijie states that monks who held the post were responsible not for all members of the capital’s clergy, but only for the affairs of their home monasteries or for specific acts of “merit”; “Gongdeshi kao: du *Zizhi tongjian* zhaji,” p. 62.

in fact. In 788, Dezong established the posts of commissioner of merit for the streets of the left and right 左右街大功德使 and commissioner for the eastern capital 東都功德使.⁵³ From this time on, these seem to have become regular appointments, increasingly held by eunuchs with a concurrent affiliation to the Palace Guard.⁵⁴ Commissioners at this time were responsible only for members of the Buddhist clergy, but in 807, supervision of Daoist priests and nuns also moved under their control. In 809, a commissioner of merit was even appointed to attend specifically to the activities of the Uyghur Buddhist clergy in Luoyang and Taiyuan.⁵⁵ Throughout, the recurring concern of commissioners was the registration and examination of clergy, and the supervision of monastic construction and scriptural translation (though many also supported such projects themselves). Here is further evidence that the state conceived of merit-making as a material activity, and so sought to bring it under the scope of imperial regulation.

The Legitimacy of Merit

As successive emperors in the eighth and early-ninth centuries intervened in the discourses and practices of merit, the material costs of their policies put them in tension with the state's secular role to protect the common weal. So although material, utilitarian understandings of merit were widely held, they also faced increasing challenge. Merit-making activities on behalf of the emperor and his family were accompanied by a particular sense of unease. This led to attempts to distinguish between the legitimacy of different understandings of merit. Such attempts were often framed in the language of orthodoxy.

Already in *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* we find a distinction between material offerings and the charitable state of mind in which those offerings were made. Merit was seen to derive above all from that state of mind, which the layperson might develop through acts of donation.⁵⁶

⁵³ Tsukamoto Zenryū suggests that a good harvest that year and the sustained influence of the Buddhist church over society at large produced this shift in imperial policy. Ro Jaesong further identifies possible causes in a growth in Dezong's faith in Buddhism during his reign and, more immediately, the revolt of the cleric Li Guanghong 李廣弘 in 787. See Tsukamoto, "Tō chūki irai no Chōan no kudokushi," pp. 395–96; Ro, "Tō Tokusō to kudokushi," p. 21.

⁵⁴ For the role of eunuchs in the Tang imperial court's relations with the Buddhist church, including in their function as commissioners for merit, see Liu, *Zhonggu de Fojiao yu shehui*, pp. 60–70; Liu, "Cong gongdeshi yizhi kan Tangdai huanguan dui Fojiao de xinfeng," pp. 29–32.

⁵⁵ WYH 468, p. 2b; cf. Bai, *Bai Juyi ji* 57, p. 1225.

⁵⁶ Chinese translations of *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* were made in the mid-6th and mid-7th cc.: *Apidamo jushe shilun* 阿毘達磨俱舍釋論, trans. Paramārtha 真諦, *T.*, vol. 29, no. 1559, esp. j. 13, p. 251B3–21; *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論, trans. Xuanzang 玄奘, *T.*, vol. 29, no. 1558, esp. j. 18, p. 97A20–B8.

Elsewhere, offerings made out of a desire to help others stood in contrast with those made for personal gain and in the expectation of recompense; merit could only be accrued through the former.⁵⁷ The same basic understanding of merit perhaps explains emperor Ruizong's insistence on August 18, 710, that members of the clergy should rigorously observe moral precepts and not "falsely claim merit 假託功德."⁵⁸

The merit-making policies of successive rulers in the eighth and ninth centuries came under similar scrutiny. Some arguments set Buddhist construction in opposition to the values of the Confucian canon, which might "stimulate moral transformation and establish principles" and serve as "the roots of exercising governance and nurturing people."⁵⁹ Others argued from within a framework of Buddhist discourse by questioning the efficacy of imperial patronage of the Buddhist church that was merely material, though they too noted its devastating effects on the people of the state. In 700-701, for example, Li Qiao 李嶠 (644-713) presented a remonstrance against Wu Zetian's plans to construct a large statue of the Buddha on White Horse Slope 白馬阪, north of Luoyang. He argued that "dharma-sovereigns" and bodhisattvas sought only to benefit sentient beings, and that the alleviation of the sufferings of the common people "accords with the buddhas' mind of compassion 順諸佛慈悲之心." As a corollary, Li suggested that such moral exemplars attached no importance to construction. He estimated that present plans for a Buddha statue would cost over 170,000 taels of cash, funds better spent on supporting the large number of people who currently faced destitution. For Li Qiao, the "merit would be limitless 功德無窮" if Wu Zetian were to show compassion through such means.⁶⁰

In 708, Lü Yuantai 呂元泰 (fl. 705-708) served as a commandant of the county of Qingyuan 清源 in the northern region of Bingzhou 并州, in present-day Shanxi. He submitted to the throne a memorial against the widespread construction of Buddhist temples at the time. Much like

⁵⁷ In the 5th- or 6th-c. apocryphon *Foshuo xiangfa jueyi jing* 佛說像法決疑經, for example; *T.*, vol. 85, no. 2870, esp. p. 1338b22-c2; discussed in Kieschnick, *Impact of Buddhism*, p. 217.

⁵⁸ The context of his edict suggests that emperor Ruizong intended to direct this injunction specifically at members of the clergy who had not registered through official channels. *WYTH* 465, pp. 5a-6b, esp. 6a; Song and Song, eds., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 110, p. 571.

⁵⁹ See, e.g., Wei Zhigu's remonstrance against the construction of the Observatory of the Gold Immortal Princess and the Observatory of the Jade Perfected Princess in 711. Wei argued that emperor Ruizong's construction of temples in the hope of securing blessings stood in fundamental tension with Confucian doctrine because it had caused the displacement of local people from their homes; *JTS* 98, pp. 3061-62; *THY* 50, pp. 871-72.

⁶⁰ But Li Qiao also acknowledged that even the construction of an image might produce merit if accompanied by charity, compassion, and the achievement of purity; *WYTH* 854, pp. 6a-10b.

Li Qiao a decade earlier, Lü expressed his criticisms in the deliberately chosen language and values of canonical Buddhist doctrine.⁶¹ He associated merit with “the *dharma* of giving,” “the transformative power of compassion and pity,” and “the teaching of equality.” He identified these as the “true doctrines of Śākyamuni 釋氏真教.” By contrast, he argued that “hollow construction” was mere “ornamentation 莊嚴,” which failed to relieve popular hunger and depredation. This was a particular cause for concern for someone like himself, familiar with the hardships endured in the border regions to which he had been posted. Nowhere did Lü reject the value of Buddhist doctrine itself. Instead, the object of his criticism was material expressions of piety that, he claimed, diverged from both “the intention of the Tathāgata’s [doctrine of] equality” and “the grace of Your Majesty’s nurturing spirit.”⁶²

Such distinctions no doubt became more urgent in the post-rebellion period. In the 760s, Chang Gun 常袞 (729-83), a man renowned for his integrity and honesty, faced emperor Daizong’s attempts to divert state funds to the construction of Daoist and Buddhist temples. On November 19, 766, he submitted a memorial arguing for frugality at the imperial court and in the provinces. Chang noted that, despite the devastating effect of ongoing conflict on the people of the empire, “at various shrines and monasteries, *sūtras* are copied and images are fashioned 寫經造像, money is burnt and jade is buried.” For Chang, this served only to enrich members of the Buddhist and Daoist clergy as well as spirit mediums. By contrast, he claimed that the path to limitless “blessings 福” for the inhabitants of the empire lay in a redistribution of resources and a reduction of taxes.⁶³ Similar arguments and rhetoric recurred in the following decades, culminating in a dramatic shift in imperial sentiment and policy in the mid-ninth century.⁶⁴

⁶¹ In particular, Lü Yuantai based his authority on *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*, quoted by a number of scholars in the early-8th c. against a view of merit as material. For contemporary uses of this *sūtra*, including reference to Lü Yuantai, see Yoshikawa, “Futsu wa kokoro ni ari,” pp. 147-51.

⁶² *CFYG* 545, pp. 11a-13a; cf. *THY* 48, pp. 851-52. In 705, Lü Yuantai also presented a statement on contemporary governance under emperor Zhongzong, in which he criticized expenditure on Buddhist construction and ordination by suggesting that it diverged from the Buddhist doctrine of compassion. On July 25, 708, Lü submitted to the emperor a further case against the construction of monasteries at times of military action. See *CFYG* 532, pp. 17b-18a; *ZZTJ* 209, pp. 6622-23; *XTS* 118, pp. 4276-77.

⁶³ *XTS* 150, p. 4809; *ZZTJ* 224, p. 7192.

⁶⁴ Examples include: Li Shuming’s 李叔明 memorial of the fourth lunar month of 778 (*JTS* 127, p. 3579; *THY* 47, p. 837; *XTS* 147, p. 4758); emperor Dezong’s ban on the construction of Buddhist and Daoist monasteries and on the ordination of clergy in 779 (*JTS* 12, p. 321); Pei Boyan’s 裴伯言 demand that monks and nuns of reproductive age be laicized (*XTS* 147, p. 4758); and emperor Xianzong’s restrictions on the extravagant construction of monasteries and temples, issued on February 13, 807, on the grounds that it would ruin the state (*CFYG* 64, p. 15b; 89, pp. 22b-24b).

DISCURSIVE CONTEXTS:

ANTI-BUDDHIST CRITIQUES OF EMPEROR WU

Against this background of the imperial state's intervention in the practices and discourses of merit, we now need to return to emperor Wu of Liang, who appeared time and again as a trope in analyses of the relationship between the state and the Buddhist church. Above all, eighth- and ninth-century accounts of emperor Wu's rule centuries earlier described his ritual activities and material patronage of the Buddhist church. As such, they reflected many of the concerns in contemporary discourses of merit-making in the service of the imperial state. For us, they also supply a second, immediate context to which Shenhui and other exponents of the novel account of emperor Wu's rule had to respond.

By the mid-seventh century, there were already three distinct types of account of emperor Wu's relationship with the Buddhist church.⁶⁵ The first adopted an anti-Buddhist position. It set emperor Wu's religious activities in conflict with his secular duties as emperor and denied him political legitimacy on those grounds. The Buddhist church was seen to have no role in imperial statecraft because it destroyed foundational social relations, undermined the canonical rituals on which the state was based, usurped political authority, and drained financial resources. Second, there was a pro-Buddhist response to these criticisms of emperor Wu, which insisted on the benefits of his religious policies. The seventh-century cleric Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), above all, argued that the emperor's ritual practices and material support for the Buddhist church had resulted in a long and relatively peaceful reign because they had attracted cosmic support for the Liang state. A third type of account celebrated emperor Wu's rule but made little reference to his patronage of Buddhism. Instead, it emphasized his virtues in a mode of imperial rule closely associated with the Confucian canon.

