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EDITED BY ALAN K. L. CHAN AND YUET-KEUNG LO

PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA

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ALAN K. L. CHAN AND YUET-KEUNG LO

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Introduction

Early medieval China was a time of profound change.¹ The fall of the Han dynasty altered drastically the Chinese political and intellectual landscape. Leaving aside changes on the political front, which fall outside the scope of the present work, questions about “heaven” and the affairs of the world that seemed to have been fully resolved under the once sure and confident guide of Han Confucianism resurfaced and demanded fresh answers. In this context, new currents in philosophy, religion, and other domains clamored to the fore and left an indelible mark on the subsequent development of Chinese thought and culture. Although continuity is never entirely absent in historical and cultural change, early medieval China saw the rise of *xuanxue* 玄學 (learning of the mysterious Dao), the establishment of religious Daoism, and the introduction of Buddhism that fueled major renovation in Chinese tradition. The eleven essays presented here address key aspects of these developments. In the companion to this volume, *Interpretation and Literature in Early Medieval China*, also published by SUNY Press (2010), a different team of scholars examine some of the equally important changes in hermeneutic orientation and literature and society.

The first five studies in this volume are devoted to *xuanxue*, the principal philosophical development in early medieval China. *Xuanxue* is complex and merits an introduction.² The word *xuan* 玄 depicts literally a shade of black with dark red.³ In the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Poetry), for example, *xuan* is sometimes used to describe the color of fabrics or robes.⁴ *Xuan* is tropically paired with *huang* 黃 (yellow),⁵ and the two have come to be understood as the color of heaven and

earth, respectively. The *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes), indeed, explicitly states that “heaven is *xuan* [in color] and earth is yellow.”⁶ As the noted Eastern Han *Yijing* commentator Xun Shuang 荀爽 (128–190) explains: “Heaven is yang and starts from the northeast; thus its color is dark red. Earth is yin and starts from the southwest; thus its color is yellow.”⁷ Without going into the cosmological underpinnings of this reading, it should be clear at least how *xuan* has come to be invoked as a general emblem of heaven in later usage.

Chapter 1 of the *Laozi* 老子, in its received eighty-one chapter form, as is well known, speaks of the Dao as *xuan* (cf. chapters 6, 10, 15, 51, 56, and 65). The question is, of course, What does it mean? An Eastern Han interpreter might not unreasonably consider *xuan* as referring to heaven here as well, as the *Heshang gong* 河上公 commentary to the *Laozi*, for example, did, given the established meaning of the word.⁸ However, Wei-Jin scholars in the main saw much more in it than a direct reference to heaven. In engaging the *Laozi* anew, they contended that *xuan* harbors a deeper significance, signifying the utter impenetrability and profound mystery of the Dao, both in its radical transcendence and generative power. In a general sense, then, *xuanxue* denotes philosophical investigation of the unfathomable, profound, and mysterious Dao, although the term itself did not come into currency until later.

During the fifth century CE, *xuanxue* formed a part of the official curriculum at the imperial academy, together with Ru 儒 or “Confucian” learning, “literature” (*wen* 文) and “history” (*shi* 史).⁹ The subject matter of *xuanxue* (or better, “Xuanxue,” capitalized and without italics, as it is used as a proper noun) in this narrower, formal sense revolves especially around the *Yijing*, *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi* 莊子—then collectively called the “three treatises on the mystery [of the Dao]” (*sanxuan* 三玄)¹⁰—and selected commentaries to them. Later historians traced the origins of this scholarly tradition to the third century, or more precisely to the Zhengshi 正始 reign era (240–249) of the Wei dynasty, and applied the term *xuanxue* retrospectively to designate the perceived dominant intellectual current of Wei-Jin thought as a whole. This focuses attention on the general orientation of Wei-Jin philosophy, but it may give the wrong impression that *xuanxue* professes a single point of view. In traversing the world of thought in early medieval China, it is important to bear in mind that *xuanxue* in the general sense—as distinguished from a branch of official learning, which reflects political interest and is the result of a long process of intellectual distillation—encompasses a broad range of philosophical positions and does not represent a monolithic movement or “school.”

In the past, *xuanxue* was commonly translated as “Neo-Daoism” (or rather, “Neo-Taoism,” as most scholars then followed the Wade-Giles system of romanization). The idea was that as Han Confucianism lost its commanding appeal—deemed not only incapable of effecting order in a fragmented world but more damagingly as part of the problem that led to the downfall of the Han dynasty—a revival of Daoist philosophy came to the rescue in charting new intellectual directions for the elite in early medieval China. “Neo-Daoism” often came to be associated with a kind of “escapism” as well. Because celebrated scholar-officials (*mingshi* 名士) were frequently implicated in the incessant power struggles at court and more than a few suffered violent deaths as a consequence, they turned to, as it were, according to this view, “purer” pursuits in Daoist metaphysics and ontology away from political criticism.

There is little doubt that some scholars at the time considered the teachings of Han Confucianism problematic. In some respects, the ethos of the age embraces an iconoclastic counterculture movement, against the Confucian orthodoxy or “teaching of names” (*mingjiao* 名教), that is, the whole structure of rituals and morality sanctioned by Han traditions and justified as having their roots in the teachings of the ancient sages. There is also no reason not to believe that some were totally disgusted with the politics of the day and yearned for a life of simple quietude. Reclusion, indeed, was a major theme in the story of early medieval China, as Alan Berkowitz reminds us in his contribution to this volume. However, just as reclusion is far more complex than running away from a troubled world, the important point to note here is that neither “anti-Confucian” nor “escapist” captures the outlook of the majority of *xuanxue* scholars.

