RUDOLF G. WAGNER

LANGUAGE,
ONTOLOGY,
AND POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY
IN CHINA

Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (**Xuanxue**)

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and
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of the Dark (*Xuanxue*)

Rudolf G. Wagner

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Contents

Preface

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It has taken many years, and several other books, to finish this work of which the present book is the third and last volume. In fact, the writing of this book took as many years as Wang Bi, its subject, lived, namely twenty-three. My gratitude for the spiritual and material support of this book and its critical discussion has accumulated. The core ideas were developed in 1971 in Berkeley, where I spent a wonderful year as a Harkness Fellow. The first of many drafts of an extrapolative translation of the *Laozi* through the Wang Bi *Commentary* was begun then, and continued in the following year in Berlin with a habilitation grant from the German Research Association (DFG). A position as assistant professor at the Free University of Berlin began a long detour. My education had been exclusively in the field of classical Chinese studies, while the focus of the Berlin Institute was modern China. While gaining some expertise in this new field, my work on Wang Bi remained active, but on the back burner. After the job in Berlin had run its course in 1977, I worked part time as a science journalist and consultant on Chinese agriculture and finished the first full draft of this book. In 1980, I submitted it (in German) as a habilitation thesis, and it was passed in 1981 with my late teacher, Professor Wolfgang Bauer (Munich), and Professor E. Zürcher (Leiden) as external referees. Cornell University was generous enough to invite me as a fellow into its Society for the Humanities in the same year, which resulted in a book on Taiping religion. In the subsequent years, I was a research fellow at Harvard University and a research linguist at University of California, Berkeley, working on two books on the politics of modern Chinese fiction. Only small segments of my Wang Bi study were published in English during these years. In 1987, I began to teach at the University of Heidelberg in Germany at an institute in urgent need of a major development effort. A stipend from the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk made possible another year at Harvard, working now on the English version of this book. In the meantime, scholarship had been revived in mainland China, and a sizable amount of new work had emerged. I was relieved that my core arguments seemed solid enough to

survive, thus I developed new sections, such as the analysis of Wang Bi's commentarial strategies, the reconstruction and critical edition of the texts, and the chapter on textual transmission, while reworking all of the rest. In short bursts of feverish work between long stretches of other equally feverish work, my project finally was completed.

This study follows two others that have already been published, because of the broad-mindedness and long-term view with which State University of New York Press has been willing to support publications in Chinese philosophy. These include *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (State University of New York Press, 2000) and *A Chinese Reading of the* Daode jing*: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi. *With Critical Text, and Translation* (State University of New York Press, 2003).

Much of the emotional cost of such a project is not borne by the author but by those on whom this kind of work imposes painful deprivations. My older daughter, Martha, was born in 1971. When I eventually told her that the manuscript was now completed, she seemed unbelieving. Since the day she was born, this manuscript had hung over her head with the eternal and never fulfilled promise that, after one last effort, it would be finished. I thank her, her sister, Tina, and their mother for their many years of bearing the burden of this work with me, and I apologize for the ensuing deprivations and disruptions that they endured.

My thanks to the foundations and universities that have generously supported this work at various stages, such as the German Research Association (DFG), the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk, and Cornell University, Harvard University, and the University of California, Berkeley, which offered me research opportunities; to the members of the research group "Text and Commentary" in the Institute of Chinese Studies in Heidelberg, who gave much-needed spiritual support and critical advice; and to Dr. Johannes Kurz and Holger Kühnle, who during the last stages, helped as research assistants to finish the manuscript and the bibliography. In addition, Florence Trefethen eventually applied her firm and gentle pen in an effort to make my English more understandable and economical.

Last, Catherine Vance Yeh, with her unflinching optimism and support, is thanked for this book's eventual completion. I wish to dedicate this volume to her.

Heidelberg, November 2000

Introduction

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Wang Bi did not have much of an appetite for philosophers who, belonging to a given "school" of thought, would then proceed to read the bequest of the Sages in light of their school's teaching. He certainly did not think that he himself was properly described by being assigned to one of the schools. He, like many of his peers and admirers, rather wanted to be defined by the object of their inquiry and judged by the contribution they made. Their main discovery was the intrinsic "darkness" of "that by which," *suoyi* 所以, the ten thousand kinds of entities are, and their main contribution was to discover this darkness not as a sad limitation of the human mind and of human language in their capacity to conceptualize something excessively complex but as a constituent feature of the That-by-which itself.

I take this term *That-by-which* from the opening statement in Wang Bi's analysis of the "Structure of the Laozi's Subtle Pointers":

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" align="center">It is generally true with regard to</td></tr>
<tr><td>that by which things are created</td><td>that by which achievements are brought about . . .[1]</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" align="center">夫</td></tr>
<tr><td>物之所以生</td><td>功之所以成</td></tr>
</table>

Wang Bi does not nominalize the *suoyi*/that-by-which, but he avoids with this innocuous formula the use of some overdetermined older concept. I have decided to follow his track and, to avoid a Western philosophical term that I would have to refashion beyond recognition, I adopted the awkward but fairly precise noun "That-by-which."