By the early-eighth century, the third account of emperor Wu's rule had faded from view because he now came to be represented almost exclusively as a "Buddhist" ruler. And despite recurring expressions of support for Buddhism's role in imperial statecraft during the eighth and ninth centuries, emperor Wu found no later apologist as vigorous or as powerful as the earlier Daoxuan. It is true that some authors cast the emperor's financial support of the Buddhist church and his propagation of Buddhist learning in broadly positive terms. But theirs were

⁶⁵ An analysis of each type of account appears in Strange, "Representations of Liang Emperor Wu," pp. 53–112.

isolated, scattered voices in an essentially hostile environment. Unlike Daoxuan before them, they did not have emperor Wu's exoneration as their primary agenda; they offered neither a powerful justification of Buddhism's role in statecraft, nor a sustained attempt to rehabilitate the Liang ruler's image as an imperial patron of the Buddhist church.⁶⁶

By contrast, it was the anti-Buddhist accounts of emperor Wu's rule that remained vibrant in the eighth century, no doubt given impetus by the patronage of the Buddhist church under Wu Zetian and emperor Zhongzong. Their authors recycled many of the themes found in earlier discourse. The first point of criticism inherited from the seventh century was that the popularity of metaphysical inquiry during Liang had distracted from the practical business of statecraft, above all from military affairs. Eighth-century critics argued that this had exposed the Liang state to the threat of usurpation.⁶⁷ Emperor Wu therefore served as a minatory example for rulers who might find themselves attracted to metaphysical pursuits in the present. On April 28, 705, for example, Li Yong 李邕 (678–747) remonstrated against attempts by Zheng Pusi 鄭普思 (d. 706), the father of Zhongzong's concubine, to secure imperial favor by claiming command of magic arts, immortals, and the Buddha's *dharma*. In his memorial, Li argued that the Liang ruler, among others, had pursued such "emptiness and delusion 虛妄." By contrast, Li stated, canonical rulers had devoted their energies not to the spirit world, but to managing human affairs.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ For example, Wan Qirong 萬齊融 (fl. 711) praised emperor Wu for exempting from taxation the Monastery of the Sacred Stūpa of King Aśoka, in the eastern coastal region of Wan's native Yuezhou. Emperor Wu appeared as a synthesizer of native and Buddhist learning in *Kaiyuan zhanjing* 開元占經, most likely completed in the early- or mid-720s. In several of his essays included in that work, he combined elements of Chinese cosmography with a loose application of Buddhist imagery and ideas to revive the discredited "canopy-heavens 蓋天" model; he also sought to explain the luminosity of the moon and the planets. In *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄, a bibliographic catalogue of 730, there are references to the Liang ruler's treatment of Buddhist monks with ritual propriety and respect, and to his involvement with scriptural translation projects. In the mid-eighth century, too, a visiting Japanese monk recognized that emperor Wu's veneration of Buddhism had resulted in large numbers of monasteries, which still shaped the landscape. See Wang, *Jinshi cuibian* 108, pp. 31b–36b, esp. 33a and 36a; Qutan Xida 瞿曇悉達, *Tang Kaiyuan zhanjing* 唐開元占經 (SKQS edn.) 1, pp. 22b–23a, 33a–37a; *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄, Zhisheng 智昇, *T*, vol. 55, no. 2154, j. 6, pp. 537A19–21, 537C19–23, 538A5, 538C3–4; and the biography of Kanjin 鑑真 (688–763) in Ominomi Fune 淡海三船, *Tōdai iwajō tōsei den* 唐大和上東征傳 (*Dai Nihon Bukkyō zenshu* 大日本佛教全書 edn.), pp. 117b–18a.

⁶⁷ See, e.g., comments made by the hermit-turned-official Li Bo 李渤 (773–831) in his *Zhenxi* 真系 of 805, in Zhang Junfang 張君房, comp., *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤, Li Yongsheng 李永晟, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003) 5, p. 78; 107, pp. 2331–32. Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933) seems to have drawn heavily on Li Bo's account for his *Shenxian ganyu zhuan* 神仙感遇傳, quoted in Li et al., *Taiping guangji* 15, pp. 104–6, esp. 105 (where Du substitutes "principles of emptiness 空理" for Li's "abstruse principles 元理").

⁶⁸ *CFYG* 544, pp. 16b–17a. Cf. *THY* 67, pp. 1181–82; *ZZTY* 208, p. 6589; Li Yong 李邕,

In their second major point of criticism, eighth-century authors made specific associations between emperor Wu's integration of vegetarian reforms into state ritual and his patronage of the Buddhist church.⁶⁹ They argued that he had violated canonical prescription. Since there were several attempts in the eighth and ninth centuries to introduce similar reforms, emperor Wu became a standard point of reference for the use of vegetarian substitutes at state rituals and public events, when meat would normally have been used.⁷⁰ Authors suggested a connection between such ritual reform and political failure. On an inscription at the Confucius Temple in Chuzhou 處州, for example, the poet and essayist Du Mu 杜牧 (803–852) insisted on the importance of observing ritual regulations to maintaining political and social order. By way of contrast, he echoed earlier claims that vegetarian reforms to Liang imperial ritual had run counter to the prescriptions of the Confucian canon. Emperor Wu therefore appeared in a line of rulers who had been worthy or talented but who had remained “unenlightened 不悟” throughout their lives because of their failure to observe ritual norms.⁷¹

Third, emperor Wu's patronage of Buddhism was seen to have eroded his secular authority. In the early-eighth century, for example,

Li Beihai ji 李北海集 (SKQS edn.) 2, pp. 13a–14a. Similarly, Zhou Tan 周曇, a lecturer at the State Academy, suggested that emperor Wu's rejection of the sensory world and concern with “emptiness 空” during his later years had caused him to fall short of the example of Yao and Shun, and had resulted in his personal downfall; Peng Dingqiu 彭定求 et al., eds., *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979) 729, p. 8361.

⁶⁹ For the establishment of this connection in 6th- and 7th-c. representations of emperor Wu, see Strange, “Representations of Liang Emperor Wu,” pp. 59, 70–71, 93–101.

⁷⁰ For example, comparisons made in the 870s between the Liang ruler and the lay Buddhist devotee and regional military commissioner of Xichuan (present-day Chengdu), Cui Anqian 崔安潛 (*js.* 849), when Cui attempted to replace meat dishes with dough and vegetable replicas at official banquets. The same anecdote tells of Cui's lenience towards monks who had broken the law, a charge also leveled against emperor Wu; Wang Dang 王讜, *Tang yulin jiaozheng* 唐語林校證, Zhou Xunchu 周勛初, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987) 7, p. 652; Sun Guangxian 孫光憲, *Beimeng suoyan* 北夢瑣言, Jia Erqiang 賈二強, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2002) 3, p. 57.

⁷¹ Du Mu 杜牧, *Fanchuan wenji* 樊川文集, Chen Yunji 陳允吉, ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978) 6, p. 105; *WYYH* 846, p. 10a. Most statements of this type date to the early-9th c. For example, Du You 杜佑 (735–812) juxtaposed vegetarian ritual with dynastic usurpation when he commented on two edicts that emperor Wu had issued in 517 to introduce vegetarian reforms to seasonal sacrifices at the imperial ancestral temple. And in his famous “Memorial Discussing the Buddha's Bone” of 819, Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) implied a causal connection between emperor Wu's ritual reforms and his later usurpation and death by starvation, and the fall of the Liang state. See Du You 杜佑, *Tong dian* 通典, Wang Wenjin 王文錦 et al., eds. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 49, p. 1370; Han Yu 韓愈, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 韓昌黎文集校注, Ma Qichang 馬其昶, ed. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986) 8, pp. 612–17. A discussion of earlier articulations of the same criticism appears in Strange, “Representations of Liang Emperor Wu,” pp. 57–60, 67–77, 78–81.

emperor Ruizong used an appraisal of the Liang emperor to question why, when occupying a venerable position, he had chosen to “debase himself and grow so deeply absorbed in the school of Śākyamuni.” Ruizong implied a causal connection with the troubles that had faced the Liang state, and ultimately with emperor Wu’s personal demise, though he also registered a sense of injustice at it all.⁷² This connection between imperial patronage of Buddhism and the collapse of the imperial state assumed a didactic urgency in the insecure political environment of the post-rebellion period, as Tang rule became increasingly decentralized. The most forceful statement was made by Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824). On February 6, 819, emperor Xianzong ordered that a relic, reputedly the finger bone of the Buddha, be brought to the palace for three days of veneration before going on public display at Buddhist temples around Chang’an.⁷³ Han, then vice-minister of justice, responded with a “Memorial Discussing the Buddha’s Bone.” In it, he voiced strident opposition to Buddhism’s role in statecraft. Among other evidence, he identified emperor Wu’s worldly renunciations and personal subservience to the Buddha as a source of Liang decline: the emperor had “devoted himself to Buddhism and sought blessings 求福, but instead incurred disaster.” Han argued that patronage of Buddhism was useless because it failed to ensure political survival. Instead, the lesson of the Liang state showed that it created only disorder and instability.⁷⁴ Though some criticized Han for being superficial in his attacks on the Buddhist church, his basic argument would find expression in representations of emperor Wu that followed for many decades.⁷⁵

⁷² Xu Jian 徐堅 et al., eds., *Chuxue ji* 初學記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962) 9, p. 215.

⁷³ *JTS* 15, p. 466; 160, p. 4198. See also *THY* 47, p. 838. The idea of having the relic brought to the capital had first been proposed by a commissioner for the cultivation of merit; *ZZTJ* 240, p. 7756.

⁷⁴ Han, *Han Changli wenji jiaozhu* 8, pp. 613–14. The importance of emperor Wu to Han Yu’s larger arguments is clear from contemporary and later responses. He himself singled out his representation of the Liang emperor for particular mention when he summarised the contents of his memorial in the preface to a tomb inscription for his daughter, Han Na 韓挈, who was buried on December 16, 823. His contemporary Li Ao 李翱 drew attention to the same passage in a posthumous report of conduct (*xingzhuang* 行狀) for Han Yu. See *ibid.* 7, p. 561; Li Ao, *Li Wengong ji* 李文公集 (SBCK edn.) 11, p. 87b.

⁷⁵ In a quatrain on Jiankang, for example, the poet Hu Zeng 胡曾 (*js.* 860–74) set emperor Wu’s usurpation beside his failure to secure numinous support from the Buddha and “vain” pursuit of a monastic life. Similarly, in his anecdotal collection *Duyi zhi* 獨異志, local official Li Kang 李亢 (fl. 865) represented emperor Wu as obsessed by Buddhist doctrine and, through his worldly renunciations, enslaved to a monastic lifestyle. See Hu Zeng 胡曾, *Xin diao zhu Hu Zeng Yongshi shi* 新彫注胡曾詠史詩 (SBCK *sanbian* edn.) 2, p. 10b; Li Kang 李亢 [*sic*], *Duyi zhi* 獨異志, Zhang Yongqin 張永欽 et al. eds., (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), *j.* A, pp. 2, 24–25 (the orthography of Li’s name here follows the *Baihai* 稗海 edn. of a Jiajing-period manuscript; compare the attribution to Li Kang 李亢 in *XTS* 59, p. 1541).

The fourth, most prevalent, criticism of emperor Wu – also the most relevant for the present paper – was that his expenditure on the Buddhist church had depleted the material strength of the Liang state. In the seventh century, emperor Wu’s critics had claimed that his widespread construction of Buddhist buildings, extravagant ornamentation of temples, and production of Buddhist images had drained Liang’s public resources. The same concerns recurred in the eighth and ninth centuries, at a time when imperial patronage of religious construction projects continued.

On May 2, 711, for example, Ning Yuanti 甯原悌 (644–728), a senior remonstrance official, attacked Daoism and Buddhism for spreading delusion, failing to contribute to society, and doing harm to the common weal. He therefore argued against the widespread construction of temples and the production of images for decoration, which would only drain the resources of the state. The immediate focus of Ning’s comments was the foundation of a Daoist temple that accompanied the ordination of an imperial princess, one of emperor Ruizong’s daughters. He also mentioned the patronage of the Daoist church by Ruizong’s aunts during the preceding reign of emperor Zhongzong. But the historical analogy of emperor Wu’s religious patronage served Ning’s argument, too: it was seen only to have enraged the common people without attracting recompense.⁷⁶

In the ninth century, the same basic argument drew particular notice from men writing in provincial settings, mainly in the east and southeast.⁷⁷ In 809 or 810, the governor of the southern region of Lingnan 嶺南, Yang Wuling 楊於陵 (753–830), issued a request for public donations to fund the construction of a local Buddhist temple. Only two or three years earlier, emperor Xianzong had sought to regulate religious construction projects out of concern for the common weal and Yang now met with protest from Li Ao 李翱 (ca. 772–ca. 841), who had been the long-time beneficiary of Yang’s patronage. Li agreed to pledge his support only if Yang considered it necessary to “levy funds to construct a temple 斂錢造寺.” But if the construction of the temple were not

⁷⁶ *CFYG* 532, pp. 22a–25b, esp. 24b; *THY* 50, p. 871 (which records the author as Ning Tiuyan 甯悌原); *ZZTJ* 210, p. 6659. Yet Shi Chongxuan 史崇玄 (d. 713), the eminent Daoist priest and abbot of Taiqing Monastery, argued the opposite. He claimed that emperor Wu had suffered personal and political collapse as the inevitable result of his failure to maintain support for the Daoist church; Shi Chongxuan, *Yi qie dao jing yin yi miao men you qi* 一切道經音義妙門由起, in *Daozang*, vol. 760, “xu 序,” p. 3b.

