Persecution of Buddhism and Production of Apocrypha under the Northern Wei Dynasty

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Abstract Various political, social and economic factors led to the establishment of restrictive measures against Buddhism, during the reign of the emperor Taiwu (r. 424-452), under the Northern Wei Dynasty. These measures resulted in the first persecution of Buddhism, between 446 and 452. The disaggregation of the Buddhist community, the loss of religious infrastructures and scriptural basis brought about the production of apocryphal religious literature with the aim of attracting believers, at various levels of society. It was in this specific context that some of the most important Buddhist apocrypha of the 5th century, such as the Tiwei Boli jing (Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika) and the Jingdu sanmei jing (Sūtra of the Samādhi [Leading to] Pure Salvation), were produced. These texts promoted a poorly conceptualized religious system which was based on basic Buddhist notions and set forth spiritual goals intended mainly for laymen. Their doctrinal framework focused on earthly wishes and promised karmic credits that would yield benefits in the present and in future lives. These texts also made reference to a number of practices not referred to elsewhere in the Buddhist Canon. The precise origins of these beliefs, modeled on Indian notions, are unclear and warrant further discussion, in particular with regard to their sources, their religious goals and their designated target group.

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