

THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE AWAKENING OF FAITH
IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The debate on the authenticity of the Awakening of Faith in early-twentieth-century China was significant in its impact on the modernization of Chinese Buddhism. It reveals the complex relation between Yogācāra and the Chinese Buddhist schools that are built on tathāgatarbha thought. The core of the controversy is the authenticity of the Awakening of Faith, which has three aspects: the authenticity of authorship, the question whether it is a translation and its doctrines. The participants of the debate were all prominent Buddhists and scholars, but they often confused these aspects. Despite the fact that they had formulated various conclusions concerning the authenticity of the Awakening of Faith, nearly all of them defended the book's legitimacy. Even for those who maintained that the book was not authentic, few chose to denounce it. The separation of academic findings and sectarian positions reveals the inherent and unsolved tension, in Chinese Buddhism, between Indian origination and Chinese localization, as well as that between authenticity and applicability.

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1. Introduction

The Awakening of Faith (*Dacheng qixin lun* 大乘起信论, the QXL) is one of the most influential treatises in East Asian Buddhism. It highlights tathāgatarbha thought (*rulai zang* 如来藏), which had a crucial influence as the foundation of several major Chinese Buddhist schools, such as Huayan, Chan and Tiantai. Although some of the tathāgatarbha scriptures, such as the *Ratnagotravibhāga*, were composed as early as the fifth century,¹ tathāgatarbha thought had very limited influence on Indian Mahāyāna schools. It was not until tathāgatarbha thought and the thought of other Mahāyāna traditions came into dialog with each other in China that a profound tathāgatarbha system was established. Fazang 法藏 (643 - 712 CE), the Huayan master who wrote one of the most important commentaries on the QXL, was the earliest to list tathāgatarbha as one of the four orientations of Buddhism, along with the Hīnayāna, and the two other major Mahāyāna traditions, the Madhyamika and the Yogācāra:

The fourth is the school of tathāgatarbha. The Lankāvatāra sūtra, the Ghana-vyūha-sūtra, among other sutras, are the teachings of this school. The QXL and the Ratnagotravibhāga, among other sāstra, explain the teachings of this school.

四如來藏緣起宗。謂楞伽密嚴等經。起信寶性等論釋此四宗。
(T. 1838 p. 61c)

The relation between tathāgatarbha thought and the Yogācāra school

1. Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: the Doctrinal Foundations*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 103.

was subtle and complex. As far as Yogācāra is concerned, Vasubandhu's *Triṃśikā-vijñaptimātratā* (Weishi sanshi song 唯识三十颂) was completed in the fourth century; by the seventh century, the "ten śāstra scholars" (*shida lunshi* 十大论师) had commented on this work. Xuanzang 玄奘 (602 - 664 CE), the founder of the Chinese Yogācāra Faxiang 法相 school and one of the greatest Buddhist translators, traveled to India in 630 CE and stayed until 645 CE. After his return, he composed the *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* (*Cheng weishi lun* 成唯识论) based on the *Triṃśikā-vijñaptimātratā* and the commentaries by the ten śāstra scholars; among these, it was Dharmapāla (530 - 631 CE) who had the greatest influence on Xuanzang's work. In China, Yogācāra was understood as constituted by two orientations, the "old" (*gu* 古) Yogācāra before Xuanzang and the "new" (*jin* 今) transmitted by Xuanzang.

Traditionally the QXL is attributed to Aśvaghoṣa (c. 80 – c. 150 CE), who is otherwise known as author of highly artful Sanskrit works on the life of the Buddha. The QXL had two alleged translations into Chinese, but no Sanskrit version has ever been discovered. The first translation is attributed to Paramārtha (499 - 596 CE), the second to Śikṣānanda (652 - 710 CE). But like other scriptures and treatises that appeared during the Northern and Southern dynasties (420 - 589 CE), their authenticity was felt to be doubtful. The earliest written record of the QXL in a Buddhist catalog is in the *Fajing lu* 法经录 (594 CE), which says:

The QXL, in one volume. Some say that the translation is by

Paramārtha, but it is not found in Paramārtha's collection of works. Therefore, it is classified as questionable.

(大乘起信论 一卷,人云真谛译,勘真谛录无此论,故入疑)
(T. 2146 142a)

Nonetheless, the QXL became extremely influential in the following centuries; the identity of the QXL was scarcely discussed before the twentieth century. The issue was first raised in Japan in the form of a conflict between Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨 (1869 - 1948 CE), who argued that the QXL was composed in China, and Matsumoto Bunzaburō 松本文三郎 (1869 - 1944 CE), who defended its authenticity. This question also attracted the attention of Western sinologists such as Demiéville, who was visiting Japan at that time and wrote an extensive study regarding the available historical evidence.² Because no decisively new evidence has been brought to bear since, not much progress has been made. Liebenthal believed that the QXL was essentially Confucian, despite its Buddhist terminology, and that the author must have been a Northerner, probably Daochong 道宠 (c. 480 – c. 550 CE).³

However, such conjecture only concerned the textual history of the QXL. In contrast, the early-twentieth-century Chinese debate on the identity of the QXL is far more complex, as will be discussed at length in the next chapters. In essence, the debate shows the intrinsic tension

2. Paul Demiéville, "Sur L'authenticité Du Ta Tch'Eng K'i Sin Louen," *Bulletin De La Maison Franco-Japonaise* 2 (1929): 1–54.

3. Liebenthal, Walter. "New Light on the Mahayana-Sraddhotpada Sastra." *T'oung Pao: International Journal of Chinese Studies* 46, no. 3 (1958): 159.

between Yogācāra and tathāgatagarbha since the sixth century. The alleged translator Paramārtha was a renowned Yogācāra scholar within what came to be known as the “old” Yogācāra. And yet, his other works had served as basis for the establishment of the *Shelun* school (摄论宗), which was based on Asaṅga’s Mahāyāna-saṃgraha and had indications of early syncretism of the thought of tathāgatagarbha with Yogācāra. Grosnick finds that the categories of “essence” (*ti* 体), “manifestation” (*xiang* 相) and “function” (*yong*) in the QXL originated from Indian classics. *Ti*, *xiang*, *yong* respectively correspond to svabhāva,⁴ guṇa⁵ and vṛtti.⁶ So they were not derived from the homonymic categories in Chinese philosophy. After comparing the QXL to Paramārtha’s other works and examining Paramārtha’s biography, Grosnick concluded that Paramārtha was the genuine author of the QXL, and that the QXL served as a classic example of Yogācāra-tathāgatagarbha syncretism, providing a clear model of how Indian Yogācāra of the time harmonized the teaching of tathāgatagarbha with other, more “classical” Yogācāra conceptions.⁷

It is even more intriguing that Lai claimed that the second

4. W H Grosnick, “The Categories of T’i, Hsiang, and Yung: Evidence That Paramārtha Composed the Awakening of Faith,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12, no. 1 (1989): 68.

5. *ibid.*, 71.

6. *ibid.*, 76.

7. *ibid.*, 87-88.

translation of the QXL was “systematically modified” to bring it in line with Xuanzang’s Yogācāra school. Lai focused on the concepts of “thought” (*nian* 念) and “no-thought” (*wunian* 无念) in both versions of the QXL. He traced these two key concepts back to pre-Buddhist Chinese philosophy and concluded that “the conflict between the QXL and Yogācāra was a standoff” that “cannot be smoothed out”.⁸

The Chinese debate on the identity of the QXL extended far beyond the discussion of Buddhist philosophy or textual history. The result would determine the destiny of Buddhism in modern China. It also shows a conflict in terms of methodology and epistemology between Buddhist masters and academic scholars. Moreover, we observe the efforts to revive a decaying Buddhism around the turn of the century, which reflected the general concern with the situation of the country at that time.

To understand the Chinese debate on the QXL, we have to put it into the broader historical context. Tarocco’s paper is an excellent introduction in English to the historical background of the debate. She acknowledges Yang Wenhui’s 杨文会 (1837 – 1911 CE) influence in garnering esteem for the QXL in China at the time. However, she underestimates the extent of Yang’s influence in the development of the controversy. It is also problematic that Tarocco only discusses Taixu 太虚 (1890 – 1947 CE) and

8. Whalen Lai, “A Clue to the Authorship of the Awakening of Faith: Śikṣānanda’s Redaction of the Word “Nien”,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 3, no. 1 (1980): 34.

Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873 – 1929 CE) as the key figures in the debate while there were several other important scholars, particularly on Ouyang Jian's 欧阳渐 (1871 – 1943) Yogācāra side. Even in the case of Taixu and Liang, Tarocco does not sufficiently explain the complexity of their respective attitudes towards the QXL.

