

## Excerpts from *Mouzi on the Removal of Error*

### *Mouzi lihuolun*

*The provenance of this text will perhaps forever remain a mystery, with some claiming it to be a work of the late second century and others assigning it to the fourth or fifth centuries, “proofs” for both sides having some validity. Leaving these debates aside, the work—a few excerpts of which appear below—addresses some of the principal objections raised against Buddhism by the Chinese, objections that will be raised time and again throughout the first millennium of the Common Era. Although there were other, more pointed, complaints about the effect of Buddhism, or more precisely, the Buddhist clergy, on Chinese society, the “cultural” complaints lodged in this document lay at the heart of the nativist reaction to his foreign religion.*

### Why Is Buddhism Not Mentioned in the Chinese Classics?

The questioner said, “If the way of the Buddha is the greatest and most venerable of ways, why did Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius not practice it? In the Seven Classics one sees no mention of it. You, sir, are fond of the *Classic of Odes* and *Classic of Documents*, and you take pleasure in the *Rites* and “Music.” Why, then, do you love the way of the Buddha and rejoice in outlandish arts? Can they exceed the Classics and commentaries and beautify the accomplishments of the sages? Permit me the liberty, sir, of advising you to reject them.”

Mouzi said, “All written works need not necessarily be the words of Confucius, and all medicine does not necessarily consist of the formulae of Bian Que. What accords with rightness is to be followed, what heals the sick is good. The gentleman-scholar draws widely on all forms of good and thereby benefits his character. Zigong [a disciple of Confucius] said, ‘Did the Master have a permanent teacher?’ Yao served Yin Shou; Shun served Wucheng; the Duke of Zhou learned from Lü Wang; and Confucius learned from Laozi. And none of these teachers is mentioned in the Seven Classics. Although these four teachers were sages, to compare them to the Buddha would be like comparing a white deer to a unicorn, or a swallow to a phoenix. Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius learned even from such teachers as these. How much less, then, may one reject the Buddha, whose distinguishing marks are extraordinary and whose superhuman powers know no bounds! How may one reject him and refuse to learn from him? The records and teachings of the Five Classics do not contain everything. Even if the Buddha is not mentioned in them, what occasion is there for suspicion?”

### Why Do Buddhist Monks Do Injury to Their Bodies?

*One of the greatest obstacles confronting early Chinese Buddhism was the aversion of Chinese society to the shaving of the head, which was required of all members of the Buddhist clergy. The Confucians held that the body is the gift of one’s parents and that to harm it is to be disrespectful toward them.*

The questioner said, “The *Classic of Filiality* says, ‘Our body, limbs, hair, and skin are all received from our fathers and mothers. We dare not injure them.’ When Zengzi was about to die, he bared his hands and feet. But now the monks shave their heads. How this violates the sayings of the sages and is out of keeping with the way of the filial!” . . .

Mouzi said, “Confucius has said, ‘There are those with whom one can pursue the Way but with whom one cannot weigh [decisions].’ This is what is meant by doing what is best at the time. Furthermore, the *Classic of Filiality* says, ‘The early kings ruled by surpassing virtue and the essential Way.’ Taibo cut his hair short and tattooed his body, thus following of his own accord the customs of Wu and Yue and going against the spirit of the ‘body, limbs, hair, and skin’ passage. And yet Confucius praised him, saying that his might well be called the ultimate virtue.”

### Why Do Monks Not Marry?

*Another of the great obstacles confronting the early Chinese Buddhist church was clerical celibacy. One of the most important features of indigenous Chinese religion is devotion to ancestors. If there are no descendants to make the offerings, then there will be no sacrifices. To this is added the natural desire for progeny. Traditionally, there could be no greater calamity for a Chinese than childlessness.*

The questioner said, “Now of felicities there is none greater than the continuation of one’s line; of unfilial conduct there is none worse than childlessness. The monks forsake wife and children, reject property and wealth. Some do not marry all their lives. How opposed this conduct is to felicity and filiality!” . . .

