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In this book Thomas Jülch takes on the task of translating the Zhenzheng lun 甄正論 (Treatise of Revealing the Correct; T2112, 3 fascicles), an important piece of Tang dynasty Buddhist apologia. In line with his other works, which include two volumes in an ongoing translation of a large segment from Zhipan’s (志磐) Fozu tongji 佛祖統紀 (Chronicle of the Buddhas and Patriarchs), this translation occupies an important place in the broader study of Chinese medieval history and Buddhist polemic. Jülch covers the relevant topics of study in his introduction with an efficiency that has become characteristic of his works, while the translation and its annotations are thorough and insightful. Before the main translation portion of the book, Jülch includes an informative “introduction” (1) and some “preliminary remarks” (17). The introduction has three sub-sections, the first of which gives a brief history of the period, explaining the influence that Wu Zhao’s rise to power had on the author and his text. The next section provides a pithy summary of the arguments in the treatise, followed by two sections to place the text in its intellectual and literary context. The final section of the introduction makes an insightful comparison between Buddhist apologia and late antique Christian apologetic texts rebuking Judaism. His “preliminary remarks” explain the formatting choices on the 30 separate dialogue sequences (abbr. DS) that make up the translation. The text presents both the Chinese and the English side by side. This is very useful as the reader can quickly refer to the source material for comparison, and the parsing up of Chinese text to show the parallelism is an excellent visual aid for those that choose to double-back and interpret the dense middle-classical Chinese. Taishō pagination is also provided in the left margin, making this translation a one-stop reference for the Zhenzheng lun. The book also provides a complete “bibliography” (183) as well as an “index” (191) sorted alphabetically, providing English first, followed by Pinyin and Chinese characters when relevant. Scriptures and names with titles are given in Pinyin and characters without the English translation, which is preferable given that English titles vary from translation to translation.

The introduction provides important information on the author as well as the content of the text. Jülch writes how, before converting to Buddhism, Xuanyi (玄嶷, fl. 684-704), the author of this treatise, was a Daoist prior at Hongdao guan (弘道觀) who was held in high esteem by Empress Wu Zetian (武則天, Keywords: Xuanyi, Buddhist apologetic thought, Wu Zetian, Chinese Buddhism, Tang dynasty
It was only in 689 that Xuanyi converted to Buddhism when Xue Huaiyi (薛懷義, 662-694), the abbot at Baima Monastery, undertook the conversion of the entire Hongdao complex. Seen in light of Xuanyi’s personal experience, it is telling that the Zhenzheng lun presents the polemical exchange between a Buddhist called “Master Revealing the Correct” (zhengxing xiansheng 甄正先生; Xiansheng) and a Daoist called “Venerable Obstructed by Customs” (zhisu gongzi 滯俗公子; Gongzi). Given the polemical nature of this text, Gongzi, the Daoist “straw man,” is fated to lose as he sets the stage for Xiansheng to lambast his claims on important points of contention between the two religions. In the first series of dialogical exchanges, Xiansheng disproves the existence of the highest deity in the Lingbao (靈寶) Daoist cosmogony, the “Celestial Worthy” (tianzun 天尊). He then argues against Daoist “conversion of the barbarians” theory (huahu 化胡) which holds that when Laozi travelled west, he went to India where he appeared as the Buddha, spreading a different form of Daoism to the locals. Xuanyi then takes issue with Daoist religiosity, disparaging various Daoist rituals and practices. Finally, he questions the veracity of the legend of Heshang gong (河上公, River-dwelling Sire), an important figure who acted as a source of authority among Daoists. At the end of this fictional exchange, Gongzi admits that the Buddhist position is indeed the right one. He converts and begins writing out their dialogue, the content of which makes up the Zhenzheng lun.

Buddhist apologetic texts were written with a very particular audience in mind. The audience shared certain points of reference that we are not privy to, and they were knowledgeable of the current topics of debate. To read and properly understand the Zhenzheng lun, one needs a solid grasp of the ongoing debates at the time, of Daoist doctrine and practice, of Buddhist ontology as well as of basic Confucian principles. For these reasons, the writing in the treatise is very condensed, marrying Buddhist and Daoist language while Xuanyi provides little to no explanation for his choice of expressions. The language is also couched in cultural associations so far removed from the present that a literal translation becomes unreadable without extensive annotations. Bearing this in mind, Jülch’s English translation reads well and he is consistent in his literal reading of the treatise. In those passages where the meaning of the translation is more difficult to discern, Jülch usually provides a note that clarifies the meaning, explains the philosophical concept, or offers a more accessible translation. The book has footnotes rather than endnotes, a much more pleasant experience for readers who, because of the prevalence of culturally specific metaphors and aphorisms, will often find themselves referring to the bottom of the page so as to make heads or tails out of the English. Jülch’s translation goes a long way towards packaging this wide array of information into one book.