The relationship between the That-by-which and the ten thousand kinds of entities is one between the One and the Many. This was thought of as the universal and stable model that an ideal ruler was to follow in his intrinsically unstable relationship with the "Hundred Families" of society; the ensuing question of how the constituent aspect of the "That-

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by-which," namely, its "Darkness," could be enacted by the ruler moved Xuanxue from pure philosophy of Being to political philosophy and of praxis. When the interpretations of Wang Bi and others were made into assigned university reading in the Southern Dynasties since the fifth century, they were not subsumed under some existing or adapted school name such as "Taoism" or the modern "Neotaoism" now sometimes used for them, but their work was defined by the object of their exploration and thus was referred to as Xuanxue, the Scholarly Exploration of the Dark.[2] Wang Bi's exploration of the Dark is the subject of this book.

This book comes at the end of a lengthy expedition that set out to secure a solid basis for the analysis. The fruits from this expedition are now available in a volume containing a critical edition, plus an extrapolative translation of Wang Bi's *Laozi* text, his *Laozi* commentary, and the surviving long bits of his exploration of the "subtle pointers" of the *Laozi*, the *Laozi weizhi lüeli*,[3] and in another volume that analyzes the craft of Wang Bi as a commentator.[4] In this manner I felt I had done all I could to provide myself and the reader with material that would permit a solidly based critical dialogue about the philosophical inquiry of Wang Bi presented here. It also made for much brevity in the present work, for many of the often tantalizingly difficult details in matters of textual philology and extrapolative translation have been discussed in these other volumes. The texts as they are used here will very often deviate substantially from what is popularly referred to as "the Wang Bi edition" (which sadly is anything but a Wang Bi edition), and the translations also follow my analysis and reasoning detailed there. The reader is kindly asked to consult these works for more detailed reference.

The discovery of the "Dark" as a constituent feature of the That-by-which, or condition for the possibility of the ten thousand kinds of entities, seems to foreclose any further talk about the latter and to mark the end of discursive philosophy. Wang Bi confronted the problem as a philosophical one that would not allow cheap solutions. The first chapter deals with his analysis of the necessary collapse of definitory language in the face of the Dark, his analysis of the uses of language made by the Sages and the warnings they gave about its unreliability, the ensuing tentative nature of their pointers, and the reading strategy appropriate for their understanding.

While prevented by the very Darkness of the That-by-which to apply a definitory hammer, language is still able to make meaningful heuristic statements about aspects of it. The second chapter explores the ontology into which Wang Bi develops and transforms the *Laozi*'s forays. The term ontology is here used pragmatically in its meaning of "study of the Being of entities." Again, Wang Bi combines a ruthless search for what "by neces-

sity" is true about the That-by-which that enables it to be the condition for the possibility of all entities, with an exceedingly careful and probing reading of the available statements in the *Laozi* but also the *Zhouyi* (especially the *Xici* and the *wenyan)* and the *Lunyu*. His approach is guided not so much by a "purely philosophical" interest than by an interest in the consequences this analysis will have in the realm of political philosophy, a general direction that he certainly shares with the texts he is analyzing (at least in his reading of them). The systematic manner in which Wang Bi maps the relationship between the One and the Many and the conditions under which the One can be the One of the Many and not one among the many provides the groundwork for his political philosophy.

Wang Bi translates the general logic prevailing in the relationship between the One and the Many into a normative guideline for the management of human society in which the ideal ruler is to model himself after the hardly gratifying features of the One in order to achieve a stability of the entire body politic—social order and security for his throne. Following the *Laozi*'s procedure, he presents the ideal ruler, the Sage, as the person able to live up to this standard. As opposed to the stable ontological relationship between the One and the Many, the relationship is essentially unstable in history and society. In a close reading of the *Laozi*, Wang Bi extracts a highly sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of a political body and outlines the manner in which the Sage, by modeling himself after the That-by-which, is able to prevent this body from exploding into chaos and civil war. The *Laozi* was written during a time perceived by contemporaries as tumultuous, the Warring States period. Wang Bi again lived in a time when the Han empire had just collapsed into three separate states, each vying for supremacy, with intermittent fighting. It was easy to depict an ideal ruler keeping the state in order at some utopian past where order had never collapsed. But what about a body politic corroded as much at the top as at the bottom, and where the hopes for a return of one of the Sages of old had long been given up? Taking his lead from a few fragmented thoughts in the *Laozi* and supplementing this with arguments proffered in other texts that he associated with the same philosophical enterprise, Wang Bi develops a strategy of a public performance of rule modeled on the That-by-which that is thrilling in its originality and even modernity, and that shows at the same time a keen understanding of the dynamics of a body politic under duress.

Since Tang Yongtong's pioneering work, a number of summary studies have been written in Chinese on the Scholarly Exploration of the Dark, but there are still few detailed studies of individual works and authors. Since in many cases the philological problems have not even been tackled, these overviews could not base themselves on a rich body of previous work but

as a rule proceeded by going through all that they considered important without being able to spend too much time on individual problems and texts.