Mouzi said, “Wives, children, and property are the luxuries of the world, but simple living and doing nothing (*wuwei*) are the wonders of the Way. Laozi has said, ‘Of reputation and life, which is dearer? Of life and property, which is worth more?’ ... Xu You and Chaofu dwelt in a tree. Boyi and Shuqi starved in Shouyang, but Confucius praised their worth, saying, ‘They sought to act in accordance with humanity and they succeeded in acting so.’ One does not hear of their being ill-spoken of because they were childless and propertyless. The monk practices the Way and substitutes that for the pleasures of disporting himself in the world. He accumulates goodness and wisdom in exchange for the joys of wife and children.”

### Death and Rebirth

*Chinese ancestor worship was premised on the belief that the souls of the deceased, if not fed, would suffer. Rationalistic Confucianism, while taking over and canonizing much of Chinese tradition, including the ancestral sacrifices, was skeptical about the*

*existence of spirits and an afterlife apart from the continuance of family life. The Buddhists, though denying the existence of an immortal soul, accepted transmigration, and the early Chinese understood this—wrongly—to imply a belief in an individual soul that passed from one body to another until the attainment of enlightenment. The following passage must be understood in light of these conflicting and confusing interpretations.*

The questioner said, “The Buddhists say that after a man dies he will be reborn. I do not believe in the truth of these words.” . . .

Mouzi said ... ‘The spirit never perishes. Only the body decays. The body is like the roots and leaves of the five grains. When the roots and leaves come forth they inevitably die. But do the seeds and kernels perish? Only the body of one who has achieved the Way perishes.’ ...

Someone said, “If one follows the Way one dies. If one does not follow the Way one dies. What difference is there?”

Mouzi said, “You are the sort of person who, having had not a single day of goodness, yet seeks a lifetime of fame. If one has the Way, even if one dies, one’s soul goes to an abode of happiness. If one does not have the Way, when one is dead one’s soul suffers misfortune.”

### Why Should a Chinese Allow Himself to Be Influenced by Indian Ways?

The questioner said, “Confucius said, ‘The barbarians with a ruler are not so good as the Chinese without one.’ Mencius criticized Chen Xiang for rejecting his own education to adopt the ways of [the foreign teacher] Xu Xing, saying, ‘I have heard of using what is Chinese to change what is barbarian, but I have never heard of using what is barbarian to change what is Chinese.’ You, sir, at the age of twenty learned the Way of Yao, Shun, Confucius, and the Duke of Zhou. But now you have rejected them and instead have taken up the arts of the barbarians. Is this not a great error?”

Mouzi said ... “What Confucius said was meant to rectify the way of the world, and what Mencius said was meant to deplore one-sidedness. Of old, when Confucius was thinking of taking residence among the nine barbarian nations, he said, ‘If a noble person dwells in their midst, what rudeness can there be among them?’... The commentary says, ‘The north polar star is in the center of Heaven and to the north of man.’ From this one can see that the land of China is not necessarily situated under the center of Heaven. According to the Buddhist scriptures, above, below, and all around, all beings containing blood belong to the Buddha-clan. Therefore I revere and study these scriptures. Why should I reject the Way of Yao, Shun, Confucius, and the Duke of Zhou? Gold and jade do not harm each other, crystal and amber do

not cheapen each other. You say that another is in error when it is you yourself who err.”

### Does Buddhism Have No Recipe for Immortality?

The questioner said, “The Daoists say that Yao, Shun, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius and his seventy-two disciples did not die, but became immortals. The Buddhists say that men must all die, and that none can escape. What does this mean?”

Mouzi said, “Talk of immortality is superstitious and unfounded; it is not the word of the sages.

Laozi said, ‘Even Heaven and Earth cannot last forever. How much less can human beings!’

Confucius said, ‘The wise man leaves the world, but humaneness and filial piety last forever.’ I

have looked into the six arts and examined the commentaries and records. According to them,

Yao died; Shun had his [place of burial at] Mount Cangwu; Yu has his tomb on Kuaiji; Boyi and

Shuqi have their grave in Shouyang. King Wen died before he could chastise [the tyrant] Zhou;

King Wu died without waiting for [his son] King Cheng to grow up ... And, of Yan Yuan, the

Master said, ‘Unfortunately, he was short-lived,’ likening him to a bud that never bloomed.

All of these things are clearly recorded in the Classics; they are the absolute words of the sages.

I make the Classics and the commentaries my authority and find my proof in the world of men.

To speak of immortality, is this not a great error?”

[translated by Leon Hurvitz]