Without detracting from the overall quality of the translation, there are infelicities that are worth pointing out. Certain passages in the treatise may not translate well to any modern language, though there are sequences where the English could still have used further editing. Without being overly nitpicky, there were avoidable spelling mistakes. For example, on one page we find “forrests” (28) instead of “forests”; “tenthousand” (28) instead of “ten thousand.” These are, however, minor mistakes. There were some translations that could have been simplified. For
example, the first line of DS 1 reads: “At the place where I grew up there was no educational background, and my feelings have not been explicit in higher learning” (余长自鄙俗，情未晓于大方；19). Here, Jülch has read too much into this passage, trying to draw out the parallel between “no educational background” (longsu 長俗) and “higher learning” (dafang 大方). It seems to me that a reading closer to the original would go as follows: “I grew up ignorant/vulgar and my thoughts could not grapple with lofty [concepts].” On the next page, we find: “As you [Gongzi] are now asking questions, I [Zhenzheng] will not forget my words” (子今質疑，不失言矣；20, square brackets are mine). The expression “forget my words” is a nice translation of bushiyan (失言), though one of two things seems to be wrong here. First, the subject just before in the passage was the Gongzi, so this should perhaps read (with Biblical gravitas): “[you] don’t forget my words.” Second, the expression bushiyan can also mean a “slip of the tongue” which would change the translation to: “[I, Zhenzheng,] will not misspeak.” In another passage, Jülch writes: “When yin and yang started their copulation, man was born.” (陰陽交合人乃生焉；26). There are two reasons why “copulation” is not the correct translation for jiaohé (交合). First, it personifies yin and yang so that the statement reads more like Greek mythology than Daoist cosmogony. Second, the Hanyu da cidian 漢語大詞典 places the earliest example of jiaohé meaning “sexual union” in the Song dynasty, long after the Zhenzheng lun was composed. Therefore, this segment might read a little differently: “When yin and yang joined together, humanity was created therein.”

I would also mention that the consistent use of the word “hollow” for xu (虚) was not always right. This is not a grammar or a definition issue, but a problem with the repeated unidiomatic English use of the word. I understand that Jülch maybe wanted to distinguish between the term “false” (wei 偽) and the word xu. However, considering that the graph xu comes up 93 times, it would have been fitting to find more English equivalents. That being said, he did also translate xu as “faked” (97), “emptied/emptying” (101, 108), “forged” (113) and more. Still, xu = “hollow” came up consistently, even where it was not necessarily the best term. The word “hollow” can be used adjectively to describe that something is without value or not true (e.g. hollow pleasures, hollow promises). One’s words can be “hollow” (“hollow talk” on p. 100), but the “conversion of barbarians” theory is not simply “hollow” (95); one cannot “richly establish hollowness” (96); the “matters of the Daoist scriptures” (98) can be “hollow matters,” but they cannot be “hollow.” The word “empty” would perhaps have been better in many instances, or if he wanted to avoid the word “false,” maybe the more figurative reading of xu as “disingenuous.” The fact that the word “hollow” was only relevant in some—but not all—of the 60 instances where it appeared in the translation should have been corrected during the editing process.

The comments above certainly do not take away from the overall worth of this translation. In Chinese Buddhist studies, apologetic texts have traditionally been translated and quoted in piecemeal fashion, with very few monographs dedicated solely to the analysis and translation of this rich literary genre. Jülch’s translation of the Zhenzheng lun adds to the growing number of works written in European languages on Buddhist apologetic thought—a corpus of scholarly texts that he
defines in his introduction (8 f.). As Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer put it in the “Forward”: “By acknowledging the Buddhist apologetic literature, we come to a more profound understanding of the religious and philosophical discourses which became part of the cosmopolitan world of the Tang dynasty” (vii). For readers of English, this translation provides a glimpse into a time and a place distinct from our own. Going through this book, I found the translation of the arguments mentioned above surrounding the relative supremacy of Laozi or the Buddha (“conversion of the barbarians” theory) particularly illuminating, presenting accessible references in English to a debate of great interest in Chinese history that had, by the Tang dynasty, been going on for centuries. For these reasons and many more, this critical translation will be a necessary addition to the libraries of academics and higher-educational institutions alike. It is a welcome piece of scholarship not only in the field of Buddhist studies, but also more broadly in the study of medieval Chinese social history.