⁷⁷ It is likely that this stood in relation to a common concern with nature and fate (*xing ming* 性命) among scholars living in the southeastern part of Tang territory from the late-8th c. This regional intellectual environment makes itself felt in a number of representations of emperor Wu, as we will see, below. See McMullen, *State and Scholars in T'ang China*, pp. 106–7.

essential, then Li warned that it would risk doing damage to canonical moral principles and might also impoverish people who already found themselves in straitened circumstances. Such grave consequences would arrive with little promise of return either, since Buddhism had neither ensured the enlightenment of many of its adherents nor brought real benefit to the state. Emperor Wu's material patronage of Buddhism proved Li's point: it had resulted not in the emperor's emergence as a latter-day Duke of Zhou or Confucius, but in the decline of Liang's sovereign power.⁷⁸

Despite such objections, the Buddhist church continued to profit both from imperial patronage and from donations given by people who were fearful of posthumous punishment for their misdeeds. It is clear that this popular financial support continued even through a succession of severe imperial policies during the 830s and 840s, which sought to curb the wealth of the Buddhist church. In a record of the construction of Hangzhou's 杭州 Southern Pavilion, probably written in the late 840s, Du Mu still noted a proliferation of Buddhist buildings and clergy that resulted from the generous support of people who had sought to "buy blessings 買福" and receive absolution. For Du, this created a strain on the financial stability of both state and society. Again, emperor Wu served as a warning against such trends: Du argued that worldly renunciations and subordination to the Buddhist clergy had turned a clear-sighted and wise ruler into one insensitive to political collapse and vulnerable to deceit.⁷⁹

ANTI-MATERIAL RESPONSES

If we turn finally from these these political and discursive contexts to examine the novel account of emperor Wu's rule that developed in the eighth and ninth centuries, we find basic continuities of themes and phrasing. The authors who endorsed this account shared with their contemporaries a concern with the mechanisms of religious

⁷⁸ Li, *Li Wengong ji* 10, pp. 80b–82a. See also T. H. Barrett, *Li Ao: Buddhist, Taoist, or Neo-Confucian?* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1992), pp. 37–38. For a similar argument later in the century, see Lu Guimeng's 陸龜蒙 (d. ca. 881) poem about Guyuan Monastery 孤園寺, founded during Liang on the slopes of Mount Dongting 洞庭 in the eastern commandery of Wu. For Lu, emperor Wu was an example of how imperial support for Buddhist construction might damage the common weal: "disciples of the Buddha were surfeited with towers and platforms, / While the common folk were left exposed to wind and rain." See Fan Chengda 范成大, *Wujun zhi* 吳郡志 (1229 edn.; rpt. Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970) 34, p. 1b.

⁷⁹ Du, *Fanchuan wenji* 10, pp. 153–54; *WYTH* 834, p. 8a. Modern scholar Wang Xiping 王西平 has dated Du Mu's composition of this record to 847, though his evidence is entirely circumstantial; "Du Mu shiwen xinian kaobian" 杜牧詩文系年考辨, *Xibei daxue xuebao* 西北大學學報 (1986.1), pp. 53–54.

recompense. In particular, they challenged material understandings of merit and they supported the argument that the imperial state ought not to expend resources on material patronage of the Buddhist church. On these grounds, they questioned the legitimacy of emperor Wu's religious practice. They conceded many of the failings of Liang rule that earlier and contemporary anti-Buddhist critics had identified: they acknowledged that emperor Wu's mode of Buddhism had brought no benefit to his state and, at worst, had done real harm to both secular and religious society. But they differed from what I have called the anti-Buddhist position because they still sought to reserve a place for Buddhism in the imperial state. To achieve this, they set emperor Wu's misguided patronage of the Buddhist church in sharp contrast with what they defined as acceptable, orthodox doctrine and practice.

The basic outlines of this argument trace back to the seventh century. In particular, a work titled *Zhongshuo* 中說, a collection of aphorisms attributed (controversially) to Wang Tong 王通 (584–617), attempted to dissociate the foundational intentions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism from their misguided implementation by later ages.⁸⁰ So Liang's political collapse was not blamed on Śākyamuni. On the one hand, Wang suggested that Buddhism, as a foreign doctrine, was not well suited to the political aspirations of Han Chinese rulers. On the other hand, a canonical quotation from the "Xici" 繫辭 commentary on *Zhouyi* 周易 – "The Way should not be practiced hollowly in the absence of the right men [to work out the principles of *Zhouyi*]" – implied that Liang scholars and statesmen had been ill-equipped to interpret Buddhist doctrine and had failed to draw out its potential value.⁸¹

In the eighth and ninth centuries, the basic line of *Zhongshuo*'s argument developed in two directions.⁸² One focused on the moral

⁸⁰ On the composition of this work and the controversies surrounding it, see Wang Yinlong 汪吟龍, *Wen Zhongzi kao xinlu* 文中子考信錄 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1934), pp. 110–11; Yu Jiayi 余嘉錫, *Siku tiyao bianzheng* 四庫提要辨證 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1958) 10, pp. 558–68, esp. 562–66; Yin Xieli 尹協理 and Wei Ming 魏明, *Wang Tong lun* 王通論 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1984), pp. 15–34. A useful survey of the Chinese literature on Wang Tong appears in Li Xiaocheng 李小成, *Wen Zhongzi kao lun* 文中子考論 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2008). See also Howard J. Wechsler, "The Confucian Teacher Wang T'ung 王通 (584?–617): One Thousand Years of Controversy," *TP* 2d ser. 63.4–5 (1977), pp. 225–72; and Ding Xiang Warner, "Wang Tong and the Compilation of the *Zhongshuo*: A New Evaluation of the Source Materials and Points of Controversy," *JAO* 121.3 (2001), pp. 370–90.

⁸¹ Wang Tong 王通, *Wen Zhongzi Zhongshuo* 文中子中說 (Shide tang 世德堂 edn.; rpt. Shanghai: Youwen she, 1914) 4, p. 7b. The quotation from the "Xici" commentary appears in *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 (SSJZS edn.; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003) 8, p. 78a.

⁸² For Wang Tong's positive reception at this time, but particularly in the 9th c., see the

principles of emperor Wu's Buddhism, especially its connection to securing the common weal. It was pursued mainly by scholar-officials in the imperial bureaucracy, who criticized emperor Wu's self-serving attitude to recompense and merit. The other development was framed in metaphysical and epistemological terms. It proceeded from an attempt to distinguish different types of merit in terms of conventional and higher forms of truth, recalling the well-worn doctrine of the Two Truths. It included Shenhui's account of a meeting between emperor Wu and Bodhidharma.⁸³ Advocates of both positions sought to remove the imperial state from its attempts to assert control over merit-making activities. The main differences between the two positions lay in the agendas that motivated them and in the alternatives that each proposed to the state's material patronage of the Buddhist church.

The Moral Argument

In his anecdotal collection *Chaoye qianzai* 朝野僉載, the low-ranking scholar-official Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (ca. 658–ca. 730) gave an account of the construction of a “hall of merit” 功德堂 with an enormous Buddha image drawn in blood. Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義, a monk who was a purported lover of Wu Zetian, was supposed to have commissioned the hall and its image in 695. On the day of the image's public display, the hall burnt to the ground. A day later, a sudden wind also destroyed the image. In an authorial comment on his own anecdote, Zhang used emperor Wu of Liang as an historical analogy to these recent events: the Buddha hall and statue of Liang's Tongtai 同泰 Monastery, the site of the emperor's worldly renunciations, had been similarly destroyed. Zhang attributed this episode to actions that were “outside the normal pat-

works listed in Wechsler, “Confucian Teacher Wang T'ung,” pp. 240–41. One might add to Wechsler's citations the following: Han Yu 韓愈, *Han Changli shi xinian jishi* 韓昌黎詩繫年集釋, Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯, ed. (Shanghai: Gudian wenxue chubanshe, 1957) 7, p. 345; Pi Rixiu 皮日休, *Pizi wensou* 皮子文藪, Xiao Difei 蕭滌非 et al., eds. (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981) 9, p. 88; Sikong Tu 司空圖, *Sikong Biaosheng wenji* 司空表聖文集 (SBCK edn.) 9, pp. 1a–b. Against these expressions of praise, Li Ao offered a critical assessment; Li, *Li Wengong ji* 6, p. 42a.

⁸³ Discussions of merit in the context of the doctrine of the Two Truths recurred in Liang times. For a particularly clear 6th-c. statement of this relationship, see the analysis of Huiyuan's 慧遠 (523–92) *Dasheng yi zhang* 大乘義章 (*T.*, vol. 44, no. 1851), in Adamek, “Impossibility of the Given,” pp. 143–50. For Huiyuan, merit was conditioned and corresponded to conventional truth; wisdom, *prajñā*, corresponded to ultimate truth. The same distinction was of recurring philosophical interest in the 8th and 9th cc. It was common to both the so-called Northern and Southern Schools of *chan* discourse, for example. Shenhui's account of emperor Wu offers a case study from the Southern School. His sectarian opponent, Shenxiu 神秀 (d. 706), also reinterpreted material views of merit in metaphysical terms in his *Guanxin lun* 觀心論, composed between 675 and 700. See McRae, *Northern School*, pp. 199–201; and Yoshikawa's conclusions in his “Futsu wa kokoro ni ari,” pp. 178–81.

tern of things” and counter to the “original intention 本意” of the Buddha. He implied that a corrupt interpretation of fundamental Buddhist doctrine had brought social and political disaster to both emperor Wu and Xue Huaiyi; yet the basic integrity of orthodox Buddhist doctrine remained intact.⁸⁴

What Zhang Zhuo called the “original intention” of the Buddha was, by implication in his anecdote, a proper concern with securing the common weal.⁸⁵ As we have seen, those who challenged material patronage of the Buddhist church also often pointed up the damage that it did to the people of the state. Li Qiao and Lü Yuantai both made this argument early in the eighth century, for example; the likes of Chang Gun followed their lead in the post-rebellion period. Now the same basic premise recurred in accounts of emperor Wu through the idea that compassion for others, *cibei* 慈悲, was both integral to Buddhist doctrine and consistent with the values of the imperial state.

In 700, the statesman Di Renjie 狄仁傑 (630–700) argued the point in response to Wu Zetian’s plans to produce a large statue – the same statue on White Horse Slope that had also drawn Li Qiao’s criticism – by raising money from the donations of the empire’s monks and nuns.⁸⁶ At the heart of Di’s argument was a distinction between extravagant projects of Buddhist construction on the one hand, and both the fundamental tasks of government and the Buddha’s foundational teaching of compassion on the other. For Di, a ruler was obliged to focus on the “affairs of men 人事” and the salvation of the common folk: “if one were to respond to this fundamental mind 本心, then surely one would not wish to have others toil in order to preserve empty ornamentation 虛飾.” In this argument, extravagant material expressions of faith were

⁸⁴ Zhang, *Chaoye qianzai* 5, p. 4a. A study of Zhang Zhuo’s biographical details, with a brief analysis of *Chaoye qianzai*’s composition and textual editions, appears in Zhao Shouyan 趙守儼, “Zhang Zhuo he ‘Chaoye qianzai’” 張鸞和朝野僉載, *Wenshi* 文史 8 (1980), pp. 129–40. Though an early example of its application to emperor Wu’s practice of Buddhism in particular, Zhang Zhuo’s was not a new argument against extravagant financial patronage of the Buddhist church in general. Yan Zhitui 顏之推, for example, had already made a similar point in near-identical rhetoric in the 6th c., when he defended Buddhism’s role in statecraft but criticized the widespread allocation of land to monasteries and the large numbers of ordinations; Yan Zhitui, *Yanshi jiaxun jijie: zengbu ben* 顏氏家訓集解, 增補本, Wang Liqi 王利器, ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996) 5, p. 391.