Most of the leading intellectuals in early medieval China remained committed to the quest for order, to finding ways to restore peace and prosperity to the land. They may have been interested in metaphysics and ontology, but as many of the authors assembled here emphasize, their philosophical investigation is not without practical aim. Indeed, one might venture that it is political philosophy and ethics that inform *xuanxue*. Moreover, although Wei-Jin scholars disagreed on many issues, almost all agreed that Confucius was the highest sage. The problem is not Confucius, in other words, but distortions of his teaching. From this perspective, *xuanxue* is fundamentally concerned with unlocking the profound mystery of the Dao by reinterpreting the teachings of Confucius and other sages, which are seen to have been eclipsed by the excesses of Han Confucian learning. Properly understood, the teachings of Confucius, Laozi, and other sages and near-sages converge in varying

degree in a deep understanding of the Dao as not only the *arche* and *telos* of heaven and earth but also the paradigmatic model or way of individual and political action. In this context, different interpretations of the one “Dao-centered” teaching vied for attention, which captured the imagination of the literati throughout early medieval China.

During the early years of the Wei dynasty, through the reigns of Emperor Wen 文 (Cao Pi 曹丕, r. 220–226) and Emperor Ming 明 (Cao Rui 曹叡, r. 227–239), a measure of order was restored. Political reform promised much-needed change and created an air of optimism. Emperor Ming was succeeded by Cao Fang 曹芳 (r. 240–254), who ascended the throne when he was still a young boy. His reign was initially named Zhengshi, “right beginning,” perhaps reflecting the hope that the Wei Empire would now flourish after a firm foundation had been laid. During the Zhengshi era, politics was dominated by two powerful statesmen: Cao Shuang 曹爽 (d. 249) and Sima Yi 司馬懿 (179–251), who were entrusted with guiding the young emperor and advancing the interests of the Wei ruling house. Cao Shuang proved the stronger of the two at first, until he was ousted by Sima Yi in a carefully engineered takeover in 249, which brought to a close not only the Zhengshi era but also effectively the rule of the Cao family, although the Sima clan did not formally abolish the reign of Wei and establish the Jin dynasty in its place until 265. During the Zhengshi era, new ideas blossomed, which sought to reclaim in different ways the perceived true teachings of the sages and worthies of old, as expressed in such classics as the *Yijing*, *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects), *Laozi*, and *Zhuangzi*. Later scholars often looked back to the Zhengshi period nostalgically as the “golden age” of a new kind of learning that has come to be remembered as *xuanxue*.

Whether or not there was in fact a tight Confucian “orthodoxy” during the Han dynasty may be open to debate; there is little disagreement, however, that there were attempts at forging one. Regardless of its content, orthodoxy seeks intellectual closure, a clear demarcation of the critical space in which a dialogue with tradition may be engaged. Toward the end of the Han period, critical challenges to certain elements of the Confucian edifice had already emerged. This gathered pace in the uncertain world of post-Han China. While it would be a mistake to conclude that early *xuanxue* scholars started with a completely blank slate, in which Confucian culture and learning had been obliterated, during the early years of the Wei dynasty, intellectual discourse flourished in relatively open surroundings, in which a thorough interrogation of tradition not only became possible but was also deemed a matter of urgency for the educated elite.

“Pure conversation” (*qingtan* 清談) debates were one main channel through which Wei-Jin and Six Dynasties intellectuals questioned tradition and shared their ideas. *Qingtan* was the distinctive mode of intellectual activity in early medieval China, in which men of letters gathered socially and debated on major philosophical issues of the day such as the relationship between “words” (*yan* 言) and “meaning” (*yi* 意) and that between a person’s “capacity” (*cai* 才) and inborn “nature” (*xing* 性).¹¹ Almost without exception, the scholars later recognized as major *xuanxue* proponents were virtuosi in the art of argumentation. They also engaged in debates through writing—the many treatises or “discourses” (*lun* 論) they composed on these and other topics such as “nourishing life” (*yangsheng* 養生) and whether human beings are by nature inclined toward learning (*ziran haoxue* 自然好學) were expected to and often did attract spirited criticism, which in turn provided a platform for rejoinders and further debate.¹² The most important medium of philosophical renewal, however, remained the composition of commentaries on key classical works, at which *xuanxue* scholars excelled and through which they bequeathed a lasting legacy to later scholars.

Prior to the Wei dynasty, the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, though certainly not unknown, were perhaps somewhat marginalized in a world dominated by Confucian learning. To the extent that these Daoist classics now took center stage, it is justified to speak of a revival of interest in philosophical Daoism. Inasmuch as *xuanxue* seeks to unveil the truth of the Dao, it is not entirely inappropriate to describe it as a kind of “Neo-Daoism.” The difficulty, of course, is that “Daoism” does not sufficiently distinguish the concept of Dao from the “Daoist” school. Brook Ziporyn, indeed, felt compelled to coin a term, “Daoishness,” precisely to mark this distinction in his presentation here (e.g., p. 109). Modern Chinese studies of *xuanxue* often characterize it as an attempt in reinterpreting Confucianism through the lens of Daoism.¹³ This presupposes a sharp partisan divide and seems less preferable to approaching *xuanxue* as a broad philosophical front that seeks to lay bare the ideal order of a Dao-centered world, which the sages not only understood but also embodied. Again, metaphysics and ethics merge in an effort to provide a new blueprint for order, which transcends narrow partisan concerns.

Recognizing that “Neo-Daoism” may not be a fitting translation of *xuanxue*, recent studies often favor the term “Dark Learning” or “Learning of the Dark”—the latter to emphasize that *xuan* functions as a noun in this construction. “Dark Learning” may be able to avoid the ambiguity that “Neo-Daoism” faces, but it is not without difficulty,

for while it highlights the ineffability of the Dao, it does not immediately convey the sense of profundity and sublimity that is part and parcel of the meaning of *xuan* in this context. More important, while the subject of the discourse may appear “dark,” the discourse itself is not. “Learning of the Dark” is grammatically clearer, but it may give the sense of something sinister. It is also not exactly economical and fares little better, in my view, than alternatives such as “learning of the mysterious Dao” or “learning of the profound” in stylistic terms. One should not forget that there are critics of *xuanxue* in early medieval China and later ages, who would employ the term *xuan* in a pejorative sense, as a type of discourse that is “dark,” obscure, and insubstantial, high-sounding but empty words at best, and at worst, a deliberate obfuscation, which if allowed to grow would spell doom to good government. To avoid misunderstanding, *xuanxue* may be better left untranslated, though not unexplained.