The relationship of detailed studies and such overall studies is a complex one, and in many cases a bold outline written without all of the facts at hand can focus and guide detailed studies, while in others a single, detailed study can derail the consensus that had been plodding along for decades. The present work clearly falls into the realm of detailed studies, and it does not attempt to give a summary treatment of Xuanxue. At the same time it hopes, through the careful analysis of a narrowly circumscribed body of historical material of high sophistication, to arrive at broader conclusions, and I would like to flatter myself with the thought that these might even be of interest to the political scientist and to the philosopher of our days.

Chapter 1

Discerning the That-by-Which: The Language of the *Laozi* and the *Lunyu*

A PLEA FOR A HISTORY OF UNDERSTANDING

Many decades ago, Feng Youlan suggested dividing the history of Chinese philosophy into two great ages—the age of the philosophers, *zixue shidai* 子學時代, which lasted until Liu An (d. 122 B.C.E.), the Prince of Huainan, and the age of the study of the classics, *jingxue shidai* 經學時代, which he saw beginning with Dong Zhongshu (176–104 B.C.E.) and ending with Kang Youwei (1858–1927). Few would doubt the importance of the early Han shift in Chinese philosophy, even while disagreeing with Feng Youlan's lumping the entire remainder of Chinese philosophy into a single category because, as he said, "there was no other basic change with regard to politics, the economy, and society."[1] He set these two stages up on a then-current model of European history of philosophy in which the short age of the philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle is said to be followed by the long centuries of scholasticism. He then transferred a common disdain for European scholastic thinking, that it mostly "poured new wine into the old bottles," to the Chinese tradition of commentaries to the classics, which thus came under the general heading of secondhand thinking. China, however, failed to move early on to the third and very innovative phase of Western philosophy that began with Descartes, and did so only when confronted with Western post–Cartesian thinking.

Feng thus imported a very particular view of the history of European philosophy developed mostly in the Protestant countries, which stressed

urtext and originality to the detriment of orthodox ("Catholic") tradition and commentary. In a direct transfer of these orientalist presumptions, Feng Youlan's age of the study of the classics thus only "poured new wine into old bottles," and therefore it deserved less attention. Feng Youlan thus devotes one volume to the 300-plus years of the age of philosophers, and one to the 2,000-odd years of the latter age. In this view, Chinese thinking during the latter age was second hand and ephemeral in nature. Evidence is the subordination of philosophy under the classics of old that is manifest in the preferred form of this age, the commentary.

Seeing the beginning of this second age mostly in terms of a politically enforced orthodoxy, neither Feng Youlan nor later prominent historians of Chinese philosophy have pondered the historical pessimism written into the shift between the two ages or the change in mentalité that this involved. Perhaps because of this imported devaluation of the second age, comparatively few serious studies on philosophers of this second period have appeared that have focused on their relationship to the classics. And while we have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, been flooded with Chinese "histories" of just about everything from literature to eclipses of the sun, even a simple history of Chinese commentary literature has not been written, not to mention such pressing studies as a history of understanding, of hermeneutics, or of the change in the mentalité of the class of scholars who would spend their lives understanding and making understood not the world, Being, or their own thoughts but the obscure messages left behind by others, whom they elevated to the unattainable rank of Sages.

Such studies would move beyond the anecdotical evidence collected by scholars such as Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞[2] (1850–1908) on the history of the study of the classics, beyond the constructs of linear development of the commentary form, as presented by Ishida Kōdō 石田公道,[3] and beyond the few abstract quotations about the hidden meaning of the classics and the way to handle them assembled by Feng Youlan himself, and more recently by Yu Dunkang 余敦康.[4] They would join in the large project once begun, and not continued, by Kaga Eiji 加賀榮治,[5] actually studying the commentaries and related writings, their craft, their implied assumptions, and their explicit philosophy.

Focusing, as I do in this book, on a commentator of the *Laozi* who is not only already part of a long history of commentaries but also engages in some lively trade and polemics with his predecessors, I am thus forced to provide a sketch of this historical background in the full awareness and ardent hope that some scholar better equipped for this task will quickly make this portrayal obsolete with a full and reasoned study.

Instead of a dilettante outline of a history of understanding, which also would involve solving problems of textual dating, I shall present the tradi-

tion through the perspective of Wang Bi himself. He was not a historian of philosophy but a philosopher. The options presented by various earlier texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Laozi*, the *Lunyu*, or the *Zhouyi* did not enter his intellectual universe in a sequential, or possibly even a logical, historical order but simultaneously as options of thinking, and possible solutions to philosophic problems. I shall therefore try a systematic exposition of those options definitely known and pondered by him or likely to have been at his disposal. Into the first category I would put texts such as the *Lunyu*, *Laozi*, *Zhouyi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Chunqiu*, and *Zuozhuan*, to which he refers explicitly and which were part of the curriculum of educated youths at the time; into the second, I would put texts such as the *Wenzi*, *Huainanzi*, or *Yinwenzi*, which in great likelihood were present in his own library and read by him, but where it can only be inferred that he knew them from allusions and an occasional unmarked quotation.