⁸⁵ Elsewhere, Zhang Zhuo directly described extravagant Buddhist construction that placed a burden on state finances, and deceitful Buddhist practitioners who drained the resources of the common people; Zhang, *Chaoye qianzai* 3, pp. 18a–b; 5, pp. 12b–13a.

⁸⁶ *JTS* 89, pp. 2893–94; *CFYG* 327, pp. 21b–23a, esp. 22b; *ZZTJ* 207, pp. 6549–50. An abridged version of the memorial, omitting reference to emperor Wu, appears in *THY* 49, p. 857. Di Renjie’s rhetoric echoed that of emperor Taizong’s criticisms of Xiao Yu 蕭瑀 (575–648), one of his most senior ministers and a devout Buddhist, in 646; *JTS* 63, p. 2403; *CFYG* 333, pp. 3a–4a; 334, pp. 18a–b; *ZZTJ* 198, p. 6240.

deficient even as acts of Buddhist piety because to sponsor temples in a way that damaged the common weal was to run counter to the central doctrine of compassion. To support his point, Di produced well-worn examples of the Buddhist church's failure to contribute economically and materially to society. Emperor Wu and his successor, emperor Jianwen 簡文, appeared as examples of imperial patrons who had been unstinting in their spending on Buddhist projects, yet the proliferation of Buddhist temples and clergy under their patronage had failed to protect the imperial enterprise or avert disaster.⁸⁷ By analogy, the resources of Wu Zetian's Zhou state were seen to be under a similar strain and the common people would suffer if grand Buddhist construction projects continued. Once the state's resources had run out, there would be no means of securing its political welfare.

Zhuang Zhuo and Di Renjie addressed the value of compassion as either implicit or secondary parts of their arguments. Yao Chong gave the same point fuller and more forceful expression early in the reign of Xuanzong, at a time when the emperor demanded general austerity in the activities of his court. As we have seen, on January 27, 714, Yao remonstrated against the recent production of Buddhist images and, above all, the unregulated ordination of clergy; the immediate context was similar to that of Zhang Zhuo's account of Xue Huaiyi in 695 and of Di Renjie's memorial of 699.⁸⁸ Yao opened his argument with a well-worn distinction between the internal and the external: "the Buddha does not lie without; one seeks him in the mind 佛不在外求之於心."⁸⁹ He therefore urged Xuanzong not to look for external, physical sources of salvation, but to develop his personal morality.⁹⁰ For Yao, the true embodiment of the Buddha – literally, the "Buddha's body 佛身," or

⁸⁷ Zhu Jingze 朱敬則 (635–709), a near-contemporary of Di Renjie, made a similar argument in an undated essay included in *WYYH* 753, pp. 1a–3a.

⁸⁸ *JTS* 96, p. 3023; *THY* 47, p. 837; *CFYG* 313, pp. 1a–b; *XTS* 124, p. 4384 (though without reference to emperor Wu); *ZZTJ* 211, p. 6695.

⁸⁹ *XTS* 124, p. 4384, reads "grows enlightened to 悟," instead of "seeks 求."

⁹⁰ Emperor Xuanzong conspicuously echoed this sentiment and rhetoric in his ban on businesses engaged in copying *sūtras* and casting images, dated September 10, 714. He contrasted the contemporary proliferation of Buddhist monasteries in the two capitals with Buddhist doctrine, which "lies in purity and preserves benefit." In the versions of his edict in *CFYG* and *Tang da zhaoling ji*, he further claimed that practitioners of a corrupted form of Buddhism "do not know at all that the Buddha does not lie without; the *dharma* originally rests in the mind 殊不知佛非在外法本居心." The same rhetoric endured in the 9th c. For example, an anonymous monk from Sheng'an Monastery in Yuezhou, in present-day Hunan, was recorded in a stele inscription of the second decade of the 9th c. as having claimed that the search for enlightenment "is not on the outside 非在外也." See *CFYG* 159, pp. 12a–b; *THY* 49, pp. 860–1; Song and Song, eds., *Tang da zhaoling ji* 113, p. 588; Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元, *Liu Zongyuan ji* 柳宗元集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979) 6, p. 158. See also Yoshikawa, "Futsu wa kokoro ni ari," pp. 113–98.

buddhakāya – was the expression of compassion, so that the common people might be happy and secure. By contrast, the ordination of those whom he labeled treacherous did harm to “the true *dharmā* 正法.”⁹¹ A clear divergence opens up between orthodoxy, defined by Yao according to the fulfilment of certain moral obligations, and a misguided practice of Buddhism, with material concerns that would not benefit statecraft. To support his position, Yao identified historical examples of eminent monks who had failed to rescue states from collapse and of rulers and senior statesmen who had failed to avert disaster despite their patronage of Buddhism. This is where Liang emperor Wu took his place. It is clear from the bare roster of names that all those on Yao’s list, including emperor Wu, had by this time become standard literary tropes who might serve the conventions of parallel prose; the rhetorical type for which they stood was more important than the specific details of their religious patronage.⁹²

Yao Chong’s argument for the importance of securing the common weal in this world over self-serving interaction with the spirit world extended to an agnostic position that cast doubt on the very possibility of spiritual recompense, so central to the material view of merit at this time. In the second decade of the eighth century, he formulated a set of deathbed instructions and admonitions to his descendants that recalled the *jiaxun* 家訓 genre in both rhetoric and function.⁹³ His text also belonged to a broader Tang tradition of expressions of doubt about the afterlife that were made in old age.⁹⁴ But it reflected above all eighth-

⁹¹ There are variants in *XTS* 124, p. 4384: “the principles of the Buddha 佛理” instead of the *buddha-kāya*; and “the genuine doctrine 真教” instead of “the true *dharmā*.”

⁹² The arguments of Di Renjie and Yao Chong, including their critical references to Liang Buddhist policy, appear to have resonated still in the mid-9th c. Both were among four essays that Li Wei 李蔚 (d. 879), a vice-director of the Department of State Affairs, cited in a memorial of 865. Li urged emperor Yizong 懿宗 to keep patronage of Buddhism at a distance from the central concerns of imperial governance. To support his argument, Li similarly claimed that emperor Wu’s political downfall had been a result of the divergence between his particular interpretation of Buddhism and its essential doctrines; *JTS* 178, pp. 4625–27; *THY* 48, pp. 844–45; *CFYG* 553, pp. 6a–8a.

⁹³ The following analysis is based on the version of Yao Chong’s text in *CFYG* 898, pp. 15a–18a. Cf. *JTS* 96, pp. 3027–28; *XTS* 124, p. 4386; *ZZTJ* 212, p. 6747. The *locus classicus* of the *jiaxun* genre is Yan Zhitui’s *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 of the 6th c. Yao Chong’s use of such phrases as *rudeng* 汝等 and *erdeng* 爾等 echoes Yan Zhitui’s *rucao* 汝曹 and *ercao* 爾曹. I am grateful to David McMullen for drawing this verbal parallel to my attention. The title of Yao Chong’s text, “Deathbed Instructions and Admonitions to My Descendants” 遺令誠子孫文, might suggest further antecedents in the genre of “deathbed admonitions 遺誡,” in which an association with frugality in funerary practices recurred in both pre-Tang and Tang times. Eminent members of the Tang Buddhist clergy also composed “deathbed admonitions.”

⁹⁴ On the development of an agnostic position during the period under study, see David L. McMullen, “Li Chou, a Forgotten Agnostic of the Late-Eighth Century,” *AM* 3d ser. 8.2 (1995), pp. 57–105.

century arguments against the efficacy of expending resources on the Buddhist church in the hope of securing blessings from the spirit world. This position was based most often on the value of frugality – resources should be preserved in this world to help the common people – and so the agnostic position operated in a framework of moral calculations.

Yao Chong insisted that extravagant funerary practices were of no concern to the dead, who probably knew nothing of them. Beyond clan and family funerals, he also criticized Buddhist mourning procedures observed by rulers and their consorts.⁹⁵ In this context, Yao revisited the dichotomy between material expressions of piety and the internal cultivation of profound faith, which he had also made in his earlier remonstrance to emperor Xuanzong.

On the one hand, Yao Chong singled out for censure extravagant Buddhist construction, the copying of *sūtras* 抄經, the fashioning and refashioning of images 造像/寫像, and worldly renunciation 施身 in pursuit of other-worldly blessings. For Yao, these were acts of “great delusion 大惑,” which impoverished the common people and brought no posthumous benefit to the dead.⁹⁶ To make his point, he listed a succession of rulers who had patronized the Buddhist church through such activities as monastic construction and scriptural translation. Emperor Wu’s decision to take monastic orders appeared not only to have damaged his person and his reputation, but also to have destroyed his state and his family. Yao linked emperor Wu’s example to the present by extending the list of historical analogues to include the lavish patronage of the Buddhist church under emperor Zhongzong, who “drained the resources of the state in constructing monasteries 傾國造寺.” Yao also included in his criticism Zhongzong’s sister, the Taiping princess, Wu Sansi 武三思, nephew of Wu Zetian and lover of empress Wei 韋, and two other contemporary court ladies “who all had people ordained and monasteries constructed 度人造寺,” yet failed to escape murder and the destruction of their households.

⁹⁵ This brings Yao’s argument within the scope of debates, developed during the 7th c., in which court officials opposed the plans of successive Tang emperors to construct grand mausolea both for themselves and for imperial relatives; *JTS* 72, pp. 2568–70 (cf. Du, *Tong dian* 79, pp. 2144–46; *THY* 20, pp. 393–95; *WYTH* 623, pp. 1a–2b; *CFYG* 542, pp. 26b–29a; *XTS* 102, pp. 3971–72; *ZZTJ* 194, pp. 6114–15); *JTS* 138, pp. 3787–88 (cf. *CFYG* 181, pp. 8b–10a; 328, pp. 8a–b; 334, pp. 20a–21a; *ZZTJ* 230, pp. 7422–24); *XTS* 97, p. 3871 (cf. *ZZTJ* 194, pp. 6122–23). See also *JTS* 63, p. 2396 (cf. *CFYG* 465, pp. 22a–b). The same discourse continued into the 8th and 9th cc.; *JTS* 149, pp. 4011–13 (cf. *THY* 20, pp. 397–98; *CFYG* 552, pp. 5a–7a); Bai, *Bai Juyi ji* 65, p. 1367; and pp. 1365–66 on ritual extravagance more broadly.

⁹⁶ Yao’s qualified statement that material expressions of piety “are called the pursuit of posthumous blessings 名爲追福” seems even to cast doubt on the integrity of such acts.

On the other hand, Yao Chong claimed that Buddhist enlightenment was essentially an affair of morality and of the mind, an argument that he had already made in his earlier remonstrations. He wrote in his deathbed instructions that “the Buddha is enlightenment, which lies in the mind 在乎方寸.” And a little later: “Though the teaching of expedient means has many points of departure, merit 功德 must proceed from the arousal of the mind. Surely no supplementary or auxiliary [cause] would attract a response of recompense? ... Moreover, death is a constant. No one since time immemorial has ever avoided it. So what will be the effect of all the *sūtras* and images that are produced 所造經像?” In contrast with rulers who had patronized Buddhism, Yao pointed to the evidence of pre-Buddhist times to argue that political longevity and popular prosperity were “surely not [the result of] the power of copying *sūtras* or casting images 抄經鑄像之力, or the merit of putting on vegetarian feasts or making donations 設齋施物之功.” Against material acts of piety, Yao set the quality of compassion and the desire to benefit others, which he claimed were characteristic of the Buddha.⁹⁷ He speculated that the Buddha would have neither placed further burden on people who were already impoverished nor offered generous patronage to members of the clergy who were already rich. Using the language of orthodoxy – the “original doctrine of Śākyamuni 釋迦之本法,” the “true doctrine 正法,” and the “true Way 正道” – Yao Chong appealed to the idea that “true” Buddhist practice involved austerity. For his own funerary arrangements, Yao therefore declared himself willing to accept no more than a simplified Buddhism, not the “corrupt doctrine 弊法” embraced by emperor Wu and others whom he had singled out for criticism.