A full discussion of *xuanxue* will have to be undertaken separately in a different venue. These introductory remarks should suffice to place the five studies on *xuanxue* that follow in a general context. A leading political and intellectual figure of the Zhengshi era was He Yan 何晏 (d. 249). Though widely recognized as one of the “founding” figures of *xuanxue*, his contribution to early medieval Chinese philosophy has not been adequately examined. Focusing on the surviving fragments of He Yan’s “Discourse on Dao” (“Dao lun” 道論), “Discourse on the Nameless” (“Wuming lun” 無名論), and other writings, I argue that He Yan offers a coherent account of the Dao and its ethical embodiment in the sage, based on a particular construal of the concepts of “namelessness” and “harmony.” The Dao is nameless and may be described as “nothing” (*wu* 無), as the *Laozi* especially has made clear, but this does not entail that it is “lacking” in any way. On the contrary, for He Yan, the Dao is nameless not because it is ontologically empty but because it is complete, an integral fullness in its pristine state that does not admit of distinctions. This has important ethical and political implications. As little of He Yan’s writings have been preserved, any reconstruction of his explication of Dao cannot but involve a relatively heavy dose of conjecture. In my paper, I refer at some length to the *Renwu zhi* 人物志 (An Account of Human Capacities) by Liu Shao 劉邵, a senior contemporary of He Yan, which may be compared with Zong-qi Cai’s discussion in his essay, “Evolving Practices of *Guan* and Liu Xie’s [劉勰, ca. 465–ca. 532] Theory of Literary Interpretation,” in the companion volume.

Zhengshi *xuanxue* is represented especially by He Yan and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249). The two studies by Jude Chua and Tze-ki Hon are

devoted to the latter and complement each other well. Wang Bi's influence on the subsequent development of Chinese philosophy is immense. Though politically a protégé of He Yan, Wang Bi proved more than the former's equal in philosophical accomplishment. Wang broke new ground in radically reinterpreting the *Yijing* and the *Laozi*, and in so doing, perhaps more than anyone else had, brought into focus some of the key questions that shaped philosophical discourse in early medieval China. In his study, Chua focuses on the semiotic and political roots of Wang Bi's interpretation of the *Laozi*, whereas Hon undertakes a detailed analysis of the political dimension of Wang Bi's *Yijing* commentary.

For Chua, fundamentally it is Wang Bi's analysis of the relationship between "names" (*ming* 名) and "forms" (*xing* 形), or more precisely the priority of forms over names, that provides a basis for his larger philosophical enterprise. "All names arise from forms," as Wang Bi declares; "never has a form arisen from a name" (53). This finds a ready parallel in the relationship between moral substance and reputation—without the former, Wang Bi is saying, the latter would be empty, which is also to say that the promise of fame and the benefit that goes with it will not yield genuine moral order. For this reason, the sage-ruler abides by the "nameless" and "nonaction" (*wuwei* 無為) in realizing peace and order, the desired political outcome. It is this and not any metaphysical logic that guides Wang Bi's new interpretation of Dao as "nothing" or "nonbeing" (*wu*). In other words, the move from a theory of language to ethics and politics and finally to metaphysics is facilitated not so much by philosophical means as by literary "equivocation." Seen in this light, Chua also argues, some of the main differences in current Wang Bi scholarship can be resolved.

For Hon, a close reading of Wang Bi's *Yijing* commentary shows how Wang carefully negotiated a view of government that reflects the political realities of his day, seeking a delicate balance between the need for centralized control and local collaboration, and between decisive reform and prudence in implementation. Importantly, Hon compares Wang Bi's understanding of the *Yijing* with that of several Eastern Han commentators, a subject that has not been addressed in any detail by Western scholars previously. Whereas Eastern Han scholars typically focused on the images of the trigrams or hexagrams and devised elaborate techniques to allow the interpreter to map out fully the perceived system of hexagrams and their cosmological references, Wang Bi took a different approach in arguing that the hexagrams are symbols that depict concrete situations and affairs, bringing into view the dynamics of change. Applied to politics, what is critical is how the ruler understands and responds to

each situation, and how he is able to employ the different elements at play, such as the six lines of a hexagram, to contribute to the good of the larger whole.

Together with Wang Bi, Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312) helped to secure the place of *xuanxue* in the history of Chinese philosophy. A brilliant interpreter of the *Zhuangzi*, Guo Xiang earned the praise of his contemporaries as being “second only to Wang Bi.”¹⁴ Indeed, Guo’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, notwithstanding its possible indebtedness to the earlier effort of Xiang Xiu 向秀 (ca. 227–280), was instrumental to the transmission of the Daoist classic itself.¹⁵ Brook Ziporyn puts forward a provocative interpretation of the concept of *li* 理—the underlying “pattern,” “principle,” or “coherence” of things and affairs—in Wang Bi and Guo Xiang.

The concept of *li* figures centrally in early medieval Chinese intellectual discourse and has impacted strongly the development of both Chinese Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism. The general scholarly consensus is that whereas Wang Bi traces all phenomena to a single ontological principle, Guo Xiang locates the meaning of Dao in the plenitude and diversity of beings. In direct opposition to this view, Ziporyn argues that it is Wang Bi who developed “a theory of distinctive individual principles of things” (97 and 127), and that for Guo Xiang there is only one “principle” that underlies the phenomenal world—namely, that of “naturalness” or “self-so-ness” (*ziran* 自然). Whereas for Wang Bi, a “mini-Dao,” so to speak, informs each concrete situation—a point that recalls Tze-ki Hon’s analysis of Wang Bi’s reading of the *Yijing*—for Guo Xiang, *ziran* signifies an entity as such—its “true self” and “the very process of its becoming” (120).