THE CONSENSUS:
THE INEFFABILITY OF
THE SAGE'S THINKING

The Master said: "Writing does not fully express what is said. What is said does not fully express what is thought." 書不盡言 言不盡意.⁶

This famous, often-quoted statement from the *Xici* is not a general statement about the inequities of the written and spoken language. It is followed by a question: "Is one accordingly unable to see the thinking of the Sages?" 然則聖人之意 其不可見乎. Thus the "what is thought," *yi* 意, of the Master's phrase refers to the thinking of the Sages. The "Sages" are a very limited number of individuals whose appearance must be counted as a world event. They qualify for this category by virtue of their insight into the ultimate things that make for the order of the universe, hence, of society, often referred to by the general name of "Dao." This insight, the "Master"—that is, Confucius, who himself is seen as the last of these Sages—says, cannot be fully expressed in spoken language, which in turn cannot be fully expressed in written characters.⁷

Wang Baoxuan has justly pointed out that this statement by the Master is not the actual argument but in the context of the *Xici* passage only affirms a commonly accepted truth.⁸ The actual argument comes after this passage and deals with the devices used by the *Zhouyi* to circumvent

the problem of language and writing. It will be dealt with later. In a more explicit translation, the Master's statement thus reads:

> The Master said: "[It is true that] writing does not fully express what is said [by the Sages about the Dao], and that what is [thus] said does not fully express what is thought [by the Sages about the Dao]."

Merely reaffirming a commonly held assumption, the *Xici* passage does not have to give a reason for this ineptitude of the spoken and the written word. The same is true for the *Laozi*. The statements again are well known. As to the Way, the *Laozi* says (in Wang Bi's reading), "A way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way" [1.1]. And the *Laozi* 41 ends with the blunt statement: "The Way is hidden and nameless." The *Laozi* repeats the description of the Way as *wu ming* 無名, "nameless," in 32.1: "The Eternal of the Way is Namelessness" 道常無名. In these statements, the difference made in the *Xici* between the written and the spoken language is blurred in the general term *ming* 名.

The Sages themselves are enabled by their knowledge of the Dao to perform the same role in society that the Dao performs in the cosmos as a whole. As a consequence, the trouble language has in dealing with the Dao is repeated in its dealing with the Sages. The *Lunyu* (in Wang Bi's reading) is quite explicit about language's inability to "name" and define the Sages. It quotes Confucius as saying:

> Great indeed is Yao being the ruler! Immeasurable he is! Only Heaven is great, and only Yao was modelled after him. So boundless he [Yao] is, that none of the people were able to define him! 大哉堯之爲君也! 巍巍乎唯天爲大, 唯堯則之. 蕩蕩乎民無能名焉.[9]

The term *great* here has the meaning of "absolute," "beyond all measure," and thus "indefinable." The same is true for Heaven as for the Dao. Consequently, the Sage Yao, whose only measure is Heaven itself, is undefinable by means of language. So is Confucius in the eyes of his contemporary and later admirers. In Wang Bi's reading, *Lunyu* 9.2 begins:

> A villager from Daxiang said: "Great indeed is Confucius. So widely learned is he that there is nothing [specific with which] to complete a definition [of him]." 大哉孔子博學而無所成名.[10]

Wang Bi comments: "[His being widely learned, but there being nothing with which to complete a definition of him] is like harmonious music that emerges out of the eight musical instruments, but the eight instruments are not its [the music's] definition." In this context, Confucius becomes undiscernible. He himself states as much: "There is no one to discern me 莫我知也夫," and ends a description of himself with the words "as to discerning me, there is only Heaven!" 知我者其天乎.¹¹ True to the statement imputed to Lao Dan in the *Zhuangzi*, that "he who knows does not speak," Confucius himself finally claims, "I want to be without words" 予欲無言, and he answers the shocked question of his students about what they were to transmit if he did not leave a verbalized teaching for them:

> What words does Heaven make? The four seasons roll on and the hundred [kinds of] animals are born. What words does Heaven make?!¹²

From Wang Bi's commentary to this passage, we see its pivotal importance for his understanding of the Sage's communications. Wang Bi comments:

> [Confucius'] saying "I want to be without words" means that he wishes to bring the root to light 明本 [that is,] to bring up the root and [thus] to encompass [all] branches [springing from it] 舉本統末 and thus show the Ultimate of the entities 示物之極. Were [he] to establish words and hand down teachings with the purpose of penetrating to the [true] nature [of entities], abuses [of these words and teachings] would end up by proliferating. Were [he] to rely on hints and to transmit instructions, the situations [in which they would be used] would end up by being vexatiously complex. Thus he is searching for the insuperable control that is in the Dao,¹³ and therefore he cultivates the root and discards the words and practices the transformation [of others] by modeling [himself] on Heaven.
>
> Seen in the strictest terms, the "heart of Heaven and Earth" [mentioned in the *Zhouyi* hexagram Return, *fu* 復] becomes visible in [their] not speaking. As cold and warm [seasons] follow each other in due order the unspoken orders [of Heaven] are acted out in the four seasons. How would Heaven [,as *Mengzi* 5A5 says,] "repeatedly [give orders]?"¹⁴