Such appeals to the importance of the moral over the material assumed particular urgency after the rebellions of the mid-eighth century, when difficult financial circumstances made material expressions of piety hard to justify. In 767, as the empire recovered from intense political and economic disturbance, a Buddhist temple was constructed outside the northeastern Tonghua Gate of Chang’an. Its purpose was to furnish “blessings among the shades 冥福” for emperor Daizong’s mother, empress dowager Zhangjing 章敬. The temple was notable for its scale and opulence. Its construction was supposed to have exhausted

⁹⁷ There is a close verbal echo between the phrasing of the version of Yao’s deathbed instructions that appears in *ZZTJ* and that of Xuanzong’s imperial edict of September 10, 714. Yao states that “the Buddha took as his foundation purity and compassion 佛以清淨慈悲爲本”; Xuanzong argues that “the Buddha’s teachings lie in purity 佛教者在于清淨.” Both texts also share a focus on copying *sūtras* and casting images.

the resources of the capital's markets and, when supplies of timber ran low, administrative buildings, the halls of two Daoist temples, and even the confiscated residences of high-ranking officials were dismantled to provide for it. The total cost of the project ran to hundreds of thousands in cash.⁹⁸ In response, Gao Ying 高郢 (740–811), a young scholar from Weizhou 衛州, in present-day Henan, submitted two remonstrations to the throne. In one, written on September 22, he argued that the construction of temples and statues fell short of true filial piety: “I have never heard of a case in which venerating and establishing Brahmā’s palaces [Buddhist temples] or engraving and carving metal and jade has served as an act of filial piety.” So, Gao wrote, emperor Daizong would achieve no substantial merit from the construction of a temple. Instead, he suggested that canonically prescribed rituals were an adequate expression of filial piety and, given the importance of the imperial ancestral temple as a site for traffic with the spirits, urged a rigorous observation of propriety in this regard.

Quoting canonical authorities, Gao Ying further suggested that the Son of Heaven should direct filial sentiments not only to his own parents, but also more broadly to Heaven and Earth, the sovereign ancestors, and the common people. As a corollary, statecraft should properly focus on the common weal and not extravagant construction projects or the pursuit of posthumous blessings, the costs of which would have to be borne by the common people once the state’s coffers were empty. Gao argued that such an outcome would prove especially damaging at present because emperor Daizong’s court had committed to military campaigns and faced the likelihood of a poor harvest.

In the context of this political argument, Gao Ying evoked the precedent of emperor Wu, whom he identified through parallel rhetoric as the antithesis of canonically-endorsed statecraft. Gao established as his model ruler Yu 禹 of antiquity, who “thought little of palace buildings but put every effort into irrigating agricultural land.” As a result, Yu continued to draw popular praise “even to this day,” establishing him as emperor Daizong’s proper exemplar. By contrast, Gao claimed that emperor Wu had “used all [the supplies of] clay and wood, and decorated monasteries and temples,” yet “people have found no reason to praise him.” For Gao, the Liang ruler was a minatory example because he had failed to achieve political security. More than that, his neglect of his fundamental political obligations was seen to be a direct result

⁹⁸ *JTS* 184, p. 4764; *THY* 48, p. 847; *XTS* 207, p. 5685; *ZZTJ* 224, p. 7195. The temple’s construction is dated to 766 in Song Minqiu 宋敏求, *Chang’an zhi* 長安志 (1931 edn.; rpt. Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1970) 10, p. 13a.

of his extravagant patronage of Buddhism and misuse of the resources of his state. The same dangers now suggested themselves to Gao in the mid-eighth century, with Daizong's construction of Zhangjing Temple. Gao therefore concluded that "if Your Majesty were to practice frugality and show affection to the people, you would ride alongside the rulers of Xia. What need then would there be to follow the past ways of [emperor] Wu of Liang, by working the people and having the population toil away?"⁹⁹

But for Gao Ying's careful dissociation of extravagant projects of temple construction from what he claimed as orthodox doctrine, all of this might have sat comfortably with the financial arguments of contemporary anti-Buddhist discourse. Yet Gao expressed no particular skepticism about Buddhism. Instead, he argued that temple construction lacked transcendental power because it was merely a material action and a product of activist concerns. By contrast, for Gao, the doctrinal tradition in whose name the temples were built embraced formlessness and non-action. So he concluded: "Surely Your Majesty should not let his mind surge forward into the realm of action 有爲之境 or solicit blessings from achievements based on physical form."¹⁰⁰ It was ineffective even in moral and sacramental terms to lavish the state's financial resources on Buddhist temples, as emperor Wu had done in the past and as Tang emperor Daizong proposed to do in the present.

In the early-ninth century, Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–850) proposed a similar argument from within the conceptual and rhetorical framework of Buddhist discourse. Despite his public statements of support for imperial control of the Buddhist clergy elsewhere, in an essay on emperor Wu, Li explicitly rejected the need to offer a critique of Buddhism itself. Emperor Wu's actions could be discredited on the grounds of Buddhist doctrine alone, without recourse to other ideological arguments.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ *XTS* 165, pp. 5070–72; *ZZTJ* 224, pp. 7195–96. See also the argument of Gao Ying's second remonstrance, framed as a discussion of "blessings 福"; *XTS* 165, p. 5072; *ZZTJ* 224, p. 7196. Gao Ying's biography in *JTS* (147, pp. 3975–77) includes neither remonstrance. As David McMullen has noted, Gao Ying draws on the language of *Zhouyi* 周易 to make his arguments; McMullen, "Li Chou, a Forgotten Agnostic of the Late-Eighth Century," p. 87.

¹⁰⁰ This appears only in the *Quan Tang wen* version of Gao Ying's remonstrance; Dong et al., eds., *Quan Tang wen* 449, pp. 17a–b. In the late-770s, Peng Yan 彭偃, then vice-director of the Office of Criminal Administration, also claimed that the Buddhist clergy had diverged from the Buddha's original doctrine of non-action; *JTS* 127, pp. 3580–81; *THY* 47, p. 837; *XTS* 147, p. 4758.

¹⁰¹ Li Deyu 李德裕, *Li Wenrao wenji* 李文饒文集 (SBCK edn.), *waiji* 外集, j. 4, p. 15b; *WYH* 747, p. 6a. I have benefited from the analysis of Li Deyu's views on Buddhism in Jovana C. Muir, "Li Deyu (787–850): His Life, Writing and Place in Intellectual History," Ph.D. diss. (University of Cambridge, 1997), esp. pp. 146–65; and Michael Höckelmann, *Li Deyu (787–850): Religion und Politik in der Tang Zeit* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), pp. 61–102. For a reading of this essay, in particular, see *ibid.* pp. 96–99.

People of the current generation are perplexed that [emperor] Wu of Liang's state collapsed and his household fell after he constructed over three hundred Buddhist monasteries. The destruction and calamity were so extreme that they believe the power of Śākyamuni was unable to save him from toppling and imperiling himself. I believe that this was not the case.¹⁰²

With Li Deyu, we are never far from the material effects of religious patronage.¹⁰³ But here Li drew a finer distinction than he did in his other, more conventional writings on the Buddhist church by distancing himself from the “people of the current generation.” In this argument, emperor Wu's act of constructing Buddhist temples in itself did not contribute to his downfall; his abuse of the state's economic resources and the oppression of his subjects are to blame.¹⁰⁴ This distinction proceeds from Li's claim that emperor Wu's patronage of Buddhism in search of “blessings 福” was self-seeking and came at no cost to himself; it was based on sacrifices that he demanded of others. For Li, this ran counter to fundamental tenets of Buddhist doctrine, in which self-sacrifice and renunciation were central to the *pāramitā* of giving.¹⁰⁵ As a result, Buddhism did not appear at fault, but rather the misplaced extremism (and attendant misrule) of the emperor.¹⁰⁶ As a corollary, Li did not suggest that Buddhism had failed to save the Liang state when it finally collapsed – an argument offered by Han Yu and other anti-Buddhist polemicists of the time. Instead, Liang's political downfall appeared to Li to have been a result of its position as “an interregnum dynasty in a marginal place, which could not sustain such mistreatment.”¹⁰⁷ For Li, then, emperor Wu had neither religious nor political legitimacy.

¹⁰² Li, *Li Wenrao wenji, waiji*, j. 4, p. 16a; *WYTH* 747, p. 6a.

¹⁰³ For a sample of Li Deyu's economic arguments against the Buddhist church, see Li, *Li Wenrao wenji*, j. 20, pp. 2b–4b (cf. *JTS* 174, p. 4514); *bieji* 別集, j. 5, p. 7a.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, *waiji*, j. 4, p. 16a; *WYTH* 747, p. 6a. Li Deyu uses the phrase *zhu zhou qi kong* 杼柚其空, an echo from *Shijing*, to describe Liang's economic hardships. In its original context, the phrase contrasts the past prosperity of eastern states with their present poverty and suffering as a result of misgovernment. The allusion is thematically relevant, but also gives Li Deyu's essay endorsement from the Confucian canon; he draws on more than just Buddhist doctrine, despite the claims that he makes in the preface to his essay. See *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (SSJZS edn.; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2003), j. 13A, p. 192c.

¹⁰⁵ Li Deyu's description of the *pāramitā* of giving is textually close to that in *Da fangbian Fo baoen jing* 大方便佛報恩經, *T.*, vol. 3, no. 156, j. 1, p. 127c14–15. But Michael Höckelmann has also identified a reflection of *Avatamsaka-sūtra* here; Höckelmann, *Li Deyu*, p. 98.

¹⁰⁶ Though Li Deyu does not explicitly criticize Buddhism in his essay, his ideological point is not a defence of Buddhism either. Allusions to *Shijing* (see above), *Zuozhuan*, and *Laozi* suggest that the commendable aspects of Buddhist doctrine identified in his essay were also present outside the Buddhist canon. On this point, see *ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ The tendency during Tang was to accord legitimacy to the Northern Dynasties over their political rivals in the south. Li, *Li Wenrao wenji, waiji*, j. 4, p. 16a; *WYTH* 747, p. 6a.

This argument would endure through the ninth century and into the tenth. In 907, for example, Huang Tao 黃滔 (*js.* 895), one of the leading Fujianese scholars of the time, composed an inscription for a sixteen-foot-high metal statue of the Buddha at a temple on Mount Shou. The statue had been ordered a year earlier by Wang Shenzhi 王審知 (862–925), the local military commissioner and a generous patron of the Buddhist church. Though Huang basically affirmed the value of the material patronage of Buddhism for the accumulation of merit, he drew a familiar distinction between the value of such merit in ensuring the welfare of the common people and its misappropriation for purely personal ends. Wang received Huang’s praise for his practice of the former. By contrast, emperor Wu appeared guilty of the latter because “in exalting Śākyamuni’s doctrines, emperor Wu of Liang did not exalt Śākyamuni’s intent. . . . He used the wealth and power of the people [to build] nearly three hundred monasteries. He prayed for meritorious achievements and took delight in virtue, but used them all for his own ends. He wept over his people, without nursing them. He shaved his head and chin to talk about enlightenment.”¹⁰⁸ As a result, emperor Wu’s negligence as a ruler was once again seen to have matched his shortcomings as a Buddhist adherent; he had failed to fulfil both his secular and his religious duties.