In this sense, while it would be appropriate to speak of “principles” in Wang Bi’s new account of Dao, Guo Xiang’s *li* signals but the facticity of being, prior to the arising of value distinction, emotional attachment, and other “traces” of experience; as such, *li* is no principle at all, if we mean by it an underlying, immanent structure that sets out the particular meaning, value, or *raison d’être* of a thing. If accepted, this would change considerably the way in which the history of Chinese philosophy has been written. Ziporyn also distinguishes between an “ironic” and “non-ironic” sense of Dao and *li*, which form the background to not only the philosophy of Wang Bi and Guo Xiang but also *xuanxue* as a whole.

With the close of the Zhengshi era and the passing of He Yan and Wang Bi in 249, as studies of Wei-Jin thought often assert, the first phase of *xuanxue* also came to an end. The next chapter of the *xuanxue*

story is usually given to the “Seven Worthies (or Sages) of the Bamboo Grove” (*zhulin qixian* 竹林七賢), a remarkable group of intellectuals who were gifted not only philosophically but also artistically, and who enjoy extraordinary recognition even today. Among them, Xi Kang 嵇康 (or Ji Kang in modern Chinese pronunciation, 223/224–262), Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), and Xiang Xiu are generally recognized as particularly important for their contribution to Chinese music, poetry, and philosophy.

In terms of age, they were contemporaries of He Yan and Wang Bi; as such, they do not constitute a second generation of *xuanxue* scholars. However, they did have to contend with the harsh political realities that appeared after the Zhengshi era, when the Wei government came under the control of Sima Shi 司馬師 (208–255) and Sima Zhao 司馬昭 (211–265), the two sons of Sima Yi, who were more than keen in eliminating any opposition to their dominance. Xi Kang was related to the Cao family by marriage and died at the hand of the Sima regime. Ulrike Middendorf, in her study of Xi Kang’s famous essay, “Sheng wu aile lun” 聲無哀樂論 (Discourse on [the nature of] sounds [as] not having sorrow or joy)—a work deemed so important and of such influence that no self-respecting intellectual in early medieval China could afford to ignore¹⁶—seeks to bring out its structure and political undertones.

Middendorf first provides a concise account of the Confucian view of music and shows how the concept of “harmony,” or more precisely “harmonious sound” (*hesheng* 和聲), undergirds Xi Kang’s musical theory and political philosophy. Harmony captures more than a musical ideal; it brings into view a conception of the nature of the sage, as Xi Kang plays on the “paronomasia” (143) of the two Chinese words, *shēng* 聲 (sound) and *shèng* 聖 (sage), and a vision of political order—a vision that, perhaps surprisingly, has a “Xunzian ring” to it (153). Furthermore, as Middendorf argues, Xi Kang’s essay should be understood in the context of the political turmoil of his day. This study connects well with the chapter on He Yan and Tze-ki Hon’s discussion of Wang Bi. The relationship between “names” and “actuality” and the concept of *li* (principle or coherence) also feature centrally in Xi Kang’s essay, which invites comparison with the studies by Jude Chua and Brook Ziporyn. Sharing basically the same philosophical vocabulary and grappling with the same fundamental issues in ethics and politics, *xuanxue* discourses understandably strike a similar pose. Family resemblances, however, do not translate into uniformity. What these studies show is that *xuanxue* is richly complex. As opposed to being a homogeneous school of thought, one could say it constitutes, rather, a

field of contested meaning, in which different interpretations of Dao, especially their application in ethics and politics, are put forward for debate. Middendorf's paper also contains extensive references to the secondary literature, which should prove useful to students of Wei-Jin thought and culture.

The Jin dynasty came to an end in 420, followed by a series of short-lived dynasties in both north and south China. While "pure conversation" continued with undiminished rigor, debating old *xuanxue* favorites such as "nourishing life," "words and meaning," and "sounds not having sorrow or joy,"¹⁷ it did not produce too many new ideas. No doubt, *xuanxue* was made a part of the official curriculum, but it was religious Daoism and Buddhism that saw the most exhilarating development.

Religious Daoism has deep roots, but as an organized religion its historical beginnings may be traced to the Eastern Han dynasty, with the establishment of the "Way of the Celestial Master" (Tianshi dao 天師道).¹⁸ As is well known, the founding of the Tianshi dao is predicated on a new revelation of the Dao given to Zhang Ling 張陵 (or Zhang Daoling 張道陵, as he is also called, in recognition of his achievement in Dao) in 142 by the "Most High Lord Lao," that is, the divine Laozi. A crucial issue in the study of early religious Daoism is the relationship between the Way of the Celestial Master and local, "popular" religious beliefs and practices. This is the issue that Chi-tim Lai examines in his contribution to this volume.

In particular, drawing from a large number of religious Daoist sources, Lai focuses on the ritual of submitting "personal writs" (*shoushu* 手書) to the divine officials of "heaven, earth, and water"—an act of confession for the expiation of sin, which is understood to be the direct cause of diseases and calamities—as a unifying thread that binds the various strands of early Celestial Master Daoist beliefs and rituals together. The "Three Officials" (*sanguan* 三官) are seen to be the very "emanations of the *qi* of the Dao (道氣)" (187), who represent the "correct law" (*zhengfa* 正法) and with whom the devotees enter into a solemn covenant (182). While the early Tianshi dao cannot but be indebted to certain local religious traditions, as a comparison with some of the Han "apocryphal" literature (*chenwei* 讖緯) and "tomb-quelling texts" (*zhenmu wen* 鎮墓文) demonstrates, it distinguishes itself through its conception of the divine administration of justice and the promise of redemption through confession and petition to celestial officials. Many of the examples that Lai cites show vividly not only the pervasive concern with disease and morality but also the centrality of the family

in the early medieval Chinese religious imagination, a theme Stephen Bokenkamp examines closely in his study here.

