BUDDHIST INFLUENCE ON EARLY DAOISM:
A SURVEY OF SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

1. Introductory Remarks

This paper does not pretend to be more than is suggested by its title. It is a preliminary survey and analysis of elements of Buddhist origin found in a selection of about 120 Daoist scriptures that can safely be assumed to be “early,” i.e. to date from the period between the Later Han and the early sixth century.¹ The scope of the investigation is therefore clearly limited, and so are the results gained from it. The conclusions should be checked against the data yielded by other sources of information: historical and bibliographical literature, belles-lettres, inscriptions and iconographical evidence. Only then a reasonably balanced picture could be drawn of what, after all, appears to be one of the most characteristic developments in medieval Daoism: its absorption of a great number of elements at various levels, ranging from simple terminological loans to doctrinal complexes, from Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism. It should be added that in the present study I only rarely touch upon the “Daoist countercurrent” which actually should receive due attention because it places the subject in its true perspective: what we observe here is no doubt one half of a process of mutual influencing in the course of which Chinese Buddhism absorbed and digested quite a number of Daoist elements.

That the vast majority of Daoist scriptures of the period show signs of Buddhist influence cannot be doubted. Of the 123 texts investigated, no less than 93 showed at least marginal Buddhist influence; the 28 early Lingbao 靈寳 texts are all clearly affected by Mahāyāna Buddhism, and

¹ The analysis is based on a list of titles kindly put at my disposal by my colleagues Schipper and Lagerwey at Paris; as without this supply of raw materials it would have been impossible to make this survey, I may here express my cordial thanks to them. Daoist scriptures will be referred to by DZ followed by their number according to K. M. Schipper, Concordance du Tao-tsang, Paris 1975; I have added between brackets the number of the volume in the photolithographic reprint edition of 1924–1926, and a capital letter indicating the Daoist tradition to which the scripture belongs: T for 天師; L for 靈寳; and S for 上清. A list of Daoist scriptures quoted or referred to is appended to this paper. Buddhist texts are referred to by their Taishō daizōkyō number, preceded by T.
particularly in that tradition we find a number of scriptures in which borrowed terminological, stylistic and conceptual elements reach such proportions that we can almost speak of “Buddho-Daoist hybrids.”

The fact itself is not surprising—on the contrary: when we consider that the two great religious traditions both took their rise in the second century CE, and since then developed side by side in the same geographical areas, it would be quite extraordinary if they would not show signs of mutual influence. It does, however, give rise to a number of questions:

(1) What types of borrowing do we find? Are the loans mainly formal, i.e. terminological and stylistic, contributing to the presentation of Daoist ideas in a more diversified, enriched, even “exotic” way, without really affecting the content of the message? Or are they also conceptual, i.e. do they also basically add new elements to the body of Daoist doctrines which by their absorption is altered or even reoriented? Or do the elements borrowed from Buddhism serve to reinforce and stimulate pre-existing Daoist notions without really altering them or adding new ideas and practices?

(2) Since processes of adoption usually imply selection, can we define what element or complexes of elements were selected from the immense corpus of Mahāyāna Buddhism as it gradually became known in the course of this period? Is it a very broad selection, covering the whole spectrum of Buddhist doctrines, monastic discipline, scholasticism, hagiography, morality, devotionalism and worship (to mention a few sectors at random)? Or do we observe a clear concentration of loans in particular sectors, and have vast fields of Buddhist religious life failed to influence Daoism? If so, can we suggest an explanation for the pattern of preference?

(3) Conversely, do we find considerable differences in density in the distribution of Buddhist loans in scriptures belonging to different “sects” or orientations within Daoism? If we find (as we do) that scriptures of the Tianshi 天師 tradition are only marginally affected by Buddhist terminology, whereas the highest concentration (both in number, scope and intensity) is found in the Lingbao tradition, can we offer an explanation?

(4) Does a closer study of Buddhist loans enable us to draw conclusions as to the dating of Daoist scriptures? Or, more concretely, are the borrowed elements so specific that they can be related to one source of information: a certain text, or at least a certain translator or school of translators, so that the latter gives us a terminus post quem? And if a certain Daoist text does not contain any trace, however marginal, of Buddhist influence does that fact point to an early date?