The problem was first brought up by Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869-1936) in 1908 but did not receive much attention until the 1920s. It was an age of political turbulence. After a series of defeats by the Western powers, the Qing dynasty collapsed in 1911. The Chinese people had to find a way to transform China into a modern nation. The double tasks of “enlightening” (*qimeng* 启蒙) and “national salvation” (*jiuwang* 救亡) were set to be accomplished in a very short period. This context made the Chinese debate on the QXL intrinsically different from the Japanese debate, whose only purpose was to discover the truth. Chinese scholars and monks of the time could not possibly discuss the authenticity of the QXL without taking into consideration how their words would impact the people's faith in Buddhism and the destiny of the Chinese traditional culture.

At the same time, the influence of Buddhism had already been declining for centuries since the Tang dynasty. Taixu, one of the most influential monks in twentieth-century China and also an important participant in the debate, described the situation of Buddhism in the late Qing dynasty in the following manner:

With the arrival of the Qing dynasty, the fate of Buddhism was

already sealed. Now, at present, Buddhism is very close to extinction. Since the beginning of global communication and the arrival of Western civilizations in East Asia, our country's political and cultural traditions have all fallen behind, among which Buddhism is indeed the most backward.

迨乎前清，其衰也始真衰矣。迨乎近今，其衰也，始衰而瀕於亡矣。從全球運開，泰西文明過渡東亞，我國之政教學術莫不瞠焉其後，而佛教實後而尤後者。⁹

In addition to that, Buddhism had been almost destroyed by the Taiping Rebellion, a peasant movement near the end of the Qing dynasty. Its leader, Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1814 - 1864 CE) was inspired by Christian missionary pamphlets and believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. To destroy all "heresy," the followers of Hong burnt down all of the Buddhist temples in the regions under their control. The situation became even worse when some elite scholars, such as Zhang Zhidong 張之洞¹⁰ (1837 - 1909 CE) and Tan Sitong 譚嗣同¹¹ (1865 - 1898 CE), advised turning the surviving temples into modern schools since they occupied a good deal of land and yet did not serve much function.

The second crucial clue that helps us understand the debate is the culture of discipleship. In early-twentieth-century China, there were few

9. Taixu 太虛, *Taixu dashi quanshu* 太虛大師全書, vol. 4, (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chuban she, 2005), 913.

10. Zhang Zhidong 張之洞, *Quanxue pian* 勸學篇, (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chuban she, 2008), 95.

11. Tan Sitong 譚嗣同, *Tan Sitong quanji* 譚嗣同全集, (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 428.

Buddhist masters, so most of the participants in the debate were from a handful of Buddhist schools. In Confucianism, the teacher-student relationship is extremely formal and strict. Students are not encouraged to question their teachers. This also applied to Chinese Buddhism. In the debate, scholars had to be very careful that their argument did not contradict that of their teachers'. Otherwise, no matter how convincing their reasoning, the argument would become invalid.

As indicated above, Yang Wenhui's influence on the debate must not be underestimated.¹² Although he was a layman and was no longer alive at the time of the debate, he is probably the most significant teacher in the history of modern Chinese Buddhism. Holmes Welch referred to Yang as the "father of the revival of Chinese Buddhism".¹³ Having come to be interested in Buddhist studies fairly late in his life, after an unsatisfying career in the Qing administration, Yang did not become a profound Buddhist scholar. However, he founded Jinling Buddhist Publishing House (*Jinling kejing chu* 金陵刻经处) in 1866, which educated many of the key figures in the debate, such as Taixu, Yinshun, and Wang Enyang.

12. For a detailed account on Yang's life and thought, see Lan Jifu 藍吉富, "Yang Renshan yu xiandai zhongguo fojiao 楊仁山與現代中國佛教," *Hua-Kang Buddhist Journal*, no. 2 (1972): 99.

13. Holmes Welch, *The Buddhist Revival in China*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 2.

Yang started to study Buddhism with the QXL. There are records that Yang recommended the QXL as an introductory text to many young followers. He also worked with Timothy Richard (1845 – 1919 CE), a British commissioner, to translate the QXL into English for the first time, but the translation turned out to be a disappointment: Richard had slipped in too many Christian interpretations. Nonetheless, Yang's advocacy of the QXL had led to the spread of the text in China during the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. This also explains why the authenticity of the QXL became such an important issue in the debate. If the QXL were forged in China, the revival of Buddhism would be greatly undermined.

Several Chinese scholars have presented the history fairly well: Yinshun wrote a *Commentary of the QXL* (起信評議 *qixin pingyi*), as his summary of the debate.¹⁴ Gao Zhennong also commented on the debate in his explanation of the QXL.¹⁵ Bao Lei has very recent bibliographical research on the debate in early twentieth century China and also covered some of the recent works on the authenticity of the QXL.¹⁶ Huang

14. Yinshun 印順, "Qixin ping yi 起信評議," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信論與楞嚴經考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 283–98.

15. Gao Zhennong 高振農, "Dacheng qixin lun jian lun «大乘起信論» 簡論," *Fayin*, no. 5 (1987): 11–25; also see Gao Zhennong 高振農, "Zhongguo jindai fojiao shi shang de wu ci da zhengbian 中國近代佛教史上的五次大爭辯," *Neiming*, no. 239 (1992): 4–11.

16. Bao Lei 包蕾, "Minguo shiqi youguan qixin lun de zhenwei zhi zheng ji pingjia 民國時期有關《起信論》的真偽之爭及評價" (Master's thesis, Nanjing

Xianian's bibliographical research introduces relevant works published recently.¹⁷ Xiao Shafu discusses the philosophical implications of the debate.¹⁸ These studies have covered most of the evidence involved in the debate. However, they are mainly narrative and fail to formulate a larger analytical framework. As a result, they have not adequately shed light on the fact that the tension was a result of conflict between the different interpretative paradigms.

Chapter 2 will revisit the debate by closely examining the primary sources. It will not be organized chronologically. Instead, three core questions will be discussed. The focus will be on the relationship between attitudes towards the QXL and conclusions reached regarding its authenticity. This will facilitate an understanding that the motivations of the defenders, such as Liang Qichao, Taixu and Tang Dayuan, are much more complex than Torocco has claimed. Most primary sources were written in Classical Chinese in the early twentieth century. Since there is no published English translation available, my translation is provided along with the original text. These translations should deliver the accurate meaning of the original text in most situations despite the subtle

University, 2012).

17. Huang Xianian 黄夏年, "Dacheng qixin lun yanjiu bai nian zhi lu 《大乘起信論》研究百年之路," *Pumen Xuebao*, no. 6 (2001): 233–67.

18. Xiao Shafu 萧萐父, *Xiao Shafu wenxuan* 萧萐父文选, (Wuchang: Wuhan daxue chuban she, 2007), 182.

grammatical tense and voice in classical Chinese that is difficult to convey perfectly in English.

Chapter 3 will scrutinize the issue of authenticity in the debate. It proposes a three-aspect analytical model to explain how the originally simple question became so entangled. The first aspect, the original question, is the authenticity of authorship based on textual evidence, such as the records in Buddhist catalogs and other references to the QXL. The second aspect that will be examined is the authenticity of the translation of the QXL based on historical records. There are substantial discrepancies in the historical record regarding where and when the QXL was translated, which suggest the possibility that the assertion of being a translation might be a pretense to give the QXL more credibility. The third aspect is the authenticity of its doctrines. In Chinese Buddhism, Indian sources are often considered to automatically possess authority. Since the authenticity of authorship and translation cannot be fully verified, an additional method to provide new evidence is to examine the doctrines in the QXL. If they are “correct”, the probability increases that the QXL is of Indian derivation, vice versa. The Chinese Yogācāra school, compared to other Chinese Buddhist schools, is closest to the Indian Mahāyāna tradition. Tension between the QXL and Yogācāra had existed for a long time, but Yogācāra never became a major Buddhist school in China. This chapter also includes a table that summarizes the complex controversy on the authenticity of the

QXL in Chapter 2, using our three-aspect framework. It would be helpful for readers who are not familiar with the participants of the debate to have a quick reference.

Chapter 4 will discuss the general implications of the debate. Chinese Buddhism has never definitively resolved the strained relation between authenticity and applicability, as well as that between the Indian roots of Buddhism and the sinicization of Buddhism. In the debate on the authenticity of the QXL, the tension was displayed as the conflict between the QXL and Yogācāra. The scholars defended the QXL for various reasons, but it is to be observed that even for those who maintained the inauthenticity of the QXL, their determination to defend QXL was not undermined. Beneath the surface of the discussion on the QXL, they were, in fact, advocating different prospects for the adaptation of Buddhism to the modernization of China.