The Metaphysical Argument

Members of the Buddhist church also intervened in the debates over emperor Wu and his displays of material patronage. They too sought to dissociate him from what they identified as profound Buddhist principles. Yet their focus was metaphysical. Unlike the various forms of moral argument, which criticized the Liang ruler for his failure to attend to the mundane world, exponents of this metaphysical argument never called into question the value of a concern with the supra-

¹⁰⁸ Huang Tao 黃滔, “Kaiyuan si zhangliu jinshen bei” 開元寺丈六金身碑, in Feng Dengfu 馮登府, ed., *Minzhong jinshi zhi* 閩中金石志 (*Shike shiliao xinbian* 石刻史料新編 edn., Taipei: Xin wenfeng chuban gongsi, 1982) 4, pp. 1a–2b, 5a; Huang Tao, *Puyang Huang yushi ji* 莆陽黃御史集 (Tianrang ge congshu 天壤閣叢書 edn. of 1884; rpt. Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 1967), j. B, pp. 53a–54a, 56b–57a. Huang’s inscription is dated to 907 in idem, *Huang yushi ji* 黃御史集 (SKQS edn.) 8, p. 20a. Albert Welter has identified a parallel to the trope of emperor Wu in a conversation between Wang Shenzhi and the monk Xuefeng Yicun 雪峰義存 (822–908); *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2006), p. 98. On Wang Shenzhi’s patronage of the Buddhist church, see Edward H. Schafer, *The Empire of Min: A South China Kingdom of the Tenth Century* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1954), pp. 91–96; Wang Rongguo 王榮國, “Sui Tang shiqi Fojiao zhu zongpai zai Fujian de chuanbu chutan” 隋唐時期佛教諸宗派在福建的傳布初探, *Xiamen daxue xuebao* 廈門大學學報 (1995.3), pp. 110–14, 120; and Benjamin Brose, *Patrons and Patriarchs: Regional Rulers and Chan Monks during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms* (Honolulu: U. Hawai‘i P., 2015), pp. 26–29.

mundane. Instead, what was at issue here was the means by which one might best gain access to the supramundane. In this argument, material patronage of Buddhism was rejected because it lacked metaphysical force and so failed to generate merit. Though this made an immediate contribution to sectarian debates in the Buddhist church of the eighth and ninth centuries, it also stood in direct relation to the terms of the broader contemporary discourse that we have traced here. It offered a response to anti-Buddhist critiques of emperor Wu's rule, which suggested that he had been too preoccupied by abstract concerns. It countered the long-running argument that emperor Wu's patronage of Buddhism had done financial damage to his state. Above all, it made a pragmatic, political point as both state and church sought to establish their areas of authority, especially over the concepts and practices of merit-making.¹⁰⁹

The most influential form of this metaphysical argument against emperor Wu's interpretation and practice of Buddhism appeared in the various accounts of a meeting between the Liang ruler and Bodhidharma, with which we opened this paper. *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* is the earliest extant text that preserves a version of this anecdote. Its preface dates the work to 733, though the evidence suggests a date of final composition in the mid-740s.¹¹⁰ Emperor Wu had not appeared in earlier accounts of Bodhidharma's evangelizing mission.¹¹¹ And there is no mention of him in biographies associated with early *chan* schools, such as *Chuan fabao ji* 傳法寶紀 and *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記,

¹⁰⁹ It is an assumption of what follows that, as John Jorgensen has noted, "Ch'an Buddhists could not escape the influence of the authoritarian Chinese state, and it is natural that many of their ideas and actions were made in response to it"; "The 'Imperial' Lineage of Ch'an Buddhism," p. 89. See also Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati*, pp. 25–27.

¹¹⁰ There is an obvious discrepancy between the date that Dugu Pei assigns to Shenhui's exposition at Huatai's Dayun Monastery (734) and the date of the preface's composition (733). Hu Shi addressed this problem in his original 1930 edition of the work. In a revised version that appeared in 1968 – the edition used here – Hu redated Shenhui's lecture to February 15, 732. He dated the final composition of *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* to after 744. Chen Shenggang 陳盛港 has since suggested that the text was edited in or shortly after 745. See Hu Shi, *Shenhui heshang yiji* (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1930), pp. 170–71; idem, *Shenhui heshang yiji*, pp. 365–70; Chen Shenggang, "Zailun Dugu Pei zhi *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*" 再論獨孤沛之菩提達摩南宗定是非論, *Foxue yanjiu zhongxin xuebao* 佛學研究中心學報 7 (2002), pp. 115–46, esp. 119–20.

¹¹¹ For example, *Erru sixing lun* 二入四行論, in Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, *Daruma no goroku* 達摩の語錄 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1969), p. 25; Yang Xuanzhi 楊銜之, *Luoyang qielan ji jiaojian* 洛陽伽藍記校箋, Yang Yong 楊勇, ed. (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008) 1, p. 13; and *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 16, p. 551B27–C26. But the 11th-c. *Chuanfa zhengzong ji* 傳法正宗記 preserves excerpts from a stele inscription composed in memory of Bodhidharma. It is attributed to emperor Wu, who is seen to refer to himself as an "ordinary man 一介凡夫." It is possible that the text of the inscription derived from an earlier source, since emperor Wu's collection was still partially extant in Song. See Qisong 契嵩, *Chuanfa zhengzong ji*, *T.*, vol. 51, no. 2078, j. 5, p. 743C3–12.

both written in around the 710s and among the first works to arrange biographies of *chan* patriarchs in sequence.¹¹²

Though there is no conclusive evidence that Shenhui drew on a clear antecedent for his account of emperor Wu, we might at least recognize that his basic thematic concerns had contemporary echoes. As we have seen, the predominant understanding of merit in the eighth and ninth centuries emphasized material expressions of piety. In *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*, the Liang emperor appeared to parade his religious piety by describing his accumulation of merit in exactly the material terms that dominated contemporary discourse and policy. More than that, the likes of Yao Chong and Li Deyu developed the moral argument against emperor Wu's religious patronage by claiming that he had sought personal merit without bringing benefit to others. In *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*, too, the piety on show was explicitly self-serving: emperor Wu was reported to have opened his question with a personal pronoun, *zhen* 朕, emphasizing his concern with the individual, not universal, accumulation of merit.

What set *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* apart from contemporary accounts was Bodhidharma's rejection of a material understanding of merit on the grounds of emperor Wu's "mundane state of mind 凡情." So whereas Yao Chong's support for internal over external conceptions of merit was above all an appeal to moral values, the question of merit in *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* rested on a distinction between different levels of metaphysical insight. Emperor Wu appeared capable of understanding merit only in the conventional terms of the allocation of material resources; it was irrelevant whether or not that allocation was properly directed or well-intentioned. Bodhidharma, by contrast, appeared to be concerned with deeper doctrinal truths, in which all material expressions of merit were useless.¹¹³ This distinction brought emperor Wu's orthodoxy and legitimacy under question. As a corollary, it circumscribed any attempt by the imperial state, as represented by the Liang ruler, to extend its reach beyond the limits of temporal power.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Both were associated with the East Mountain 東山 group of Hongren 弘忍, the purported fifth *chan* patriarch; Du Fei 杜胄, *Chuan fabao ji* 傳法寶紀, *T.*, vol. 85, no. 2838, pp. 1291A27-B3, 1291C6-13; Jingjue 淨覺, comp., *Lenggie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記, *T.*, vol. 85, no. 2837, pp. 1284C21-1285A29.

¹¹³ On the use of oppositions in Bodhidharma's hagiographical tradition, see Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1993), p. 130.

¹¹⁴ This recalls *Foshuo zuo fo xingxiang jing*, p. 788A26-28, in which king Udayana asked what he might hope to gain by producing an image of the Buddha (see above). But the Bud-

To understand what might have motivated this distinctive intervention in contemporary discourse, we need to return to the particular context of the unstable relationship between the Buddhist church and the imperial state during the early-eighth century. Lavish imperial support for Buddhism at the end of the seventh and into the first decade of the eighth century had given way to a strong reaction against the activities of the Buddhist church. Emperor Xuanzong was in power and we have already seen that over the first twenty years of his rule he ordered the laicization of members of the clergy, banned the construction of new monasteries, forbade laypeople to cast statues of the Buddha, and prohibited the laity from copying *sūtras*. In proposing such policies, Xuanzong no doubt drew support from contemporary anti-Buddhist polemic, particularly on the financial damage done to the state by a powerful Buddhist church. But he also adopted the arguments of those who sought to embed what they defined as orthodox Buddhist doctrine in the imperial state, and who even appealed to Buddhist canonical authorities to do so.

Shenhui and his disciples had to find a way to extricate themselves from this unsympathetic and restrictive political environment if they were to survive where exponents of other schools had foundered. Their account of how Bodhidharma had rejected emperor Wu's overtures could stand as a general assertion of the Buddhist clergy's independence, especially its financial independence, from the imperial state. More immediately, it reflected an attempt to escape the increasingly strict state supervision imposed by Xuanzong's recent policies. There can be little coincidence, then, that the religious practices targeted by Xuanzong were precisely those that Bodhidharma was seen to reject with such force in *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*.¹¹⁵

dha's insistence that the king might expect extensive "blessings and assistance 福祐" was at a far remove from the Bodhidharma's response to emperor Wu.

¹¹⁵ Elsewhere in *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*, Shenhui made recurring appeals to *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*, used by others in the 8th c. to reject material understandings of merit. Shenhui's recourse to the authority of this text, over that of *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, has been commonly presented as central to his challenge to the so-called Northern School (though such an account has also been questioned). It is significant for the present paper that Shenhui claimed the merit obtained by lay believers who held faith in *Vajracchedikā-sūtra* would be "unfathomable" and that its recital and explication were preferable to, among other things, "using all the jewels to construct a seven-jewel *stūpa* 造七寶塔 that would reach the *Brahmā* Heaven" or obtaining merit by making offerings to buddhas. See *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*, pp. 296–309, esp. 299, 303–4, 306–7. Yet John McRae was right to point out the ironies that run through Shenhui's position in the light of his later fundraising activities; "Shenhui as Evangelist: Re-envisioning the Identity of a Chinese Buddhist Monk," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 30 (2002), pp. 134–38, esp. 137 for the account of the encounter between emperor Wu and Bodhidharma.

Shenhui does not seem to have found any immediate success in his attempt to promote a metaphysical conception of merit-making over a material and imperially-focused one. The imperial state made no clear concession to the metaphysical authority of the Buddhist church. The membership of the so-called Northern School, the target of Shenhui's reforms, continued to grow into the 770s. Meanwhile, the representation of emperor Wu in *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* initially disappeared from view.

Yet from at least the early 770s, the core characteristics of *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun*'s account found themselves recycled in a number of texts, all affiliated with the ideologies and practices of various *chan* lineages.¹¹⁶ It was precisely at this time that, as we have seen, the state renewed its attempts to assert its control over material expressions of merit. This is reflected, for example, in the increasing prominence of commissioners of merit under emperors Daizong and Dezong. It culminated in Dezong's ban on the construction of Buddhist and Daoist monasteries and the ordination of clergy shortly after his accession to the throne in 779.¹¹⁷ So it is tempting to identify a connection between shifts in imperial policy and a revival of accounts of an exchange between emperor Wu and Bodhidharma, with their common scrutiny of material forms of merit-making.

In 771, for example, the eminent scholar Dugu Ji 獨孤及 (725-777) composed a stele inscription for a *stūpa* erected at Shan'gu 山穀 Monastery in Shuzhou 舒州, in the southeast, where he served as prefect. The *stūpa* was to house the cremated remains of the third patriarch of *chan* schools, Sengcan 僧璨 (d. 606). In his inscription, Dugu traced the transmission of Buddhist doctrines from Han times to emperor Wu. He argued that people of this period had been misguided in their understandings of the "ultimate truth 第一義諦": preoccupied by the idea of attracting recompense, they had concerned themselves exclusively with material and ritual acts, but had ignored crucial meditation (*chan*) practices. For Dugu, the appearance of Bodhidharma had decisively changed the situation, though "out of mistrust, people still did not

¹¹⁶ Sekiguchi Shindai 關口真大 has collated the various anecdotal accounts of Bodhidharma's meeting with emperor Wu in tabular form in *Daruma no kenkyū* 達摩の研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1967), esp. pp. 112-23. I have collected the anecdotes afresh, though, and so the references that follow are to the individual works in which they appear, not to Sekiguchi's collation.

