

## “True Forms” and “True Faces”: Daoist and Buddhist Discourse on Images

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A major revolution in Daoist ritual practice and discourse occurred between the late fifth and late sixth centuries in the ancient capital region of Chang’an. It was during this time that local communities composed of Buddhist and Daoist adherents installed dozens of stelae that combined Buddhist and Daoist iconographies, aspirations, and motivations. Most importantly, these stelae are engraved with the earliest anthropomorphic image of Lord Lao, the physical manifestation of the ineffable Dao, indicating a shift in Daoism from a profound aniconic theology to an iconographic practice, which was only accepted as an orthodox and canonic Daoist practice a century later. Intriguingly, the stelae include inscriptions that provide philosophical and theological legitimation to this iconographic practice, based on ancient Daoist cosmology and rhetoric. Even more intriguing is the fact that at the same time as the appearance of the Dao-Buddhist stelae, Buddhists too begin to inscribe statues with similar apologetic statements. This paper examines this confluence in Buddhist and Daoist rhetoric, discourse, and practice, with a particular focus on the terms “true forms” (*zhenxing* 真形) and “true faces” (*zhenrong* 真容).