2. The Controversy

The controversy over the identity of the QXL is undoubtedly a critical event in the modern history of Chinese Buddhism. The controversy covered several aspects regarding the QXL. These aspects went far beyond the investigation of its textual history. The participants of the debate were all prominent Buddhist scholars, but it would be inaccurate to imagine that the discussion was similar to a modern academic conference. The authors did not subscribe to the same academic premises and standards in terms of method and general philosophical assumptions.

So we must understand the controversy in the context of traditional Chinese academia. To some extent, an author is always expressing his or her own subjective opinions, but in modern academic discourse the general expectation is that authors remain as “neutral” as possible. In the traditional exegesis of Chinese classics, explicitly expressing one’s opinions on the subject is very common, although in most cases the opinions must not conflict with the traditionally accepted interpretation. Only a few scholars debating the QXL chose not to disclose their personal attitudes towards the QXL. Lü Cheng 吕澂 (1896 – 1989 CE) and Chen Yinke 陈寅恪 (1890 – 1969 CE) both published their research in the 1950s. They are outliers to the general trend because they do not argue either for or against the QXL.

Apart from Lü and Chen, the controversy primarily went in two

directions. The first one examines the authenticity of the QXL in terms of whether it is composed by Aśvaghōṣa and translated by Paramārtha. The representative intellectuals were Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao, and Taixu. Zhang and Liang's main concern was to determine what evidence should be accepted to the discussion, which was both an inheritance and a response to the Japanese debate. However, Taixu had more complex consideration when he refuted Liang's argument.

The second debate concerned the correctness of key concepts such as *tathatā* (*zhenru* 真如) in the QXL. The renowned Yogācāra scholar Ouyang Jian was the first to point out the flaws in the QXL system. His student, Wang Enyang 王恩洋(1897 – 1964 CE), was even more outspoken. Wang denounced the QXL to be “fake Dharma” (*weifa* 伪法). Keeping the influence of the QXL on Chinese Buddhism in mind, it is not surprising that so many Buddhist scholars, such as Chen Weidong 陈维东 (c. 1900 – c. 1940 CE), Tang Dayuan 唐大圆 (1885 – 1941 CE), Changxing 常惺 (1896 – 1939 CE) all wrote criticisms against Wang's polemic.

Although there are these three distinct trends, it could not be said that there were three separate debates, just as it could not be said that there was no single unified debate. Classifications always carry the risk of oversimplifying an understanding of the actual situation. Thus, the following sections will investigate the primary sources in detail to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

2.1 Zhang Taiyan, Liang Qichao and Taixu

Zhang Taiyan wrote *A discussion for the QXL* (*Dacheng qixin lun bian* 大乘起信论辩),¹⁹ a short essay trying to find an explanation for discrepancies in the records regarding the QXL in the Buddhist catalogs. This initial investigation was the beginning of the whole controversy.

Zhang was an active political reformer during the late Qing dynasty and early period of the Republic of China, as well as a renowned scholar. He specialized in traditional Chinese philosophy, but he also studied Yogācāra. In *A discussion for the QXL*, Zhang's methodology was to find textual evidence, direct and indirect, from the classic sources. He argued it is insufficient to say the identity of QXL is dubitable merely based on the coeval catalogs, such as the records of the questionable identity of the QXL in the *Fajing lu* 法经录, because the communication between the North and the South was difficult.²⁰ For example, Zhang found records in the *Lidai sanbao ji* 历代三宝记 that contradict the records in the *Fajing lu*.²¹ He also argued the second translation was not a forgery, because the alleged translator used to live in Khotan (Yutian 于阗), which was very close to Northern India.

19. Taiyan Zhang 章太炎, "Dacheng qixin lun bian 大乘起信论辩," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 9–12.

20. *ibid.*, 9.

21. *ibid.*, 10.

Furthermore, Zhang maintained that Aśvaghoṣa was the author of the QXL. If Aśvaghoṣa was only a poet, how could he be comparable to the great Bodhisattvas? For Zhang, the only proper explanation is that Aśvaghoṣa wrote the QXL.²² Zhang also argued that the QXL must predate Nāgārjuna. Most of the Japanese scholars believed the QXL to be a post-Nāgārjuna work because of connections between ideas in the QXL and what Nāgārjuna wrote. In Zhang's view, the similarities proved that the QXL was written before Nāgārjuna, as the Mahāyāna philosophy in the QXL was less developed than other post-Nāgārjuna works.²³

Zhang questioned that if the QXL were written after the era of Nāgārjuna, it must have been written around the time of Āryadeva 提婆, a disciple of Nāgārjuna and the author of the QXL would have read the full translation of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra. However, the QXL shows no sign of influence from the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, and thus, could not be a rewriting based on it.²⁴ Zhang falsely assumed that whether the QXL was composed before or after Nāgārjuna, it would have to have been written by a master who lived very close to that time who knew the most profound teachings of that time. Zhang never thought of the possibility that the QXL might have been forged by someone who was not so learned and lived hundreds

22. *ibid.*, 11.

23. *ibid.*, 12.

24. *ibid.*, 12.

of years after Nāgārjuna. Zhang's conclusion was that Madhyamika (*kongzong* 空宗) and Yogācāra (*youzong* 有宗) should be defined not chronologically but geographically. The dubitable points in the QXL can be all explained by the geographical separation that led to the different interpretations of the doctrines.

However, Zhang's arguments were problematic, and would later be refuted by Liang and others. Despite being a learned scholar, Zhang probably had not predicted the potential controversy over QXL that he would initiate. Otherwise, he would have been more prudent when he formulated his arguments.

Liang Qichao wrote *A textual study on the QXL (Dacheng qixinlun kaozheng* 大乘起信论考证),²⁵ a long and thorough investigation of the textual history of the QXL. He followed the Japanese historians for the most part. In response, Taixu wrote *Comments on 'The textual study on the QXL' (Ping dacheng qixinlun kaozheng* 评大乘起信论考证)²⁶ under the pen name *Feixin* 非心, refuting almost every idea in Liang's article. This radical opposition represents the conflict between two paradigms. Liang was a scholar activist who sought to reform hackneyed ideas within traditional

25. Liang Qichao 梁启超, "Dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 大乘起信论考证," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 13–72.

26. Taixu 太虚, "Ping dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 评大乘起信论考证," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 73–82.

Chinese academia. In contrast, Taixu was educated as a monk. Despite Taixu's effort to accommodate Buddhism to the new times, his approach to the history of Buddhist thought was traditional.

By juxtaposing their positions, we see the conflict between the academics and the Sangha. It continues to exist as a contemporary issue in the separation of Buddhist temples and university classrooms, the practice of rituals and academic study of Buddhism.

Liang was a famous scholar, who was an active promoter of a new approach to academic study. His overview of the historical research by Japanese scholars was very detailed. In his research, Liang uses the same historical evidence that was presented in the Japanese debate, and thus, did not submit any original findings. Nonetheless, Liang's article is valuable to us mainly because he was very thoughtful concerning his methodology. He knew from what perspective he was treating the question, clearly and thoroughly defining it, and this quality was extremely rare in the debate. Most of the scholars in the controversy did not acknowledge the possibility of other potentially correct paradigms. This resulted in an impasse in communicating between them.

To summarize, in Liang's view, the QXL is not Aśvaghoṣa's work, as it is too stylistically different from Aśvaghoṣa's other pieces. Further, the QXL would have been too far ahead of Aśvaghoṣa's time in the history of thought. The QXL also can not be Paramārtha's translation because there

are too many discrepancies in several sources regarding the place and time of the translation.²⁷ Moreover, the fact that the Tibetan collection does not include the QXL²⁸ is strong evidence that there was no Sanskrit version. Typically, the Tibetan collection includes books that are not found in the Chinese collection, not vice versa. The *Xu gaoseng zhuan* (续高僧传) mentions that Xuanzang had translated the QXL from Chinese to Sanskrit. When Xuanzang went to India, Mahāyāna was prevailing in India. Liang inferred that if there were ever an original QXL in Sanskrit, it would not have been already lost by this time.²⁹

Liang points out that Mahāyāna principles and understandings that are contained in the QXL were not available even at Nāgārjuna's time, so it could not possibly predated Aśvaghoṣa.³⁰ Liang's method to locate the QXL in history was to identify the contemporary targets it aimed at in its text. According to two passages, Liang located the QXL as a response to the Buddhist debate during the Northern and Southern dynasties.³¹ These ideas had not been formulated yet in Aśvaghoṣa's time. Liang further argued that the conclusion that the QXL must have been translated by

27. Liang Qichao, "Dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 大乘起信論考證," 29.

28. *ibid.*, 35-36.

29. *ibid.*, 36.