During the Eastern Jin dynasty, the rapidly growing religious Daoist tradition was ripe for reform and expansion. Two new sects emerged—namely, the Shangqing 上清 (commonly translated as “Highest Clarity” or “Highest Purity”) and Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure).¹⁹ Bokenkamp’s essay focuses on the latter, especially its alleged borrowings from Buddhism. “Influence” is never simple. Rather than seeing the Lingbao masters simplistically as “surrendering” to Buddhist insights, Bokenkamp argues cogently that they “explicitly manipulate them in ways that served to reassert traditional Chinese values, to answer certain questions, or solve certain problems” (204). The central notion of “rebirth” in Lingbao scriptures may have been taken from Buddhism, but the way in which it is interpreted in the light of family ties and concerns, including the fate of one’s departed ancestors, renders it distinctively Chinese. The hermeneutic thrust of Bokenkamp’s approach brings into sharp relief the need to take into account the intended audience of Daoist scriptures, and what matters to them. If the Tianshi dao of the Eastern Han can be seen as a “reformation” of Chinese popular religion, as Lai suggests, resulting in a new religious Daoist identity, Lingbao Daoism saw its mission as reforming existing Daoist practices, directing its numerous injunctions not at Buddhism or local cults but at the Daoist community itself. The two essays by Lai and Bokenkamp both bring out important ethical issues that confronted the development of religious Daoism in early medieval China. Bokenkamp’s may also be profitably compared with the essay by Robert Campany, “Narrative in the Self-Presentation of Transcendence-Seekers,” in the companion volume.

Regardless of when Buddhism was first introduced into China, by the late Eastern Han dynasty it was beginning to make its presence felt.²⁰ The period of disunity that followed proved conducive to the flourishing of new ideas and practices, and yielded fertile ground for Buddhism to sink its roots in China. There was then an urgent need to explain Buddhist doctrines and to translate Buddhist terms and concepts into Chinese. One important hermeneutical tool that emerged in this context was *geyi* 格義, usually translated as “matching concepts” or “matching meanings.” By means of *geyi*, as it is generally understood, individual Buddhist terms and concepts were matched with existing Chinese, especially Daoist, terms, which then made it possible for the new foreign religion to find ready acceptance in early medieval China. But is this really what *geyi* meant?

Victor Mair challenges the conventional understanding of *geyi* and argues that it “was not a translation technique at all but an exegetical method” (227), designed specifically to handle the large supply of numbered lists of concepts such as the four noble truths and the twelve links of dependent origination in Buddhist texts. It did not work, according to Mair, and was phased out quickly, for unlike the Indian tradition, the Chinese evidently did not invest nearly as much in organizing and presenting their ideas in enumerated lists. How, then, did *geyi* come to be understood as “matching concepts” and assigned a central role in the story of the Buddhist “conquest” of China? Mair traces this also in his analysis, which is certain to ignite debates among students of Chinese Buddhism.

The development of Buddhism in early medieval China is nothing less than spectacular. Both in the north and the south, Buddhism gained fervent following by a large number of elite clans, including royal families, and began to spread widely among the populace. Royal patronage was instrumental to the success of Buddhism then. Emperor Wen 文 of Song (Liu Yilong 劉義隆, r. 424–453), for example, is well known to have been a staunch supporter of the Buddhist faith. During the Southern Qi dynasty, the devotion of Xiao Zilang 蕭子良 (460–494), Prince of Jingling 竟陵, to Buddhism is equally well known. In the north, although twice, in 446 and 547, Buddhism came under the attack of the state, it flourished throughout the Northern Dynasties. Of all the royal patrons of Buddhism during this time, probably none was more devout and influential than Emperor Wu 武 of Liang (Xiao Yan 蕭衍, r. 502–549) in the south, who was not only a generous benefactor but also a member of the *sangha*, who several times “gave himself” (*sheshen* 捨身) to the Buddhist order; that is to say, surrendered his status as emperor and lived as a monk.

Emperor Wu is often praised in Buddhist sources as the “emperor bodhisattva” par excellence. Indeed, the Emperor took to identifying himself as the “Pusajie dizi huangdi” 菩薩戒弟子皇帝, “Emperor-disciple of the bodhisattva precepts,” as Kathy Ku points out in her study. Moreover, Ku argues that in this case the “emperor bodhisattva” ideal should be understood more finely in terms of the Indian tradition of *Buddharāja*, that is, someone who is Buddha and *rāja* (king) at once (275). Even more specifically, on the basis of not only textual but also iconographic evidence, Ku suggests that Emperor Wu looked to the tradition of the *Buddharāja* Maitreya in his attempt to fashion an exemplary Buddhist kingdom in southern China. This goes beyond clarifying a technical point in the history of Chinese Buddhism, but brings into

view both religious and political motivation in the spread of Buddhism. Like Mair's study, this, too, should provoke some debate.

Religious Daoism and Buddhism are large topics, but the four essays outlined above should give some insight into the lush religious landscape of early medieval China. Several essays in the companion volume also touch on religion—besides Campany's contribution referred to earlier, Timothy Wai-keung Chan's study of "'Jade Flower' and the Motif of Mystic Excursion in Early Religious Daoist Poetry," Cynthia Chennault's "Representing the Uncommon: Temple-Visit Lyrics from the Liang to Sui Dynasties," and Mu-chou Poo's "Justice, Morality, and Skepticism in Six Dynasties Ghost Stories" should be of particular interest.²¹