Wang Bi makes it clear that this statement by Confucius is a sigh of resignation. He might wish to make do without words, but in fact he talked

all day, and he knew he would have to. With the advantage of hindsight, Wang Bi can well argue that what has been made into "the teachings" of Confucius has suffered from the double jeopardy of whimsical interpretation and changing circumstances of application. Confucius continues talking and acting, well aware that language might be an unreliable medium of philosophic communication but accepting that it is irreplaceable. The statement is thus a warning by Confucius himself that his utterances should not be reified into some textbook teaching, and it is a guide showing the insightful how to read the Master's words and acts. "Seen in the strictest terms" 以淳而觀, however, the real control 御 over the entities is achieved through not meddling, that is, not speaking.

For Wang Bi's *Laozi*, the Sage who embodies the Dao also defies language. "If the Great [the Sage] is at the top, those below know [only] that he exists [but cannot define him]"[15] 大上，下知有之 [17.1]. "Those in antiquity who were well-versed in the Way were recondite and abstruse, so deep that they could not be discerned" 古之善爲道者微妙玄通深不可識 [15.1].

There is thus a consensus across these texts that the Dao of the Sages cannot be simply expressed in language. The classics are supposed to be aware of this problem and to be efforts of the Sages to circumvent the limits of language while continuing to make use of it.

THE RADICAL POSITION

The above-mentioned statements are defensive. They concede the impossibility of expressing the Sages' thinking while proposing alternative strategies or being inserted into texts whose structure has to be viewed as such an alternative strategy. While the surviving sources do not seem to permit the reconstruction of the horizon of discussion within which these statements became defensive, some surviving passages in the *Zhuangzi*, possibly from a later age, maintain what might have been the original proposition about the ineffability of the Dao in a counterattack against well-established alternative strategies.

The first passage comes from a section in the "Tianyun" chapter 天運 in the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which Graham has grouped together into the "Dialogues of Lao Tan and Confucius":

Confucius said to Old Dan: "I have studied the six classics, the Songs, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes, and Annals in my opinion for quite a while, and I am quite familiar with all their

details; with this knowledge, I introduced myself to seventy-two princes; discoursing about the Dao of the former kings, I threw light on the traces [left behind] by [the Dukes of] Zhou and Shao [in these classics], but not one prince saw anything he could snap up for his use. Really! Isn't it [because] the Dao is difficult to explain that people are hard to convince?[16]

The argument is "late" primarily in that it presupposes a previous discussion of the issue.[17] The difficulties of getting access to the Way of the former Sages have already been experienced. The classics have already been described as a way to attain this access. The *Zhuangzi* passage takes issue with this form of access, which possibility is claimed primarily by the Ru, and it does so ironically by having the highest authority for the Ru, Confucius himself, declare his frustration with the effort. In this remark, Confucius defines the classics as the "traces" of the dukes of Zhou and Shao. What caused these traces is the "Dao of the former kings," which the two dukes followed and thus encoded into the classics left behind. In his discourses for the princes, Confucius does not extrapolate this Dao of the former kings from the configurations of these traces but throws light on these available traces by making use of the Dao of the former kings. This presupposes that he knows the Dao of the former kings, and that this knowledge enables him to make these traces meaningful. It is not made clear whether he knows their Dao by being a Sage himself or as a result of his studying the classics, but evidently he intends eventually to make the classics the guidebooks from which the princes might "snap up things for use." Although Confucius is thoroughly familiar with the classics, he somehow does not manage to convince the princes. Owing to the fact that although the "traces" are there, the Dao remains hard to explain, Laozi answered:

What luck that you did not meet a prince [setting out to] establish [true] order in the world [and trying to use you and your teaching for it]! Because the six classics are [but] the obsolete traces of the former kings—how should they be that by which these traces were made? 夫六經, 先王之陳迹也, 豈其所以迹哉 [Guo Xiang comments: "That by which the traces are made is the true nature [of beings]. As they [the former kings] relied on the true nature of the other beings, the traces of this are the six classics"]. Now what you are talking about [in holding forth on the classics] are still [just those] traces. Traces, however, are brought about by shoes; how could the traces be the shoes? 今子之所言猶迹也夫迹履之所出而迹豈履哉[18]