30. *ibid.*, 55.

31. *ibid.*, 57-58.

Paramārtha because it is similar to the Mahāyāna-saṃgraha (*She dacheng lun* 摄大乘论), which was also translated by Paramārtha, is untenable. Liang thought that the understanding of ālaya was different in these two books, and thus, the QXL cannot have been translated by Paramārtha.³²

Liang's point of view and his evidence never went beyond the research results of the Japanese scholars. His conclusion regarding the authorship also relied on Mochizuki Shinkō, who suggested locating the QXL between the year of the death of Huiyuan 慧远 (563 CE) and the completion of the translation of the *She dacheng lun* (592 CE). However, Liang did not agree with Mochizuki's conclusion that the author of the QXL must have belonged to a certain school at that time. Liang pointed out that the author of the QXL was worried about the ramifications of the debate between the South and the North, and so had written the QXL with the intention to end it and had chosen to remain anonymous, which was quite common in ancient China. Liang argues that the rumor that Aśvaghoṣa was the author and Paramārtha was the translator was probably started by someone who read the QXL later and thought the book was too brilliant to have any author other than Aśvaghoṣa.³³

Liang asserted that the QXL was of Chinese origin, but he thought that the QXL was a brilliant work of the highest quality and should be the

32. *ibid.*, 59.

33. *ibid.*, 58.

pride of Chinese Buddhism as having Chinese authorship. Liang's research was an excellent summary of the Japanese debate, and his attitude was unique in the debate.

In contrast to Liang, Taixu understands the doctrinal problems of the QXL probably better, but insists on maintaining the authenticity of the QXL as an originally Indian text. He affirms Liang's allegiance to Chinese traditional culture, but criticized Liang for his lack of faithfulness and honesty. This criticism, in fact, also applies to Taixu himself. His reason for defending the QXL can be found in the preface to *Comments on 'The textual study on the QXL'*. Liang's article immediately became well-known among the Buddhist communities, and most of the believers, including monks, were not able to judge whether Liang's arguments were correct. Buddhist associations from many cities wrote letters to Taixu, asking him to make a judgment.³⁴ In *Comments on 'The textual study on the QXL'*, Taixu mentions his doubt as to the authenticity of the QXL in his early years studying *The Biography of Xuanzang (Xuanzang zhuan 玄奘传)*, and how he found a solution to "overcome his doubts" based on the record that Xuanzang did not see a Sanskrit version of the QXL in India.³⁵ He argues that the doubt surrounding the QXL is mainly due to two unreliable assumptions by Liang, who followed Mochizuki's lead. The first assumption pertains to the

34. Taixu, "Ping dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 評大乘起信論考證," 73.

35. *ibid.*, 74.

discrepancies in many Buddhist catalogs regarding the record of the translation of the QXL. The second assumption was that the QXL can not have appeared as early as Aśvaghoṣa considering the evolution of Buddhist thought. Against the first point, Taixu argues that during the Northern and Southern dynasties the political situation and the differentiation of Buddhist schools was unstable, which makes it difficult to find a reliable account.³⁶ So the discrepancies do not necessarily mean that the QXL has a questionable identity. Against the second point, Taixu claimed that the development of Eastern thought follows the opposite pattern of Western thought. Eastern thought does not unfold in a progression, but rather descends from a perfect beginning. Thus, the method of the history of thought is not applicable to the development of Buddhist thought. The reverse evolution of Chinese thought was agreed upon among most traditional scholars during the era of the debate.³⁷ However, after several decades, Yinshun, a disciple of Taixu, admitted this to be one of the major flaws in Taixu's defense.³⁸

Taixu proceeds to refute Liang's arguments, all based on the refutation of these two assumptions. The way that Taixu refutes Liang is a refutation of his method, rather than a refutation of evidence. Taixu

36. *ibid.*, 75.

37. *ibid.*, 75.

38. Yinshun, "Qixin ping yi 起信評議," 286.

claimed, “it was unnecessary to read Liang’s arguments to know the fallacies” (吾虽未读, 已可不烦言而解矣).³⁹ This might be right as long as one accepts the assumption that Buddhist thought does not follow a progressive pattern and cannot be studied as history.

Taixu’s solution to the controversy was that Aśvaghoṣa wrote the QXL, but Aśvaghoṣa knew it was too early for people to understand, so Aśvaghoṣa decided to “hide the book in the mountains, waiting for the most appropriate time” (藏之名山以待后世尔).⁴⁰ This explanation is not very persuasive, and it should not be taken as Taixu’s true opinion. As shown in the preface, for the sake of the revival of Buddhism, Taixu had to urgently write an apology to maintain the faith of Buddhists before he could think of a more persuasive argument.

39. Taixu, “Ping dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 評大乘起信論考證,” 75.

40. *ibid.*, 80.

2.2 Wang Enyang and his rivals

This second debate was initiated by Ouyang Jian. Like Taixu, Ouyang was also a student of Yang Wenhui, but his attention had shifted to whether the QXL had defects pertaining to crucial Mahāyāna philosophical concepts. The scope and methodology had also changed drastically so this could even be viewed as a separate debate.

Ouyang was the main figure in the revival of the Yogācāra school. He wrote an essay, pointing out the flaws in the philosophical system of the QXL, but he still defended Aśvaghoṣa's authorship in order to maintain the credibility of the QXL.⁴¹ In Ouyang's theory, Aśvaghoṣa was a representative of early Mahāyāna, but he received Buddhist education in Hīnayāna schools. Thus, Aśvaghoṣa inevitably lacked the profundity of later Mahāyāna thought. Meanwhile, Ouyang argued that as a Mahāyāna master, Aśvaghoṣa had to take his followers' acceptance of the QXL into consideration. If the QXL were too profound, people at that time would not have been able to understand it.⁴²

When it comes to Wang Enyang, a disciple of Ouyang, the problems of the QXL were not covered anymore. Wang wrote *A critical assessment of the QXL* (*Qixin lun liaojian* 起信论料简), an extremely sharp criticism on the

41. Jian Ouyang 歐陽漸, "Jueze wu fa tan zhengzhi 抉擇五法談正智," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 1–8.

42. *ibid.*, 5.

QXL.⁴³

Wang pointed out that the level of understanding of tathatā (*zhenru* 真如) in the QXL is shallow. Wang's analysis displayed his profound knowledge of Yogācāra, and he pointed out three ways in which tathatā is misconceived in the QXL. Moreover, he thought that the QXL too often misinterprets the Mahāyāna.⁴⁴ Wang further claimed that the reason that nobody had criticized the QXL seriously was the fear of harming the piety of the faithful, but Wang thought it would be even more harmful to let the teachings of the QXL be spread.⁴⁵ On the last two pages of his article, Wang described the outcry against him:

However, if you [Wang] criticize the QXL, your words are immoderate. As this work was attributed to Bodhisattva Aśvaghoṣa, and translated by the Tripitaka Master Paramārtha, it has been circulating in China for more than a thousand years. The great wise men had always praised it highly more than ordinary scriptures, and there were tens commentaries. Since the end of the Qing dynasty, Yang Wenhui, the lay Buddhist master, spent much effort advocating the QXL. So it was extremely popular nationwide in the past decades. Countless people began to believe in Buddhism because of the QXL. So the treatise had merit disseminating the teachings of the Buddha, how could that be denied?

然如汝料簡起信論者，則辭失過當。夫此論文既題馬鳴菩薩造，真諦三藏譯，流行中國既千余年，古來大德推崇尊重超逾常經，注疏之多乃數十種。迄清末年，仁山老居士復加提倡，以是數十年風靡全國，

43. Wang Enyang 王恩洋, "Dacheng qixin lun liaojian 大乘起信論料簡," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian 大乘起信論與楞嚴經考辨*, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 83–120.

44. *ibid.*, 105.

45. *ibid.*, 116–119.

因斯论而起信佛心者盖无数也。是则此论有功佛教，何可抹杀？⁴⁶

Haven't you worried that [your criticism of the QXL] would imperil people's belief in Buddhism, or raise a spirit of rebellion and lead to fighting among different Buddhist schools? ... Shidai⁴⁷ is the teacher of your teacher; you are in his school but deviate; I consider it as improper.

夫亦岂不惧因是而堕人信佛之心，或生反动而起诸宗门户党伐之事，佛法前途宁不转生障碍，况汝师资上承石埭，即于门下而自参差，静言思之而未见其可。⁴⁸

Wang defended:

The Buddha left us the teaching of "four reliances". First, rely on the Dharma—do not rely on the person; second, rely on the meaning—do not rely on the words; third, rely on the definitive meaning—do not rely on the provisional meaning; fourth rely on jñāna—do not rely on vijñāna.