The two essays that close this volume address larger themes, cutting across different domains of the Chinese intellectual world. As mentioned, Alan Berkowitz scrutinizes the widespread phenomenon of reclusion in early medieval China. The ideal of reclusion can hardly be reduced to a kind of one-dimensional "hiding" from political turmoil, although there is no denying that politics was fraught with peril at that time. Those who turned to reclusion did so for a variety of reasons, as Berkowitz points out after a historical introduction, including what we would call today lifestyle choices. Nor should reclusion be branded simplistically a partisan "Confucian" or "Daoist" pursuit. Significantly, whereas in ancient China reclusion entailed sociopolitical withdrawal, many early medieval Chinese recluses remained deeply engaged both socially and politically, though they might have renounced public office. Indeed, there is little reason why "high-minded" or worthy individuals should not be "allowed to freely transition between reclusion and office, office and reclusion" (307). "Reclusion within the court" (307) and "noetic reclusion" (308), that is, reclusion as a state of mind, further added to the complexity of the tradition. As reclusion became an integral part of mainstream high culture, embraced by the scholar-official class as a whole, it found expression in a range of forms and contexts. This study makes a strong case for a "thick" analysis of early medieval Chinese culture, probing beyond abstract ideological motivation to uncover the contexts and conditions that mattered to real individuals.

The concept of "destiny" (*ming* 命) is probably one of the most powerful concepts in the history of Chinese thought. Its presence in Chinese culture is virtually ubiquitous, from antiquity to the present. Yuet-Keung Lo surveys ideas of destiny and retribution in early medieval China. The concept of *ming*, of course, has a long history; but the decline of the Han dynasty threw into question earlier assumptions

and compelled reinterpretation. Does *ming* entail a kind of “hard” determinism that precludes human intervention, or could a “softer” rendition of *ming* accommodate the efficacy of moral pursuits?

Framed this way, Lo examines the concept of “retribution” (*chengfu* 承負) in the *Taiping jing* 太平經 and the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary on the *Laozi*, both important scriptures of early religious Daoism, and how it negotiates between “hard destiny” and “soft destiny.” The religious Daoists were certainly not alone in this effort; as Lo goes on to show, the concept of destiny plays an equally important role in early medieval Confucian learning and *xuanxue* philosophy. In particular, the concept of *ziran* in Wang Bi and Guo Xiang reflects different attempts at coming to terms with the perceived reality of *ming*. “Hard” destiny proved difficult to refute, giving rise to a widely shared and deeply felt “romantic spirit of general despair” (336) among the literati. Finally, Lo turns to the Buddhist concept of karma, arguing that its success “lies in its removal of the contradictions inherent in the *chengfu* theory by introducing the idea of individual karma and rejecting the worldview of hard destiny” (337), thereby opening “an optimistic vista” to “a sustainable belief in human ability to mould a person’s destiny” (342).

The studies by Berkowitz and Lo both bring into view the intricate terrain of early medieval Chinese philosophy and religion, which probably no single book could exhaust. The present volume makes but a modest effort in focusing attention on it, from an interdisciplinary perspective, which we believe offers significant methodological advantage. One consistent message that emerges from these studies, besides the richness of the field, is that the world of philosophy and religion in early medieval China was preoccupied with practical concerns. Even *xuanxue*, which can soar into abstract heights, with its interest in fathoming the roots of all things and affairs in the Dao, proves decidedly “earthbound,” strongly tied to the world of ethics and politics. Philosophers, just as recluses, scholar-officials, princes and emperors, Daoist adepts and Buddhist monks, could not but respond in different ways to the challenges that marked early medieval China, even if some were captivated by the mystery of the Dao or the promise of “otherworldly” transcendence. Together with the nine essays on interpretation and literature in the companion volume, the studies here hope to provide a ready point of departure for further research.

No attempt has been made to standardize the translation of Chinese terms in this or the companion work. For example, whereas Chua emphasizes that *xuanxue* should be understood particularly in the sense of “Studies of the Profound,” Mair opts for “Dark/Abstruse/Mysterious/

Metaphysical Learning” (243), to bring out the different connotations of the term *xuan*. Translation is ultimately a form of interpretation. Some differences, admittedly, are essentially stylistic—for example, whereas Stephen Bokenkamp and I translate “Tianshi dao” as the “Way of the Celestial Master,” Chi-tim Lai prefers “Heavenly Master,” in agreement with a number of other scholars of religious Daoism. Nevertheless, the principle of authorial judgment takes precedence. The different translations on offer serve to invite a fuller exploration of the world of philosophy and religion in early medieval China.

Chinese characters are provided for important terms and extended quotations, so that the reader can engage the primary sources directly. The characters for the Chinese dynasties, however, will appear only in the Introduction and are not repeated in the essays. Transliterations are omitted generally for phrases that exceed four characters. The Chinese texts cited are punctuated in the way the authors understand them. All Chinese terms are given in *Hanyu pinyin*, except for the names of some authors who publish in English (e.g., Wing-tsit Chan), titles of books and articles, and some proper names (e.g., Taipei, Yangtze). Wade-Giles transliterations are also kept in quotations, to preserve the integrity of the original, with *pinyin* equivalents given in parenthesis.

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Notes

1. “Early medieval China” is not an exact term. It is now generally used by Western scholars to refer to the period of Chinese history that spans between the fall of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and the founding of the Sui 隋 dynasty (589–618), corresponding to the period known as “Wei Jin Nanbeichao” 魏晉南北朝 (Wei, Jin, and the Southern and Northern Dynasties) in Chinese historiography. However, few would

object if the term is stretched fifty or so years at either end; that is to say, from the last years of the Eastern or Later Han dynasty (25–220) to the early years of the Tang 唐 (618–907), after which China may be said to have entered its high Middle Ages.