¹¹⁷ On Dezong's early initiatives to curb the influence of the Buddhist church, see Weinstein, *Buddhism*, pp. 89-94. Evidence that these anti-Buddhist policies were felt in the provinces suggests itself to Glen Dudbridge in *Religious Experience and Lay Society in Tang China* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995), p. 85.

give due consideration to [his teachings].”¹¹⁸ Immediate concerns no doubt shaped these arguments. Dugu composed his inscription only four years after emperor Daizong himself had questioned (but then apparently accepted) the Buddhist concept of recompense. Dugu’s inscription, by contrast, elevated the metaphysical over the material and so safeguarded Buddhism’s claims to metaphysical efficacy from such criticisms as Daizong’s. It was consonant, too, with a recurring interrogation of questions of nature and fate, *xing ming* 性命, that Dugu and his fellow scholar-officials in the southeast expressed elsewhere.¹¹⁹

Also in the 760s or early in the 770s, *Xiguo Fozu daidai xiangcheng chuanfa ji* 西國佛祖代代相承傳法記 drew not just on the general arguments of *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* but also on its narrative detail. Its version of the meeting between emperor Wu and Bodhidharma has been preserved in *Naishō Buppō sōjō kechimyaku fu* 內證佛法血脈譜, dated to 819 and attributed to Saichō 最澄 (767–822), the founder of the Japanese Tendai lineage who traveled to the southeastern part of Tang territory in 804 and 805.¹²⁰ *Xiguo Fozu daidai xiangcheng chuanfa ji* developed the version of the anecdote found in *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* by stressing the extent of both emperor Wu’s devotion and his delusion. The Liang ruler appeared to seek out Bodhidharma and to extend him a personal greeting on arrival in the capital. This echoed

¹¹⁸ WYTH 864, p. 7b; Dugu Ji 獨孤及, *Piling ji* 毘陵集 (SBCK edn.) 9, p. 9a. The date of 771 is given in Nianchang 念常, comp., *Fozu lidai tongzai* 佛祖歷代通載, *T.*, vol. 49, no. 2036, j. 14, p. 603A26–29. Jinhua Chen examines this inscription’s role in establishing Sengcan’s reputation. He touches on Dugu Ji’s sympathetic relationship with Buddhism and the type of *chan* represented by Shenxiu in the capital, drawing on this inscription for indirect support; Chen, “One Name, Three Monks: Two Northern Chan Masters Emerge from the Shadow of Their Contemporary, the Tiantai Master Zhanran 湛然 (711–782),” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22.1 (1999), pp. 11–29. See also Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū* 初期禪宗史書の研究 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1967), pp. 324–25.

¹¹⁹ David McMullen has noted Dugu Ji’s interest in Buddhism, despite his Confucian commitments and even a connection with Han Yu; McMullen, “Historical and Literary Theory in the Mid-Eighth Century,” in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the Tang* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1973), p. 312. For Dugu Ji’s interest in *xing ming*, see Dugu, *Piling ji* 17, pp. 7b–8b; 19, pp. 4a–5a; 20, pp. 5a–6a.

¹²⁰ Saichō 最澄, *Naishō Buppō sōjō kechimyaku fu* 內證佛法相承血脈譜, in Tendaishū shūten kankōkai 天台宗宗典刊行會, comp., *Dengyō daishi zenshū* 傳教大師全集 (Tokyo: Tendaishū shūten kankōkai, 1912), vol. 2, p. 6. On Saichō’s relation to the Bodhidharma lineage, see Pei-yin Lin, “Precepts and Lineage in Chan Tradition: Cross-Cultural Perspectives in Ninth Century East Asia,” Ph.D. diss. (University of London, 2011), pp. 147–84, esp. pp. 175–77 for a sketch of the place of *Naishō Buppō sōjō kechimyaku fu*. See also Ibuki Atsushi 伊吹敦, “Saichō ga tsutaeta shoki zenshū bunken ni tsuite” 最澄が伝えた初期禪宗文獻について, *Zen bunka kenkyūsho kiyō* 禪文化研究所紀要 23 (1997), pp. 152–60. Yet Jinhua Chen has argued that this text was altered after Saichō’s death and, as a result, we can only securely use it as evidence of opinions in the period that immediately followed Saichō’s death; Chen, “The Construction of Early Tendai Esoteric Buddhism: The Japanese Provenance of Saichō’s Transmission Documents and Three Esoteric Buddhist Apocrypha Attributed to Śubhākarasiṃha,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 21.1 (1998), pp. 21–76.

the idea expressed in earlier representations of emperor Wu, particularly anti-Buddhist representations, that the Liang ruler had subordinated himself to the Buddhist clergy.¹²¹ The text further emphasized emperor Wu's material expressions of piety: he now appeared to have "widely" constructed temples, ordained people, copied *sūtras*, and cast images. Finally, *Xiguo Fozu daidai xiangcheng chuanfa ji* was stronger than the ancestral *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* in its language of orthodoxy. It distinguished between "true merit 實功德," and emperor Wu's conventional piety, which Bodhidharma was seen to refer to as a mere "conditioned thing 有爲之事."¹²²

This version of the anecdote was preserved with minor variation in *Lidai fabao ji* 曆代法寶記, composed by a member of the Bao Tang lineage in Jiannan 劍南, in present-day Sichuan, between about 774 and 781.¹²³ Many of the textual innovations of *Xiguo Fozu daidai xiangcheng chuanfa ji* found themselves recycled and even expanded. *Lidai fabao ji* carried reference to the emperor's personal greeting to Bodhidharma, and had Bodhidharma articulate a similar distinction between "real merit" (*zhen gongde* 真功德 in this version) and piety that was merely "conditioned" (here, *youwei zhi shan* 有爲之善). *Lidai fabao ji*'s version of the anecdote further introduced the emperor's interest in the active conversion of his subjects to Buddhism. With echoes of the famous exchange between king Hui of Liang 梁惠王 and Mencius, emperor Wu was supposed to have asked Bodhidharma: "what teachings and doctrines have you brought from your state to convert the multitudes

¹²¹ For a particularly powerful criticism of this sort, see the 6th-c. statement offered by Xun Ji 荀濟 in *Guang hongming ji*, j. 7, p. 129A8-12.

¹²² *Naishō Buppō sōjō kechimyaku fu*, p. 6. It is tempting to see in this phrasing a continuity with references to "conditioned" or "activist" forms of merit that appeared in contemporary political discourse. (One example, among many, is Gao Ying's remonstrance of 767, sampled above.) But the distinction was also commonplace in Buddhist texts of the 8th and 9th cc. and so this need not have been a direct response to those who advocated imperial control of merit-making activities. One near-contemporary parallel is particularly relevant to the present argument. In an appraisal of Zhiyi 智顛, the purported founder of the Tiantai lineage, the 8th-c. monk Faxian 法銑 (718-78) listed examples of Zhiyi's "conditioned merit 有爲功德": "he constructed 36 temples, [produced] 15 copies of the canon, personally ordained over 14,000 monks, fashioned 80,000 sandalwood, gold, bronze, or plain paintings or statues [of the Buddha], transmitted [his teaching] to 32 disciples, and caused countless others to receive the Dharma and cultivate themselves"; Guanding 灌頂, *Sui Tiantai Zhizhe dashi biezhuan* 隋天台智者大師別傳, T., vol. 50, no. 2050, p. 197C26-29.

¹²³ *Lidai fabao ji* 曆代法寶記, in Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, *Shoki no zen shi* 初期の禪史 (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1976), vol. 2, p. 68. Yanagida Seizan traces the early textual history of *Lidai fabao ji* in *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū*, pp. 278-92; on its dating, see esp. p. 279. See also Yanagida Seizan "The *Li-tai fa-pao chi* and the Ch'an Doctrine of Sudden Awakening," in Whalen Lai and Lewis R. Lancaster, eds., *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1983), pp. 13-49; and Wendi Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2007).

of sentient beings?” Bodhidharma was seen to have responded that he had not “brought a single word of teaching,” distancing himself from this project as he was later seen to have distanced himself from all of the Liang ruler’s purported attempts to have Buddhist doctrine and practice serve his own ends.¹²⁴ This version hinted at a political slant to emperor Wu’s religious agenda: the unification of his state under a single religious creed. It was a message that recurred in the inclusive, syncretic tendencies of eighth-century discourse and state policy.¹²⁵ Yet in *Lidai fabao ji* this agenda was seen to stand in tension with Bodhidharma’s insistence on remaining independent from the political concerns of state.

An elaboration of the anecdote appeared in *Baolin zhuan* 寶林傳.¹²⁶ The exact circumstances of this work’s composition are unclear, though it seems to have held an affiliation with the lineage of Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788) in Hongzhou 洪州, in present-day Jiangxi and Hunan. It was most likely composed around the turn of the ninth century.¹²⁷ In it, the anecdote began to take on the look of an historical document, with all of its attendant authority. For the first time, Bodhidharma’s arrival in Liang territory was given a firm date: October 31, 527. It now had a sharp geographical focus, too. Bodhidharma was reported to have arrived in Guangzhou 廣州, before traveling north to Jiankang ten days

¹²⁴ In the same vein, Bodhidharma’s rejection of emperor Wu’s piety was strengthened in *Lidai fabao ji* by the insertion of an adverbial particle, *bing* 並 (“You have *absolutely* no merit”), which is absent from both *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* and *Xiguo Fozu daidai xiangcheng chuanfa ji*.

¹²⁵ Tejima Isshin has identified evidence for syncretism in merit-making activities of the early-8th c.; “Kudoku to hō no ichi kōsatsu,” pp. 235–39. Several exponents of what I have called the moral argument suggested an equivalence of Confucian and Buddhist values. There were also statements of this idea in versions of the metaphysical argument. For example, the Sichuanese monk Shenqing 神清 (d. 814) drew the relationship between Confucianism and Buddhism in the rhetoric of “conventional truth 俗諦” and “absolute truth 真諦,” which also shaped contemporary accounts of the meeting between Bodhidharma and emperor Wu. Shenqing criticized emperor Wu’s rejection of a catholic religious policy, in which there was a place for both truths. For Shenqing, this had prevented the Liang ruler from “arriving at a greater way of doing things by becoming a scholar of superior attainments.” Shenqing acknowledged that emperor Wu had shown the “utmost faith” in Buddhism, yet argued that his expressions of piety did not accord with the principles on which profound faith was based and which the Buddha had demonstrated in his own practice, *Beishan lu*, j. 9, p. 628A6–14, B14–15, B23–C11.

¹²⁶ *Baolin zhuan* 寶林傳 (*Songzang yizhen* 宋藏遺珍 edn.) 8, pp. 1b–3b.