Aśvaghōṣa is a person, so he should not be relied on. The QXL is words, so it should not be relied on ... If we examine the meaning of QXL, it is not even Buddha Dharma, let alone Mahāyāna. If we examine the person, both Japanese and Chinese scholars have proven that Aśvaghōṣa did not compose the QXL, but that someone during the Chen and Liang dynasty forged it.

我佛垂教以四依贻赠后人：一者、依法不依人，二者、依义不依语，三者、以了义经不依不了义经，四者、依智不依识。马鸣菩萨人也，本不应依。大乘起信语也，亦不应依……况以义求之，本非佛法，何论大乘。以人求之，则东瀛中土学者，既考证其非马鸣造，乃陈梁间人伪作耳。⁴⁹

Wang clearly asserted what Taixu and Ouyang had hesitated to express:

46. *ibid.*, 116.

47. Yang Wenhui's birthplace, here refers to him

48. *ibid.*, 116.

49. *ibid.*, 117.

that the QXL is a false Dharma. His was the most radical critique of the QXL in the debate. For Wang, the QXL lacks authenticity in all respects and cannot claim to present the true Dharma. His conclusion was that such a book should must not be used to teach at all.

However, the debate was never limited to the historical and philosophical, but always involved participants' considerations from their respective standpoints. Unsurprisingly, Wang had no supporters. People who read Wang's article were infuriated and wrote polemics. Most of them included sarcasm and personal attacks against Wang, as Wang had expected.

Chen Weidong wrote *A critical assessment of "A critical assessment of the QXL"* (*Liaojian qixin lun liaojian* 料简起信论料简), but Chen's defense of the QXL was not very strong. He quoted from classic sources such as the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Niepan jing* 涅槃经) and the *Vijñāptimātratāsiddhi*, but he did not interpret his sources very well. Nonetheless, his determination to defend the QXL was not affected at all.

The reason became apparent when Chen concluded:

Also, Wang had claimed that people should not establish the School of Tathatā, saying Madhyamika used to be called "the School of Dharma-nature." Since Dharma-nature is tathatā, there is no reason to set up a School of Tathatā apart from Dharma-nature, and it is not correct. The Madhyamika school views the Dharma-nature as empty, so the term "emptiness" was to give a name to dharma nature, but Yogācāra schools view dharma nature as non-empty and not-empty, not allowing Madhyamika schools to view emptiness as dharma-nature. The difference was of interpretations ... Since we can establish two schools, why can't we establish three?

又王君谓近人不应立真如宗，谓空宗旧称为法性宗，法性即是真如，是故不应于法性外别立真如宗。此亦不然。夫空宗以法性为空，故即以空题名法性，法性是即真如，而唯识等宗，则以法性为非空不空，即不许空宗以空为法性，此诂旨之异也。……既可约性相而立有空之二宗，亦何不可约三性而立三宗哉？⁵⁰

Chen was obviously unsatisfied that, from the perspective of Yogācāra, Wang refused to take tathāgatagarbha thought in the QXL as the third orientation of Mahāyāna. Chen was one of the first students of Taixu's new Buddhist school in Wuchang in 1923. So it is not surprising Chen's perspective was already determined by Taixu's view of three orientations of Mahāyāna.

Tang Dayuan was one of the first instructors in Taixu's academy. He was already a Yogācāra scholar when he wrote a *Solution to the Doubts on the QXL* (*Qixin lun jiehuo* 起信论解惑). In the first place, Tang personally appreciated Wang's article since it advocated Yogācāra. The preface explained why he later wrote this article against Wang:

Wang Enyang sent me his *Qi xin lun liao jian*. When I read it, I was happy that it would help Yogācāra to spread and would even incorporate modern science and philosophy into the path to awakening. This was not a small accomplishment. However, I feel Wang likes to argue too much, which easily evokes polemics ... Now that my younger brother Dading read Wang's *Liaojian* and told me, "I used to study the QXL, and be in wonder of its subtlety; now that I have read Wang's *Liaojian*, it seems the QXL has problems" ... If I do not analyze it for him, he will feel disconcerted. Moreover, in the future, there will be more people who are confused by this.

50. Chen Weidong 陳維東, "Liaojian Qixin Lun Liaojian 料簡起信論料簡," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chubanshe, 1978), 132.

王恩阳居士寄赠所著起信论料简，阅之欢喜赞叹，谓能弘扬法相，足以纳今世科学哲学入觉路，功德非小。然微嫌好辩，易蹈矛盾……已而舍弟大定阅料简举，告余曰：往读起信，叹为妙绝。今观王君料简，似于起信不无怀疑……若不为汝分疏，汝将因而失措，后人亦必有由之大惑不解者。⁵¹

The shift in Tang's attitude was dramatic. As we have discussed in the previous section, in the debate with Liang Qichao, there are indications that Taixu understood the problems in the QXL, but he never explicitly acknowledged them. Tang obviously thought Wang Enyang's arguments were convincing, but he still had to defend the QXL. He explained that the QXL system was sound. The QXL deliberately omitted a discussion of "seed theory" (*zhongzi yi* 种子义) because the usage of *xunxi* 熏习 in the QXL is different from that in the *Cheng weishi lun* so the "seed theory" is not needed.⁵²

Tang's reconciliation was inherently contradictory. He hoped to advocate Yogācāra, and he knew the QXL had problems and that Wang was probably right about this. At the same time, he was afraid of the consequences. If people were to lose confidence in the QXL, they would also lose faith in Buddhism, and the revival of Yogācāra would be impossible. His solution was very similar to Taixu's. Both avoided direct

51. Tang Dayuan 唐大圆, "Qixin lun jiehuo 起信论解惑," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 133.

52. *ibid.*

opposition to the QXL and suspended the controversy by claiming that Mahāyāna Buddhism had many schools, and each of them had understood only a part of the true Dharma.

Wang Enyang was not satisfied with such a compromise. He responded with *Questions on the QXL from the Perspective of Yogācāra* (*Qixin lun weishi zhiyi 起信论唯识质疑*).⁵³ He reaffirmed his judgment of the QXL as being “against Dharma-nature, against dependent arising, against vijñaptimātra, and thus against Buddhism” (背法性, 谬缘生, 违唯识).⁵⁴ Tang was also unsatisfied with the effect of his previous work because many people still had doubts and wrote letters to him asking for clarification.

Tang probably started to feel that the mild compromise was insufficient to settle the controversy. He wrote *Correct Interpretations of Tathatā* (*Zhenru zhengquan 真如正詮*).⁵⁵ Tang used a different strategy, claiming that Ouyang Jian and Wang Enyang were not criticizing the QXL, but rather criticizing those who had the obsession on the QXL.⁵⁶ He

53. Wang Enyang 王恩洋, “Qixin lun weishi shi zhiyi 起信論唯識釋質疑,” in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨*, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 151–58.

54. *ibid.*, 157.

55. Tang Dayuan 唐大圓, “Zhenru zheng quan 真如正詮,” in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨*, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 159–60.

56. *ibid.*, 160.

proposed that “we should not undervalue Ouyang and Wang because they criticize the QXL, but we should also not undervalue the QXL because Ouyang and Wang criticized it”.⁵⁷ This was apparently not a good solution. After this, Tang felt that he was not able to dissolve Wang’s criticism of the QXL without denying Yogācāra philosophy. He had no choice but to admit that Wang’s arguments “seemed to have solid reasons to support them, and are unshakable”.⁵⁸ He hoped that Wang would listen to his advice, and stop criticizing the QXL in such a radical way. He also hoped that Wang would use his talent to integrate Yogācāra into modern science and Western philosophy. Tang was in no way a reformer. He may have had good intentions for the development of Buddhism, but when he faced the practical problems of the integration of Buddhism with Western historical science, he maintained that the Dharma transcends the conception of time and Liang’s historical research was entirely meaningless.

Changxing wrote a refutation to Wang’s *Liaojian*.⁵⁹ Changxing was a monk who studied under several Huayan and Tiantai masters. Because Changxing was educated in the traditions where the QXL was widely

57. *ibid.*, 160.

58. Tang Dayuan 唐大圓, “Qixin lun liaojian zhi zhonggao 起信論料簡之忠告,” in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian 大乘起信論與楞嚴經考辨*, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chubanshe, 1978), 162.