For readers who may not be familiar with early medieval China, the Wei (220–265) followed the Han in official Chinese “dynastic” histories, although it had to share the “Central States” (*zhongguo* 中國) or more generally the “world under heaven” (*tianxia* 天下) with two rival kingdoms—the Shu 蜀 (221–263) in the Sichuan area and the Wu 吳 (222–280) south of the Yangtze River. The term “Three Kingdoms” (*sanguo* 三國) is thus also used to designate this period of Chinese history. The Jin (265–420) succeeded the Wei and reunified China for a short time. Beset with internal struggles and external threats from the start, however, it suffered a major defeat in 311 by the Xiongnu 匈奴 under Liu Cong 劉聰 (d. 318), who captured the Jin capital Luoyang 洛陽. The Jin ruling house rallied around Emperor Min 愍 (Sima Ye 司馬鄴, r. 313–317) in Chang’an 長安; but the respite was temporary and the Western Jin dynasty (265–316) soon came to an end. The Jin court was reconstituted in Jiankang 建康 (modern Nanjing), east of Luoyang, south of the Yangtze River, under Sima Rui 睿 (276–322), who assumed the title King of Jin in 317 and a year later, Emperor Yuan 元, the first emperor of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420).

The Eastern Jin enjoyed a period of relative peace. The large-scale migration of especially upper-class families from the north transformed not only the political scene but also the southern Chinese cultural milieu. After the Eastern Jin, a series of four dynasties ruled the south; namely, Song 宋 (420–479), Qi 齊 (479–502), Liang 梁 (502–557), and Chen 陳 (557–589). These are the “Southern Dynasties”; the Song is often referred to as “Liu-Song” 劉宋, as the authors here do, after the name of its rulers, to distinguish it from the later Song dynasty (960–1279). In discussions of post-Han developments in the south, the term “Six Dynasties” (*liuchao* 六朝) is also generally used, as it is in some of the essays here, which refers to the Kingdom of Wu, the Eastern Jin, and the four Southern Dynasties. All six had their capital in Jiankang (or Jianye 建鄴, as the city was called when it served as the capital of Wu). In the north, from the start of the fourth century to 439, some sixteen kingdoms were founded, mainly by members of the Xiongnu, Qie 羯, Xianbei 鮮卑, Di 氐, and Qiang 羌 ethnic groups, collectively called “Hu” 胡. There were more than five such groups, and more than sixteen kingdoms rose and fell during this period; nevertheless, traditional Chinese history, written from the ethnic Han perspective, uniformly laments the invasion of the five Hu “barbarian” groups and the “Sixteen Kingdoms” that “ravaged” the north. In 439, the Northern Wei 北魏 (386–534) under its Xianbei ruler Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾 triumphed over its rivals and largely unified the north. This marked

the start of the Northern Dynasties. The Northern Wei eventually was split into two and succeeded by the Northern Qi 北齊 (550–577) and the Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581). For a historical introduction to early medieval China, see Wolfram Eberhard, *A History of China*, fourth edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), chapter VII.

Though “early medieval China” is now widely used, we are aware that some scholars may consider the label “medieval” inappropriate, for a significant divide separates post-Han China from medieval Europe in political, economic, and other terms. “Early *imperial* China” may be a less problematic alternative, according to this view, although it does not quite distinguish the Han from the period of disunity that followed; or, to avoid the debate altogether, “Wei Jin Nanbeichao” or “Six Dynasties” should be used. This is not the issue that the authors in this project set out to resolve. What is not in dispute is that the period of Chinese history in question is important and perhaps has not been given sufficient attention in Western scholarship. The excellent essays in *State and Society in Early Medieval China*, edited by Albert Dien (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), focusing primarily on social and political history, provided a much needed impetus for research in this field. The recent arrival of Zong-qi Cai’s edited volume, *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004) hopefully signals renewed interest in early medieval China. Between 1990 and 2004, there are fine collections and individual studies such as Charles Holcombe’s *In the Shadow of the Han: Literati Thought and Society at the Beginning of the Southern Dynasties* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), Robert F. Campany’s *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), Alan Berkowitz’s *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey, eds., *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001). This is not an exhaustive list. Nevertheless, there remains much room for further, especially interdisciplinary research in English on early medieval China.

2. Studies of *xuanxue* in the West focus primarily on individual thinkers. See, for example, Donald Holzman, *La vie et la pensee de Hi Kang (223–262 AP. J.-C.)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), and *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi, A.D. 210–263* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). Holzman’s research has contributed significantly to the study of early medieval China. Some of his published essays have been collected and reprinted in Holzman, *Immortals, Festivals, and Poetry in Medieval China: Studies in Social and Intellectual History* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Variorum, 1998). The following works, listed in alphabetical

order, should also be of interest to students of *xuanxue*: Alan K. L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-tzu* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), and “Zhong Hui’s *Laozi* Commentary and the Debate on Capacity and Nature in Third-Century China,” *Early China* 28 (2003): 101–59; Robert G. Henricks, trans., *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China: The Essays of Hsi K’ang* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Richard J. Lynn, trans. *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Richard B. Mather, “The Controversy over Conformity and Naturalness during the Six Dynasties,” *History of Religions* 9, no. 2–3 (1969–1970): 160–80, and his monumental translation, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World by Liu I-ch’ing with Commentary by Liu Chün* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976); Vincent Y. C., Shih, trans., *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons by Liu Hsieh: A Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959); J. K. Shyrock, trans., *The Study of Human Abilities: The Jen Wu Chih of Liu Shao* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1937; reprinted, New York: Paragon, 1966); Tang Yung-t’ung (Tang Yongtong), “Wang Bi’s New Interpretation of the *I Ching* and the *Lun-yü*,” trans. Walter Liebenthal, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 10 (1947): 124–61; Rudolf G. Wagner’s three-volume study, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi’s Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), and *A Chinese Reading of the Daodejing: Wang Bi’s Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Ying-shih Yü, “Individualism and the Neo-Taoist Movement in Wei-Chin China,” in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, ed. Donald Munro (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1985), 121–55; and Brook Ziproyn, *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). Also see the general discussion by Paul Demiéville in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 1, *The Ch’in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), chapter 16, “Philosophy and Religion from Han to Sui,” 808–78. In Chinese, the following deserve special mention: Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Wei-Jin xuanxue lungao* 魏晉玄學論稿, in *Tang Yongtong xueshu lunwenji* 湯用彤學術論文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983); Wang Baoxuan 王

葆玟, *Zhengshi xuanxue* 正始玄學 (Ji'nan: Qi-Lu, 1987); Wang Xiaoyi 王曉毅, *Zhongguo wenhua de qingliu* 中國文化的清流 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue, 1991), and Wang Bi pingzhuan 王弼評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue, 1996); and Xu Kangsheng 許抗生, et al., *Wei-Jin xuanxue shi* 魏晉玄學史 (Xi'an: Shanxi Shifan daxue, 1989).