Laozi's statement describes the classics from two perspectives, their genesis and their decoding. They are, it is true, as Confucius calls them, the traces of the former kings. Confucius, however, made efforts to illuminate these traces to the point of providing the ruler with some accessible matter imbued with the Way. These efforts were frustrated, and Confucius even understood that the relationship between the Way of the former kings and the linguistic configuration of the traces they left in the classics was far less close than he had thought. Laozi picks up this thought and drives it to its natural conclusion. He maintains that what caused these traces, the practice of the former kings, is irretrievably gone. The traces are just *chen* 陳, "obsolete," like the obsolete and exhausted ether, *chen qi* 陳氣, which, according to the *Suwen* 素問, the sick person has to "push out" for the disease to be cured.[19] The traces cannot operate as a pointer to something beyond themselves. By attaching himself in his own oral explanations to the written classics that he studied so meticulously, Confucius attached himself to the obsolete part of the event of the former kings, the empty tracks. The image chosen here by the *Zhuangzi* does not do justice to the passage. When Laozi says, "Traces, however, are brought about by shoes; how could the traces be the shoes?" he invites the thought that, in fact, much about the shoe can be discovered by a careful study of the traces. The Dao, however, is not a shoe, nor anything as neatly definable, and Laozi's description of the workings of the Dao immediately following this sentence makes this quite clear. We thus have to read the intention of this statement by Laozi against the words actually used in the statement. The passage accepts the claim that the classics are the traces of the Dao of the former kings, and it operates in the hierarchical sequence of written word/spoken word/meaning familiar from the *Xici*. But by arguing that this Dao is elusive, it denies the possibility of talking about those traces as a way of getting access to this Dao.

The second *Zhuangzi* passage also comes from a section in the outer chapters that Graham considers "related" to the inner chapters. It runs:

> The [form] in which the world cherishes the Way is the written form 書. As the written form is nothing else but the spoken word [written down], it is the spoken word which has [in fact] something to be cherished. That which is cherished in the spoken word is the thinking 語之所貴者意也. Thinking has something it is about 意有所隨. What thinking is about cannot be transmitted by words 意之所隨不可以言傳也; but on account of that [object of thinking] the world cherishes the words [indicating the thinking] and transmits [them] in written form 而因世貴言傳書. Although the world cherishes them

[the written words], I still think they do not qualify for being
cherished because their [the written words'] being cherished is
not the cherishing of IT [that is, of what the thinking is about,
namely, the Dao] 世雖貴之, 我猶不 足貴, 爲其貴非其貴也.
That is why what can be seen when one looks at it is shape
and color; what can be heard when one listens for it is name
[spoken term] and [musical] tone. How sad that worldly people
consider shape and color, name and tone sufficient to get a feel-
ing for THAT [what the thinking is about]! 悲夫, 世人以形色
名聲爲足以得彼之情! As, however, shape and color, name and
tone are definitely not sufficient to get a feeling of IT, "he who
knows does not speak, and he who speaks does not know" [as
the *Laozi* says in 56.1 and 56.2], and so how should the world
[ever] learn about it?[20]

Graham translates the key phrase 爲其貴非其貴也 "because what is
valued in them is not what is valuable,"[21] and Watson, "what the world
takes as value is not real value."[22] Both agree in relating the two *qi* 其 to
the same noun, namely, "words," and attributing two different grammati-
cal functions (verb and noun, respectively) and meanings to the two *gui*
貴. My own translation also assumes that the repetition of *qi gui* 其貴
is a play on words, but I assume that the two *qi* 其 refer to two different
objects—the first to the written words, *shu* 書, with whom the entire argu-
ment started, and the second to what these ultimately are supposed to be
about, the Dao. In this sense, "the cherishing of them [the *shu* 書] is not
the cherishing of IT [the Dao]." In the preceding lines, the text made the
argument that written characters only reproduce spoken words, which in
their turn only refer to thinking, which itself refers to something unnamed
and later called "THAT" 彼.

　　The argument of the text is not dealing with language in general but
is directed against the attachment of the world to the written, verbalized,
and thought forms of the Dao, which in fact "cannot be transmitted by
spoken words [not to mention written characters]." The second part of
the argument generalizes the first. We are not only dealing with language
in all its specificity but with the objects of all the senses that again are
characterized by specificity. This specific world altogether does "not qualify
to get a feeling of THAT," and therefore, "he who knows [about THAT]
does not speak."

　　The hierarchy written word/spoken word/thinking of the Sage, al-
ready familiar from the *Xici* passage quoted above, is here extended one
further step with the argument that thinking is about something, which
itself cannot be transmitted by words, a similar position to that found in

the previous passage, which also denied access to IT through the written traces of the former kings. While the *Xici* only argues that the thinking of the Sages cannot be exhaustively presented, *jin* 盡, through words, the two *Zhuangzi* passages quoted here maintain that there is no way at all to "transmit" the content of this thinking through words and writing. Strictly speaking, as he "who knows [about the Way of the Sages] does not speak," "how should the world ever learn about it?"