59. Changxing 常惺, “Dacheng qixin lun liaojian bo yi 大乘起信論料簡駁議,” in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian 大乘起信論與楞嚴經考辨*, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chubanshe, 1978), 165–76.

accepted, he did not need to consider how to preserve Yogācāra while defending the QXL. He claimed that the QXL was the “greatest Mahāyāna,” so it was inherently superior to Yogācāra’s interpretation.⁶⁰ He also quoted the traditional “teaching classification” (*pan jiao* 判教) to determine that Huayan is superior to Tiantai, and Tiantai is superior to Yogācāra.⁶¹ He commented on Yang Wenhui and Wang Enyang, and the tendency to follow the authority and tradition is evident here:

[Yang) advocated the QXL throughout his lifetime. Now you [Wang] suggest that Yang used heterodox doctrines (外道学) as *upāya* to attract followers. Someone as slow-witted as I am couldn’t see the correctness.

且石埭居士一生，推崇起信论至于极点。今乃谓石埭以外道学做诱人之方便，以惺之愚，未见其可。⁶²

From Changxing’s words and his way of formulating arguments (using *panjiao* to determine the legitimacy and rank of Yogācāra), we can see how the old Sangha tradition was still influencing China at that time.

60. *ibid.*, 165.

61. *ibid.*, 174.

62. *ibid.*, 175.

2.3 Historians: the outsiders

Lü Cheng wrote *The QXL and Chan: An investigation on the originality of the QXL* (*Qixin yu chan: dui dacheng qixin lun laili de ta tao* 起信与禅——对大乘起信论来历的探讨)⁶³ in a late stage of the controversy. Lü held that the QXL is a rewriting based on the substandard version of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra that was translated during the Northern Wei dynasty (386 - 534 CE). A Chinese monk, most probably a Chan master in the North, composed the QXL under the name of Aśvaghoṣa.

Lü's most forceful evidence is that specific fallacies in the QXL text only result from the misinterpretation of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra in its Wei translation. The fallacies do not only concern the translation of specific terms but also relate to the understanding of crucial concepts, which are not found in the previous translations of Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and its original Sanskrit text. So the QXL must be associated with this specific version and not just generally related to the thought in the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra.⁶⁴

Based on this assumption, Lü dates the QXL no earlier than 513 CE, the year in which the Wei version of Laṅkāvatāra Sutra was translated. The earliest credible citation of the QXL was by Huiyuan 慧远, so the QXL must date no later than 592 CE, the year of Huiyuan's death. Furthermore, from

63. Lü Cheng 吕澂, "Qixin yu chan: dui dacheng qixin lun laili de tantao 起信与禅 -- 对大乘起信论来历的探讨," in *Dacheng qixin lun yu lengyan jing kao bian* 大乘起信论与楞严经考辨, (Taipei: Dacheng wenhua chuban she, 1978), 299–314.

64. *ibid.*, 302.

574 to 580 CE, the Wu Emperor of the Northern Zhou notoriously persecuted Buddhists.⁶⁵ The period of turbulence was conducive to the emergence of apocryphal texts.

The QXL has specific descriptions of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* practice, so Lü inferred that a Northern Chan master wrote the QXL. Because of Kumārajīva's advocacy, Northern Buddhism venerated Aśvaghoṣa. So it was a natural choice to put the QXL under Aśvaghoṣa's name to increase its credibility. Then, the QXL would need a translator if it was presumably written by Aśvaghoṣa in Sanskrit. Around the same time, the scriptures translated by Paramārtha in the South had started to spread to the North. Probably for the same reason as its alleged authorship, the actual author of QXL chose Paramārtha as the alleged translator.⁶⁶

The supposed second translation displays more clues of its close relationship to Chan. The revised explanation of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* in this version specifically relates to Dongshan Chan (东山禅). After comparing several critical texts, Lü concluded that the alleged first translation, in Chan terms, advocates "gradual practice and gradual enlightenment" (*jian xiu jian wu* 渐修渐悟), while the second version proposes "gradual practice but sudden enlightenment" (*jian xiu dun wu* 渐修顿悟). All the clues pointed to the fact that Zhishen 智洗 (609-702 CE)

65. *ibid.*, 306-307.

66. *ibid.*, 307-308.

was the author, who would have faked the identity of the QXL in order to establish his school against the canonical Shenxiu 神秀 (606-706 CE). As evidence, Lü found that "the way sentences are divided" (*judou* 句读) in the alleged second translation could not possibly be a translation from Sanskrit. Further, Fazang 法藏, who had massive commentaries on the QXL, never quoted or mentioned this second translation supposedly by Śikṣānanda. Given the fact that Fazang participated in Śikṣānanda's translation, it is very clear that there is no such second translation.

In Lü's view, neither the alleged author nor the alleged translator of the QXL were authentic. It is more likely to have been composed by a Northern Chan master based on the Wei version of Laṅkāvatāra Sutra. He described his purpose as:

From the materials mentioned above, it is obvious that the identity of the QXL is always contentious. However, since many schools acknowledge the book, people do not deeply investigate the question anymore ... Now, we know the QXL has such a close relationship to Buddhist thought during the Sui and Tang dynasty. To correctly understand the essence of Buddhist thought during the Sui and Tang dynasty, we have to know the true meanings of the theories in the QXL, so it is still necessary to have a deep discussion on the identity of the QXL.

从以上几种资料看，可见“起信”的来历一向就被认为有问题，不过其书既已为各宗所信用，大家也就不再深究而已。……现在，我们认为，以“起信”对于隋唐佛学思想的关系那样的密切，如要正确地理解隋唐佛教的实质，就非先弄明白了“起信”理论的真面目补课。因此“起信”的来历如何，仍有深入探讨的必要。⁶⁷

For Lü, the investigation on the QXL was merely for the sake of

67. *ibid.*, 300.

understanding Buddhism and it is difficult to guess Lü's position on the book. However, that does not mean Lü did not take any position at all. He had proved that the Wei version of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* was indeed a substandard version that is full of mistranslations. If the QXL was based on this version of *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, it cannot escape the fallacies.

Chen Yinque held there were many true historical facts in the fake preface attached to the first translation of the QXL.⁶⁸ He demonstrated that it was impossible for later people to forge the descriptions of the official positions and details of ceremonies to offer sacrifices in such a chaotic political environment at that time without any mistakes.⁶⁹ The attitudes and positions were what mattered most at that time. Because Chen did not take any position, to either defend or criticize the QXL, his argument never received a great deal of attention. The response to Chen's research also shows how pure historical research never served as the main current of the debate.⁷⁰

Another participant who did not explicitly take a position is Yinshun

68. Chen Yinque 陈寅恪, "Liang yi dacheng qixin lun wei zhikai xu zhong zhi zhen shiliao 梁译大乘起信论伪智恺序中之真史料," *Yanjing xuebao*, no. 35 (1948): 95-99.

69. *ibid.*, 95-97.

70. Following Chen's clues, Yu Delong argues that the forged preface, somehow, proves the authenticity of the QXL being a translation by Paramārtha, see Yu Delong 于德隆, "Re-Examination of the Authenticity of the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith," *Yuan Kuang Buddhist Journal*, no. 21 (2013): 63-124.

印順 (1906 – 2005), a disciple of Taixu. His complex motivation was all very similar to Taixu but the conclusions were quite different. Yinshun had an argument on the correct attitude towards the authenticity of QXL:

Furthermore, even if the historical research has proven that Aśvaghōṣa did not compose the QXL and it was not translated by Paramārtha, the value of the QXL is still to be discussed. My view is: 1) [Scriptures] from India are not necessarily good. Chinese Buddhist communities always have blind admiration for India, and think the scriptures are right as long as they are from India; the Theravāda treatises are written by arahats; the Mahāyāna treatises are written by great bodhisattvas. In fact, some of the scriptures translated from India are indeed insightful, while others are shallow; some are even disorganized. So, do not take whether it is translated from India as the standard for the scriptures. On the other hand, in India there were also many works attributed to great masters; even if they are translated, [the teaching] is not necessarily correct.

而且，即使考证得非马鸣作、非真谛译，起信论的价值，还得从长讨论。我的看法是：一、印度传来的不一定是好的。中国佛教界，一向有推崇印度的心理，以为凡是佛典，只要是从印度传来的就对；小乘论都是罗汉作，大乘论都是了不起的菩萨作。其实，印度译来的教典，有极精深的，也有浮浅的，也有杂乱而无章的。所以不要以印度翻译过来，作为佛典是非的标准。而且，印度要不少托名圣贤的作品；即使翻译过来，并不能保证它的正确。⁷¹

Yinshun's argument is that Buddhist treatises by Chinese masters (e.g. Tiantai texts) are not automatically inferior to works composed in India. Yinshun also implicitly criticizes Taixu's approach to syncretize the teachings of different Buddhist schools:

Since principles of different schools are inherently different, the effort to syncretize will not work. One school will still not accept other schools. So, we have to understand the difference; we shall not be biased, nor force ourselves to adapt. We should first understand the special meaning of the teachings, and we can then evaluate their

71. Yinshun, "Qixin ping yi 起信評議," 288.

position in the Dharma. I think, this is the right way!