¹²⁷ The Hongzhou lineage traditionally claimed as its founder Nanyue Huairang 南嶽懷讓 (677–744), a disciple of the fifth Chinese patriarch Hui’an and of Huineng; Jing 靜 and Yun 筠, *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 (1245 edn.; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1994) 3, pp. 21b–23a; *Song Gaoseng zhuan*, j. 9, p. 761A11–B12. Tokiwa Daijō 常盤大定 has offered a detailed study of *Baolin zhuan*. He attributed its compilation to an obscure monk, Zhiju 智炬, and dated it to 801. Yanagida Seizan and John Jorgensen have since offered a more complex picture of both authorship and date. See Tokiwa Daijō, *Shina Bukkyō no kenkyū* 支那佛教の研究 (rpt. Tokyo: Shunjūsha Shōhakukan, 1943), vol. 2, pp. 203–326; Yanagida, *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū*, pp. 351–65; Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, pp. 644–49.

later, under orders from emperor Wu.¹²⁸ There were possible regional interests at work here: as its title suggests, *Baolin zhuan* carried explicit connections with Baolin Monastery in Shaozhou 韶州, in present-day Guangdong, a region also associated with Shenhui's purported teacher, Huineng. Bodhidharma's connection with the same region would have lent authority to immediate sectarian arguments in the context of the regionalism that dominated the late-eighth and ninth centuries. More generally, this account may have been influenced by the contemporary intellectual atmosphere of the southeast, where interior questions on such themes as human nature and fate had drawn scholars' notice since the late-eighth century and, as we have seen, shaped their discussions of merit.¹²⁹

Elsewhere in *Baolin zhuan's* account, emperor Wu's question about the doctrines with which Bodhidharma intended to convert the Liang populace was omitted. This was balanced by the addition of a prophecy of Bodhidharma's arrival, rich with symbolic detail. A record of a conversation between the eminent Liang cleric Baozhi 寶誌 and emperor Wu, set after Bodhidharma's departure from Liang territory, also made its first appearance in the sequence of versions of this anecdote. It confirmed the emperor's error in dismissing Bodhidharma from his court and pointed up his ignorance of Buddhist doctrine and of the "Buddha-mind 佛心" – as the Hongzhou author of this account would have defined it, at least.¹³⁰

Finally, the anecdote was recycled in *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經, which purported to record sermons given by Huineng at the otherwise unidentified Dafan 大梵 Monastery in Shaozhou.¹³¹ The whole meeting

¹²⁸ *Baolin zhuan*, j. 8, p. 1b.

¹²⁹ There are problems with these details of time and place, though. Particular tensions emerge when the anecdote is compared to Daoxuan's biography of Bodhidharma in *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* (and confirmed by circumstantial evidence in that text's biography of Sengfu 僧副), which claims that he arrived in China during the earlier Song dynasty (420–479). This has drawn the notice of Hu Shi and Sekiguchi Shindai. Hu concludes that Bodhidharma arrived in Guangzhou in around 470 and traveled north, where he remained for about fifty years; Hu, "Putidamo kao" 菩提達摩考, in *Hu Shi wencun sanji* 胡適文存三集 (Shanghai: Yadong tushuguan, 1930), vol. 2, j. 4, pp. 449–65, esp. 463. See also Sekiguchi, *Daruma no kenkyū*, pp. 116–17.

¹³⁰ *Baolin zhuan* 8, pp. 3a–b. A similar representation of the relationship between Baozhi and emperor Wu appeared in an anecdote in Fan Shu's 范攄 late-9th-c. *Yunxi youyi* 雲谿友議 (Shanghai: Gudian wenzue chubanshe, 1957), j. C. p. 71.

¹³¹ Yampolsky, *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, pp. 15–16 (critical text); for Yampolsky's translation, see *ibid.* pp. 155–56. *Liuzu tanjing* presents problems of dating and authorship: different textual strata and amendments have been dated between the early-8th and the early-9th cc. John Jorgensen has reviewed the current state of evidence available to us but, as Philip Yampolsky noted, this evidence allows no resolution of the issue. It need not detain us here beyond the basic suggestions that the text descended from *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* and dates to the period under present study. A sample of contributions to the debate over

now appeared in the context of a conversation between Huineng and the local prefect. The core account of the meeting itself was terse and appeared to have a closer filiation to *Putidamo Nanzong ding shifei lun* than to later versions. The framing conversation served as a commentary on the anecdote and advanced its central theme by setting up more powerfully than ever a dichotomy between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. In short: emperor Wu claimed to have pursued material trappings of piety “for his whole life,” a stronger statement than in earlier anecdotes of the Liang ruler’s patronage of Buddhism. Yet this was cast as “a heterodox way 邪道”; emperor Wu had failed to recognize “true doctrine 正法.” He further appeared to have been concerned with the pursuit of merely personal blessings – the phrase *zhi shi* 只是 denoted the limitation – not with the embodiment of Buddhist doctrine, the *dharmakāya* 法身.¹³² His blindness to “true principles 正理” rested on this distinction. There was also a distinction drawn in *Liuzu tanjing* between external manifestations of belief on the one hand, and self-reflection, self-cultivation, and the silent transmission of the “heart-seal” on the other. Here, too, a comprehension of “true principles” was seen to be at stake. All this no doubt sharpened the Liang emperor’s role in the deepening schisms between different lineages of *chan* ideology and practice. Yet, as we have seen, in the context of *Liuzu tanjing*’s composition there was already well-worn discourse surrounding emperor Wu, which stressed a basic dichotomy between an orthodoxy that pre-

dating and authorship includes: Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽, *Zenshū shi kenkyū* 禪宗史研究 (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1941), vol. 2, pp. 117–72; Hu Shi, “An Appeal for a Systematic Search in Japan for Long-hidden T’ang Dynasty Source-Materials of the Early History of Zen Buddhism,” in *Bukkyō to bunka: Suzuki Daisetsu hakushi shōju kinen ronbunshū* 佛教と文化, 鈴木大拙博士頌壽記念論文集 (Tokyo: Suzuki gakujutsu zaidan, 1960), p. 20; Yanagida, *Shoki zenshū shisho no kenkyū*, pp. 181–212; Yampolsky, *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, pp. 89–90; Jorgensen, *Inventing Hui-neng*, pp. 596–604. On Dafan Monastery, see Zhang Xijing 張希京, *Qujiang xian zhi* 曲江縣志 (1875 edn.; rpt. Taipei: Chengwen chubanshe, 1967) 16, p. 10b. Yampolsky was right to draw attention to the factual errors in this source, which undermine its credibility; *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p. 93, n.14.

¹³² *Liuzu tanjing* is the first extant text in which reference to “distributing alms and making offerings 布施供養” appears among the list of emperor Wu’s “merits.” They are what Huineng identifies as “merely cultivating blessings 只是修福.” But the phrase “distributing alms and making offerings” also echoes Huineng’s “Verse on Formlessness” 無相頌, which immediately precedes the anecdote about emperor Wu in *Liuzu tanjing*. In this verse, there is a similar distinction between superficial and deeper forms of faith. On the one hand, “foolish people cultivate blessings 修福 without cultivating ethical conduct / Yet claim that to cultivate blessings *is* [ethical conduct]. / Though [they may think that,] through alms-giving and offerings 布施供養, blessings will be limitless, / The three *karmas* have been created in their minds all along. / So if one wishes to absolve oneself of wrongdoing by cultivating blessings, / Even if one obtains blessings in later lives, the wrongdoing will still remain.” On the other hand, “if one awakens to the Great Vehicle and truly repents, / By ridding oneself of evil and practicing what is true, one will come to be without wrongdoing”; Yampolsky, *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p. 15. I have benefitted here from Yampolsky’s translation at *ibid.*, pp. 154–55.

scribed universal compassion and a heterodox interpretation of merit that was materially-focused and self-serving.

There was some degree of give and take in the detail of these later versions of the anecdote, but they were all consistent in representing emperor Wu as misguided in his belief that material displays of piety might constitute true religious merit. Successive versions tended to gain in minor circumstance, which strengthened the weight of criticism against this understanding of merit. But the basic stability of the later anecdotal tradition suggests that it had finally begun to achieve its purpose: there was little need for radical adaptation to ensure its relevance and argumentative force in the intellectual environment of the time.

We can judge the success of this political and ideological project by at least the early-ninth century from the fact that even such a well-informed critic of *chan* ideologies as Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819) accepted without comment the accounts of a meeting between Bodhidharma and emperor Wu. Liu did not question, either, their basic opposition between conventional, activist mode of religious practice – Liu referred to emperor Wu’s “karmically conditioned acts 有爲” in terms that resonated beyond Buddhist discourse – and unmediated enlightenment represented by the ideal of “non-action 無爲.”¹³³

The same trope spread outside Tang territory, too. One example appeared in a stele inscription written by the Silla scholar-official Gim Young 金穎 on October 11, 884, to commemorate the third Silla *seon* (*chan*) patriarch, Bojo Chejing 普照體澄 (804–880). There, emperor Wu served as an analogy for what Gim identified as a general tendency in early-eighth-century Silla to follow Buddhism without comprehension of its foundational doctrines. Like Bodhidharma in his exchanges with the Liang emperor, the first Silla *seon* patriarch and founder of the Mount Gaji 迦智 lineage, Doui 道義 (d. 825), was seen to recognize that the age in which he lived was not ripe for enlightenment and so he took up a life of reclusion.¹³⁴ This account of emperor Wu had developed as an immediate response to the political and sectarian con-

¹³³ In a stele inscription that commemorated emperor Xianzong’s bestowal of a posthumous title on Huineng, Liu Zongyuan made reference to the purported meeting between Bodhidharma and emperor Wu. Though Liu was no doubt simply fulfilling an official duty by writing this inscription, it still suggests his acceptance of Huineng as the sixth Chinese *chan* patriarch and therefore a tacit acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the Shenhui’s mode of *chan* over the claims of its northern rival; Liu, *Liu Zongyuan ji* 6, p. 150. For Liu Zongyuan’s criticisms of *chan* practitioners, see *ibid.* 6, pp. 159–161; 7, pp. 170–171; 20, p. 567; 25, p. 680. See also Jo-shui Chen, *Liu Tsung-yüan and Intellectual Change in T’ang China, 773–819* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1992), pp. 176–78.

¹³⁴ Lu Xinyuan 陸心源, ed., *Tang wen shiyi* 唐文拾遺 (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1962) 68, pp. 20a–24b, esp. 22a.

texts of its composition; but it now came to shape the basic terms of contemporary discourse.

CONCLUSION

This paper has traced continuities between the understandings of piety and merit that played out in eighth- and ninth-century accounts of emperor Wu on the one hand and broader political concerns on the other. The immediate sectarian purposes to which Shenhui and others pressed the Liang ruler have drawn recurring notice in modern scholarship. But, as I have tried to show, emperor Wu also played a role in debates between the Buddhist church and the imperial state, and the mid-Tang representations of the Liang ruler might be read, most basically, as attempts to delimit spiritual and temporal claims to authority. They therefore provide a yardstick for the political thought, particularly the religious policy, of the time.

In this reading, it is significant that the novel accounts of emperor Wu that emerged during the eighth century tended to move away from, and in some cases explicitly rejected, earlier analysis of material and ritual modes of statecraft. Instead, these accounts turned to intensive contemplation of interior and metaphysical questions in political thought, and especially in determining the place of the Buddhist church in relation to the imperial state.¹³⁵ Should political society be based on metaphysical ideals or was it the product of temporal and man-made institutions? Did a ruler derive his claims to sovereignty from a religious identity or solely from his capacity to fulfill secular obligations as head of state? And, by extension, what was the proper scope of imperial power, in particular relation to the Buddhist church?¹³⁶ The example of emperor Wu offered no single response to such questions. Instead, he emerged time and again as an ideological cipher, readily coopted to serve competing agendas. But it is exactly the indeterminate and malleable quality of his image that points up how delicate and contested was the relationship between church and state in the political and religious climate of the eighth and ninth centuries.

¹³⁵ This, in essence, is the movement that David McMullen has traced in several streams of Confucian intellectual life in his *State and Scholars in Tang China*. See, e.g., pp. 70, 93–94, 105–12, 118, 210, 235, 245, 249, 260–61. I suggest that it offers an early indication of an intellectual tendency that would later take firm shape in Neo-Confucianism.

¹³⁶ It is of comparative interest that these questions were raised, in remarkably similar conceptual terms though in a very different context, by the Thomist attack on Lutheran political theory during the European Counter-Reformation.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- CFYG* Wang Qinruo 王欽若 and Yang Yi 楊億, eds., *Cefu yuangui*
冊府元龜
- JTS* Liu Xu 劉昫 et al., *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書
- THY* Wang Pu 王溥, comp., *Tang huiyao* 唐會要
- WYYH* Li Fang 李昉 et al., eds., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華
- XTS* Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 and Song Qi 宋祁, *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書
- ZOZTJ* Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