The next passage directly follows the previous one, and the two are linked by their theme:

> Duke Huan was reading a book on top of the hall; wheelwright Bian was chipping a wheel at the foot of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan: "May I ask whose words my lord is reading?" The Duke answered: "The words of the Sages." "Are Sages still alive?" "They have already died." "But then what you are reading are but the dregs of men of antiquity!" 古人之糟魄!
>
> Duke Huan answered: "How can it be that a wheelwright criticizes my reading books? If you have an explanation you'll get away with it; if not, you die." Wheelwright Bian said: "Your subject sees it from the perspective of your subject's busi-ness. If, in chipping a wheel, I am too slow, [the chisel] slides and does not grip. If I am too fast, it bites and won't budge. Not too slow and not too fast, you've got it in your hand and it responds to the heart, my mouth cannot articulate it, there is a knack somewhere in the middle of all of this 有數存焉於其間. Your subject is unable to teach it [even] to your subject's son, and your subject's son also is unable to receive it [even] from your subject [his own father]. That is why I have been at work for seventy years always chipping wheels [without ever having myself replaced by my son]. The men of old died together with those things that could not be handed down. Thus what you are reading are just the dregs of the people of old."[23]

The key points of this conversation match the passages from the *Zhuangzi* that I have already quoted. The written form is but a sad record of the words spoken, only the "dregs" left from the Sages of antiquity, another expression for the "obsolete traces of the former kings." Their Dao "cannot be handed down"; they took it into their graves. Still, like the wheelwright himself, the Sages had this Dao, and to attain it remains a distinct possibility, but it cannot be attained through the verbal mediation of teaching and learning, writing and reading. The only access to this Dao

is through the spiritual practice and exercise described in other passages and here for wheelwright Bian. These *Zhuangzi* passages see no possible access to the Way of the old Sages through the verbal dregs left behind in the classics.

This, however, is what Confucius and Duke Huan are trying to do in the *Zhuangzi* passages quoted above. The *Zhuangzi* mounts the most formidable polemic against this assumption by ridiculing attempts to extrapolate the Way of the former Sages from their sorry dregs, the classics, and by adding one more, ultimate layer of remoteness to the *Xici* list, what thinking is about. Still, the *Zhuangzi* argues against what was and remained to the end of the third century C.E. the common assumption, namely, that the classics (including the *Laozi*) were texts of a special kind coded in a highly sophisticated manner, which managed to purvey a glimpse of the Dao to those who knew how to read them.

DEVELOPING READING STRATEGIES

All three texts for which Wang Bi wrote his commentaries and outlines implicitly, explicitly, and repeatedly stress the inability of language and hence cognition to "name," that is define, the last things.

The *Zhouyi* consists of two parts, the *jing* 經 and the *zhuan* 傳. The former contains the hexagrams with the *tuan* and *xiang* as well as the line statements, the latter, the commentaries appended to all of these statements and inserted into the main text by Wang Bi, as well as additional interpretive material such as the *Xici*, which remains in separate chapters. Generally speaking, the *jing* part is considered older and directly related to prognostication, while the *zhuan* are more interpretive and philosophical.[24] As a communication construct, the *Zhouyi* makes ample use of nonverbal devices, whether graphic/structural (hexagrams, trigrams) or relational (lines, their positions, and the dynamics of their relationship). The wording used to explain the meaning of the different clusters is grammatically and terminologically diffuse, seemingly full of allusion and metaphor. Its particular meaning is established in a complex interplay with the nonverbal structural context of the hexagram or line to which a given statement refers. At the same time, the statements are firm and definite enough to evoke the impression of systematic thinking of an impenetrable depth. The silent structure and the textual surface of the *Zhouyi* can both be read as an implicit commentary on the insufficient potential of verbal and/or written communication and as explorations of alternative and more complex forms of expression. The actual use of these devices thus suggests an implicit theory about the limits of language in dealing with

such elusive and complex matters. The above-quoted passage from the *Xici* A thus continues with a statement about the particular strategy used by the *Zhouyi* to circumvent this problem.

> The Master said: "[It is true that] writing does not fully express what is said [by the Sages about the Dao], and that what is [thus] said does not fully express what is thought [by the Sages about the Dao]."
>
> [Question:] "Is one accordingly unable to see the thinking of the Sages?" 然則聖人之意 其不可見乎?
>
> The Master said: "The Sages set up the images in order to fully express [their] thinking, and set up the hexagrams in order to fully express what is actual and what is false. It was through appending [written] statements [to both, in the form of the *gua-ci* and the *yaoci*] that they fully expressed what they [intended to] say 聖人立象以盡意設卦以盡情僞繫辭焉以盡其言. They made it flexible as well as comprehensive in order to fully express what is beneficial 變而通之以盡利. They drummed and danced about it in order to fully express the spirit 鼓之舞之以盡神.[25]

The two statements carry high authority, because the "Master" is commonly assumed to be Confucius.[26] The entire passage is not a general statement on language but on the language of the *Zhouyi* as a means of expressing "the thinking of the Sages." The second statement of the Master, however, makes the entire complex verbal and nonverbal structure of the *Zhouyi* an attempt to circumvent the accepted limitations of writing and speaking in expressing the Sages' thinking. Accordingly, the *Zhouyi* as a whole *is* in fact the thinking of the Sages. In the presentation of the *zhuan*, especially the *Xici*, the *Zhouyi* code is based on the code of the universe, and thus the *Zhouyi* contains all of the mysteries of the universe's operation, and there is enough language to justify a transition from a cosmological to an ontological reading of the *Zhouyi*. In short, the thinking of the Sages as present in the *Zhouyi* is focused on the only subject matter deserving the thoughts of the Sages, the Dao 道, but the Dao has a role both in the universe and in society.