学派的教理，既各有不同处，就是费劲力量以求圆融会通，而结果，别人也还是不会承认的。所有，我们先应该了解它们的不同；不要偏执，也不要附会。先明白各论的特殊意义，再来考虑它在佛法中的地位。我觉得，我们应该这样！⁷²

72. *ibid.*, 289.

3. Three Aspects of the Authenticity

The controversy failed to reach any substantive conclusion. The participants were unaware of the fundamental divergence in their methodologies and kept debating indiscriminately about the authenticity of the QXL. So it is useful to take a step back and examine the core concepts in the controversy.

The authenticity of the QXL is the essence of the debate. The Chinese term for authenticity is *zhenwei* (真伪), which is composed of a pair of antonyms. *Zhen* (真) means true, while *wei* (伪) can be translated as fake. The phrase together is commonly translated into English as ‘authenticity,’ which means having an undisputed origin or being genuine, but in the controversy, the undisputed origin of the QXL is hardly the central issue.

Translating *zhenwei* into authenticity does not fully deliver the original meaning. The tricky part is that *zhenwei* inherently carries an implication of questioning. In common usage, *zhenwei* is usually followed by *wenti* (问题), which means “question”. We only use the word *zhenwei* when something has questionable authenticity. So even if the *zhenwei* is used alone, an implicit question is always asked. No matter how much the monks insisted that Buddhist thought could not be examined in terms of times, they inevitably entered the field of questioning once they became involved in the discussion of the *zhenwei*.

In the debate, the participants were unaware that the scope of

zhenwei would determine trends of the controversy. Consequently, they sometimes confused the answers to the following questions: Do we need to trace the QXL back to one particular historical figure who is believed to live more than a thousand years ago in India, where reliable historical evidence was rare? Alternatively, do we have to know the genealogy of the original version of the existing QXL to confirm its Indian identity? Moreover, is an anonymous Indian author automatically more authoritative than an anonymous Chinese author? Much was undiscussed and taken for granted. However, what can be taken for granted was a lack of agreement among the participants in the debate. For example, the monks would insist that the Buddha's teachings are timeless, and that to trace the identity of the QXL by finding textual evidence is wholly meaningless because all true dharma teachings are not confined to this-worldly time.

So despite all of the historical research mentioned in Chapter 1, a framework to examine all of the arguments and positions of the participants in the debate needs to be formulated. There are three aspects of *zhenwei* in the controversy, though it is important to note from the outset that the three-aspect model must not be taken as definitional, but rather analytical. In other words, it aims at elucidating the rationale behind the different positions taken by the historians, the monks, and the Yogācāra scholars in the debate rather than evaluating and ranking them. It does not necessarily support any of the scholars' positions, neither does it

undermine any. Instead, the model offers a possible stage on which the arguments can be understood within a system.

The first aspect is *zhenwei* of authorship of the QXL (the aspect of authorship). The QXL is commonly attributed to Aśvaghoṣa. So by the strict definition of *zhenwei*, if Aśvaghoṣa did not write the QXL, it is then forged or *wei*. Obviously, if the controversy were as simple as this, it would have been easily solved. Even scholars who claimed the QXL to be *zhen* in the authorship aspect, could hardly provide any direct evidence that confirms Aśvaghoṣa's authorship. The Chinese scholars were not very interested in the historical Aśvaghoṣa. Liang was the only one to discuss Aśvaghoṣa historically and respond to the theory of six *Aśvaghoṣas* in *Shi mo he yan lun* (释摩诃衍论).⁷³

Instead, the attention is shifted to (and sometimes confused with) whether the QXL was composed in India or China. The conclusions of such a discussion would only be valid if we assume an Indian author is sufficient for QXL authenticity. Most scholars also left this unexamined before they proceeded with their arguments.

If the discussion of the authorship of the QXL were strictly confined to the study of textual history, there would have been little difference between an Indian master who is not Aśvaghoṣa and a Chinese master who is equally not Aśvaghoṣa. It would be obviously ridiculous to argue that

73. Liang Qichao, "Dacheng qixin lun kaozheng 大乘起信論考證," 25.

the author is more Aśvaghōṣa if he is Indian, but when such a statement takes a more complex form, such as the argument that the QXL being of Indian origin makes it more authentic, people will accept it without even questioning.

The lack of conclusive evidence regarding the first aspect makes it impossible to settle the dispute. So people bring in the second aspect of the *zhenwei* question, the supposed translation of the QXL (the aspect of translation). The logic is that if we can prove that there was no translation at all, it would be very likely that the QXL was originally composed in Chinese. Otherwise, the Chinese terms that were supposed to be a translation could provide evidence that may connect to other more reliable sources. Since no Sanskrit copies have yet been found in India, the Chinese records of the translation taking place and the credibility of the translator's bibliography become the most significant evidence to decide whether the QXL was originally written in Sanskrit or Chinese.

However, the aspect of translation is even more complex than the first aspect. The QXL has two Chinese translations. The historical records pertaining to Paramārtha, the alleged translator of the first version, are much more detailed and reliable than those of its second alleged translator Śikṣānanda. Paramārtha was one of the four most renowned translators of Buddhist texts into Chinese. If the QXL was in fact translated by Paramārtha, its Indian identity and legitimacy can be somehow secured

because otherwise the translator would have pointed out the problems in the QXL. Nevertheless, two factors complicate the question. First, if the authenticity of translation were based only on the confirmation that a Sanskrit version existed in India, why would the scholars spend so much time on determining the authenticity of other independent records? Logically, the probability that Paramārtha translated the QXL is neither strengthened nor undermined by whether the preface is a forgery. So if they are textually independent of each other, why should scholars examine the authenticity of these texts? One may plausibly argue that the preface provided much useful information that helps determine the author and translator of the QXL if it is proved to be reliable. However, Chen Yinque has shown that the historical facts in the preface could not have been forged by later monks even though the preface was probably not written by Zhikai. The question becomes intriguing because someone who is not the attributed author of the preface provided authentic information in the preface. Does that add to the preface's authenticity? If not, why would the fact that someone who is not Aśvaghōṣa but who writes in Sanskrit (probably someone from India, but also possibly someone from one of the small kingdoms beyond the west border of China) add to the authenticity of the QXL? Similarly, the *zhen* in the aspect of translation is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition to determine the QXL as *zhen*. Second, scholars' attitudes towards whether the historical Paramārtha or someone

who lived around the same time translated the QXL is quite different from whether the historical Aśvaghoṣa composed the QXL. If they were to confirm that the translation truly occurred and use it as proof of the existence of an original Sanskrit version of the QXL, it would not be necessary to specifically examine whether it was Paramārtha who translated it.

What further confuses this aspect is the second translation by Śikṣānanda later in the Tang dynasty. It could possibly be considered more proof of an actual Sanskrit version, but it is also possible that the second translation was translated from the Sanskrit version that Xuanzang translated from Chinese text, if there was one, as the records in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* indicate. Taixu and Liang both acknowledged this in their arguments.

Scholars have doubted whether Xuanzang ever translated the QXL into Sanskrit at all. Bunzaburō Matsumoto provided several clues. First, according to the *Datang xiyu ji* 大唐西域记, the oral account of Xuanzang's adventures to India, the few books he carried with him from China were all lost before he arrived at his first destination in India. Without the written copy, even if Xuanzang could recite the whole text of the QXL, as a prudent master, he would not only rely on his memory for the translation of such an important text. Furthermore, the *Da cien si sanzang fashi zhuan* (大慈恩寺三藏法师传) does not contain any mention of a potential translation by

Xuanzang of the QXL. If the translation were authentic, such an important issue would not be ignored.

The dispute surrounding Xuanzang's translation opens up possibilities that an earlier translator who predated Xuanzang might have translated the QXL from Chinese into Sanskrit. This possibility makes the confirmation of the translation aspect of authenticity even more challenging.