The first statement by the Master in this *Xici* passage about written and spoken words and the thinking of the Sage does not exactly match the second with its series of measures taken by the Sages themselves to overcome this limitation of language.[27] For the expression of the Sages' thinking, images are set up, and for the full expression of their spoken

words, the "Appended Statements," *xici*, are made. There is, however, no counterpart in the first part to the phrase that they "set up the hexagrams in order to fully express what is actual and what is false," nor to the last two phrases on making "it flexible as well as comprehensive" and on drumming and dancing about it.

The *Zhouyi* thus describes its own form of communication as being the result of the insight into, and the acceptance of, the inability of language to fully express what is thought by the Sages. It accepts this insight and claims to be in fact a structure that can at the same time respect this rule and circumvent it through a different use of language and sign. The appended statements, *guaci* and *yaoci*, which make written statements indicating the content of the hexagrams and their individual lines, are here said to "fully express" what the Sages said, and the images *xiang* 象—that is, the specific form of the hexagram—are said to "fully express" what the Sages thought. The *Xici* states that but does not explain why these appended statements should be able to fully express what the Sages said, while regular writing cannot do so. The same is true for the images or symbols in relation to the Sages' thinking. Both symbols and appended statements of the *Zhouyi* have their point of reference beyond themselves in a hierarchy that leads from the "Appended Statements" to spoken words, from spoken words to symbols, and from them to thinking.

The appended written statements do not mean what they say, they do not define a given object, they are not co-determinous with their object but point beyond themselves to "spoken words,"[28] and they get their content only from this referral. They differ from regular written statements by being "appended" and thus structurally signaling that they have their point of reference beyond themselves. Through this interaction they are able to develop with great economy a more complex form of communication that evokes the richness of oral communication. These spoken words again do not define their object but are there to point to and elucidate a still more refined form of communication, the symbol, which again does not in itself define but becomes the ultimate pointer, indicating where the meaning is and getting its own content not from itself but from this interaction. In this manner, a four-tiered structure of communication is developed to mediate between the immediately accessible written language and the ultimately targeted thought, with the result that this thought is being "fully expressed" without ever appearing in the manifest verbal or nonverbal structures of the *Zhouyi*.

The *Zhouyi* does not describe itself as a book consisting of a text and one or more commentarial layers added by a sequence of commentators. What might be seen as different strata of the text with the later strata com-

menting on the earlier ones, whose meaning had become unaccessible or whose point of reference had to be adjusted to new concerns, is depicted within the *Xici* as a historic creation to which a sequence of Sages contributed, the final product eventually enabling them fully to express their thinking without ever directly putting it into the inept media of symbol, speech, or writing.

There was a common assumption that the Sages of old shared the same thought and purpose.[29] For this reason it is not necessary to specify which Sage's thinking went into this or that passage. They can be referred to by a collective name, indifferent as to singular and plural, "Sages." By linking the structure and content of the *Zhouyi* to this "thinking of the Sages," *shengren zhi yi* 聖人之意, the *Xici* established a unity for the text that is certainly not evident on its surface.

The self-referential *Xici* statement about the crafting of the *Zhouyi* is thus at the same time a statement about reasons for its complex structure and a guide for the reader about how to approach and handle this structure without undue reification. It advises him or her that the textual surface has a multilayered, referential character unified by an underlying thinking, and that the immediately accessible text is in itself unreliable and possibly trivial and meaningless, because it is thrice removed from the meaning. The reader is instructed to remember that the writing and the words themselves are unable to express the Sages' thinking, and that only by handling the specific forms of writing, words, and symbols as tentative, tenuous, and referential will he or she be able to reach this meaning. This explanation of the *Zhouyi* form of communication and Sagely communication altogether has dramatic consequences. By defining these communications as those by the Sages, they become impregnated with high meaning perfectly independent of the often overwhelming triviality that the surface text might seem to exude. At the same time, they open a wide window of opportunity for the specialists able to handle such arcane matter. While this construct provides much freedom for the commentator by loosening his or her ties to the surface text, it also establishes a demanding and rigid framework of analysis by requesting a unified and unforced explanation of the entire body of Sagely communication, and it lays upon the reader the heavy responsibility and challenge to access the thinking of the Sages, which precludes any frivolousness in the operation. In *Lunyu* 16.8, Confucius himself is said to have called the words of the Sages "fearsome." Kongzi said:

> The Junzi has three [things] he fears: He fears the orders of Heaven, he fears the Great Man, and he fears the words of the Sages.