The third aspect is the authenticity of the doctrines in the QXL (the aspect of doctrine). The QXL is significant in its influence on various major Chinese Buddhist schools, including Huayan, Tiantai and Chan. This aspect further complicates the controversy. Though the authenticity of the doctrines in the QXL can not be decided on the basis of the authenticity of authorship or translation, the debate assumed certain connections between these aspects. The distinction between *zhen* and *wei* inherently carries a value judgment that can be extended. In other words, *zhen* in any of the aspects increases authenticity in other aspects; *wei* in any of the aspects decreases authenticity in other aspects. Based on such assumptions, the Yogācāra scholars' assertion that the philosophical system of the QXL is flawed serves to undermine the QXL as a whole. According to Yogācāra scholars, the key concepts, such as *tathatā*, in the QXL are not solid. Yogācāra is probably the most "Indian" Buddhist school. Most Yogācāra texts are authentic and reliable in that we have original Sanskrit versions in

India of several of them. Thus, Yogācāra scholars occupied the high ground from the very beginning of the debate, regarding both the aspect of authorship and translation. Having understood Yogācāra's status in the three-aspect model, one may now understand why all the polemics against the Yogācāra scholars' approaches were less convincing. Furthermore, even the scholars who separated the fact-oriented aspects of authorship and translation from the value-oriented aspect of the doctrines were not free from judgment in the aspect of doctrine. For example, Liang argued that Chinese Buddhists should be proud of the fact that a Chinese master was the author of QXL instead of assuming that such a fact would make the QXL inferior.

Ge Zhaoguang claims that the debate is centered around a confusion between the paradigms of "doctrinal authenticity" (*shifei* 是非) and "historical authenticity" (*zhenwei* 真偽). Ouyang Jian and Taixu approached the issue from the doctrinal *shifei* perspective. They showed "emotions" (*yiqi* 意氣) in the debate that turned the discussion on historical authenticity into one on doctrinal authenticity.⁷⁴ Ge views Liang Qichao and Zhang Taiyan's distinction between the *shifei* and the *zhenwei* to be more reasonable, but as we have discussed in Chapter 2, Ge's observations are superficial.

74. Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, "Shifei yu zhenwei zhijian," *Dushu zazhi*, no. 1 (1992): 70–77.

Bao Lei followed Ge's distinction between *shifei* and *zhenwei*. She adopted a two (*zhen-wei*, or authentic-fake) by two (*shi-fei*, or right-wrong) matrix as an analytical tool to elucidate the positions of scholars in the debate. In her model, Zhang Taiyan views the QXL as authentic but wrong; Liang Qichao views the QXL as fake but right; Ouyang Jian and Wang Enyang view the QXL as fake and wrong; Taixu views the QXL as genuine and right. This method implies that the separation of *zhenwei* from *shifei* constitutes an appropriate historical research method. For example, Bao interprets the debate on the QXL as fruitlessly focused on ideology, rather concentrating on the *zhenwei* issue.⁷⁵ But a defect of such model, as well as of Ge's approach, is that it does not explain the mechanism that transformed the discourses on *zhenwei* to that on *shifei*. The failure to distinguish these aspects of the debate entailed a lack of clarity regarding the inherent connection between *shifei* (the authenticity of the aspect of authorship and translation) and *zhenwei* (the authenticity of the aspect of doctrines).

75. Bao Lei, "Minguo shiqi youguan qixin lun de zhenwei zhi zheng ji pingjia 民国时期有关《起信论》的真伪之争及评价," 30-33.

Table 1 is a summary of all the participants in Chapter 2, using the revised framework.

Table 1 Conclusions on the authenticity and attitude towards the QXL

Year of Publication	Authorship	Translation	Doctrines	Attitude
Zhang Taiyan 1908	Forged	Forged	Unconcerned	Not clear
Ouyang Jian 1922	Authentic	Unconcerned	False	Not clear
Liang Qichao 1923	Forged	Forged	True	For
Taixu 1923	Authentic	Authentic	True	For
Wang Enyang 1923	Forged	Forged	False	Against
Chen Weidong 1923	Authentic	Unconcerned	True	For
Tang Dayuan 1923	Authentic	Unconcerned	True	For
Changxing 1923	Authentic	Authentic	True	For
Chen Yinque 1948	Forged	Forged	Unconcerned	Neutral
Yin Shun 1950	Unconcerned	Unconcerned	True	For
Lü Cheng 1962	Forged	Forged	Defective	Neutral

As shown in Table 1, among all the participants, only Wang Enyang denounced the QXL and claimed the spread of the QXL to be harmful. With the exception of Wang and three historians, all of the scholars defended the legitimacy of the QXL for a variety of reasons. Some, such as Chen, Tang and Changxing, simply wanted to defend the tradition of Chinese Buddhism at large, believing authority is, in itself, worthy of being defended.

Liang and Taixu's considerations were more complex. Liang had accepted all the evidence that Japanese scholars presented to prove that the QXL was composed in China. However, his attitude towards the QXL was radically different from the Japanese scholars. He declared that the fact that the QXL was a Chinese composition was the best illustration of Chinese wisdom and should be honored. Liang was an advocate of the new Western academic methods, but he also worried that China would lose its traditions in the process of modernization. This contradiction somehow led to the tragedy that took his life. In February 1926, Liang was misdiagnosed by a doctor named Liu Ruiheng 刘瑞恒 and the surgery removed the wrong kidney. Liang chose not to reveal this error to the public because Western medicine had just been introduced to China and he did not believe that it could survive such a scandal. In the case of the QXL, Liang wanted to refresh the antiquated academic environment in China by introducing new methods for historical research. At the same time, Liang was also concerned that such denial of the QXL would destroy Chinese Buddhism.

As a Buddhist master, Taixu had more reasons to maintain the authority of the QXL than Liang, but he also understood the problems with the QXL better than Liang. Taixu chose to defend the QXL just because he hoped to settle the controversy and allow Buddhists to reform Buddhism to be suitable for the modernization of China. His arguments in the apology were not all persuasive, and were later criticized by his disciple Yinshun.

Yinshun, however, was the one to realize Tiaxu's blueprint of a new Buddhism, and established several important Buddhist institutions in Taiwan. Taixu studied Yogācāra in his early years, so Taixu understood the problems with tathāgatagarbha thought in the QXL from the perspective of Yogācāra. However, he knew that the obscure Yogācāra philosophy was not the best option to promote Buddhism in China.

4. Conclusions

The controversy over the identity of the QXL was, in fact, the conflict over how Buddhism should reform and survive during the period of modernization in China. The topic was unique, as it attracted so many scholars from different backgrounds. As a result, their methodologies were too different to make any real progress in their discussion. Regardless of their disagreements in other areas, they all reached the same conclusion that Buddhism should be valued and advocated. A reformation that supplants Buddhism is not desirable. Tradition is almost equivalent to legitimacy for Chinese intellectuals, and this was also why the Indian origin of a Buddhist text would matter so much.

Buddhism has changed significantly during its sinicization, but the Chinese Buddhist schools still preferred to have an Indian master as the nominal founding patriarch to establish the legitimacy. The Buddhist schools which were founded in China, such as Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan, all have this tendency. However, they also adopted the QXL through their focus on different parts. There were abundant well-documented classical sources, many of which were as early as the alleged translation of the QXL, indicating that its identity was questionable. Thus, we have no reason to think that the Chinese masters were unaware of the issue of authenticity. The QXL was not very important in the early stages of the Chinese Buddhist schools. Moreover, it is difficult to determine whether the

popularity of the QXL caused these schools to absorb it in order to attract more followers, or whether the schools' decisions to absorb the QXL made it influential. However, the tension between authenticity and applicability has been there since the beginning of Chinese Buddhism. Thus, it is inaccurate to imagine that the controversy over the QXL was invented only in the modern academic context.

It is also inaccurate to describe the twentieth-century debate simply as history repeating itself. The seed of the debate had existed for a long time, but without the introduction of a new historical research method, the questions would never have been asked in such a way. Traditional Chinese scholars viewed history as recurrent instead of linear and progressive, so there is always a trap in the study of Chinese history that overlooks the originality of thought by finding their counterparts in history. To some extent, this is applicable to our case.

However, this is true only if we separate the history of thought from the broader historical context. As we have mentioned, China was in political turbulence; the society was collapsing. There were many attempts to reform and save the society, most of the traditional culture failed. In this situation, reforms that had even limited positive impacts were valued and followed. Any drastic reforms carried the risk of complete failure. In this way, we may better understand the positions of the defenders: that they may disagree with every aspect regarding the lack of authenticity of the

QXL, but at the same time, none of them would be against Buddhism.

In China, Buddhism had declined for several centuries by this time. For the followers who could not properly understand Buddhism, masters felt that they had to invent less true but more comprehensible versions of the doctrines to explain the dharma teachings. So *upāya* may have been implemented to such an extent that it resulted in serious contradictions between what was true and what was right. Paradoxically the two, trueness and rightness, should be exactly *one* according to Buddhist teachings. From this perspective, the debate was actually about the future of Chinese Buddhism. The Conservatives proposed to maintain the tension between authenticity and applicability as it had existed for centuries in the Chinese Buddhist traditions. However, there was also a suggestion of radical reform: that bringing back true Buddhism was the only way to save it. Otherwise, like Wang Enyang argued, what we would have saved would no longer be Buddhism.

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