3. The Han dynasty lexicon, *Shuowen jiezi* gives two meanings for the word “xuan”: (1) “hidden and far” (*youyuan* 幽遠), and (2) “black with dark red” (黑而有赤色); see Xu Shen 許慎 (fl. 100), with commentary by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1988), 159.
4. For example, see the poems “Qiyue” 七月 (Mao no. 154), “Caishu” 采芣 (Mao no. 222), and “Hanyi” 韓奕 (Mao no. 261). In some poems, it may be more generally rendered “dark”—e.g., “xuan niao” 玄鳥 (Mao no. 303 “Xuan niao”) and “xuan wang” 玄王 (Mao no. 304 “Changfa” 長發) may be taken to mean “dark bird” and “dark king,” respectively, although the former has also been more specifically identified as the swallow. See Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937), 275–77.
5. The poem “He cao bu huang” 何草不黃 (Mao no. 234) opens with these lines: “Every plant is yellow [*huang*]; everyday we march (何草不黃, 何日不行) . . . / Every plant is purple [*xuan*]; every man is torn from his wife (何草不玄, 何人不矜). . . .” As translated in James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, volume 4, *The She King* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 424. Cf. Waley, *The Book of Songs*, 121.
6. The sixth or top line of hexagram #2, “Kun” 坤, reads: “Dragons war in the wilds; their blood, dark-red and yellow” (戰龍於野, 其血玄黃). The “Wenyan” 文言 commentary to this hexagram explains, “Now, ‘dark-red and yellow’ refer to a mixture [of the color] of heaven and earth. Heaven is dark red [in color], and earth is yellow” (夫玄黃者, 天地之雜也, 天玄而地黃). See Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648), *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, in *Zhouyi zhushu ji buzhen* 周易注疏及補正, *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 edition (Taipei: Shijie, 1968), 1.7a–7b.
7. The Chinese text reads: “天者陽, 始於東北, 故色元 [=玄] 也。地者陰, 始於西南, 故色黃也。” As cited in Li Dingzuo 李鼎祚 (Tang dynasty) comp., *Zhouyi jijie* 周易集解, in *Zhouyi zhushu ji buzhen*, *Shisanjing zhushu* edition (Taipei: Shijie, 1968), 37.
8. Heshang gong, or the “old master by the river,” is a legendary figure who is said to have taught and transmitted his commentary on the *Laozi* to Emperor Wen 文 of Han (r. 179–157 BCE). I would date the commentary to the Eastern Han period, although some scholars are of the view that it is a later product of the Southern Dynasties; see my *Two Visions of the Way*, chapter 3, and “The Formation of the He-shang Kung [Heshang gong] Legend,” in *Sages and Filial Sons: Mythology and Archaeology in Ancient China*, ed. Julia Ching and R. W. L. Guisso (Hong Kong:

- Chinese University Press, 1991), 101–34. Consistently, the Heshang gong commentary renders “*xuan*” as “heaven” (e.g., commentary to *Laozi* chapters 1, 6, 15, and 65). See Zheng Chenghai 鄭成海, *Laozi Heshang gong zhu jiaoli* 老子河上公注斟理 (Taipei: Zhonghua, 1971), 9, 40, 93, and 397. The *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to the *Laozi*, a religious Daoist document that is generally traced to around 200 CE, similarly interprets *xuan* as heaven (chapters 10 and 15); see Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaozheng* 老子想爾注校證 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1991), 13 and 18. The influential Eastern Han commentator Gao You 高誘 (fl. 205–212) also understood *xuan* to mean heaven in his commentary to the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (e.g., chapter 1, “Yuan Dao xun” 原道訓); see *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, *Xinbian zhuzi jicheng* 新編諸子集成 edition (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1989), 23 and 36.
9. See, for example, the *Song shu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983), 93.2293–94; cf. *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 2.45–46. Also see *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983), 16.315. For a discussion, see Wang Baoxuan, *Zhengshi xuanxue*, 3. References to the standard “dynastic” histories in this book are all from the modern Zhonghua shuju 中華書局 punctuated edition and will be cited by their *juan* 卷 and page numbers.
 10. Wang Baoxuan, *Zhengshi xuanxue*, 7, discusses the earliest references to this term in Chinese sources.
 11. On the former, see my *Two Visions of the Way*, 32–34, and Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China*, 7–15; on the latter, see my “What are the ‘Four Roots of Capacity and Nature’?” in *Wisdom in China and the West*, ed. Vincent Shen and Willard G. Oxtoby (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2004), 143–84.
 12. These two debates have been translated in Henricks, *Philosophy and Argumentation in Third-Century China*, 21–70 and 135–43.
 13. For example, see Xu Kangsheng et al., *Wei-Jin xuanxue shi*, 27; and Gao Chenyang 高晨陽, *Ru Dao huitong yu Zhengshi xuanxue* 儒道會通與正始玄學 (Ji’nan: Qi-Lu, 2000), chapter 7.
 14. *Shishuo xinyu*, 4.17, commentary by Liu Jun 劉峻 (462–521), citing the *Wenshi zhuan* 文士傳 (Biographies of Literati); see Yang Yong 楊勇, *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian* 世說新語校箋 (Taipei: Zhengwen, 1992), 158, n. 2. Cf. *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 50.1396, biography of Yu Ai 庾敳.
 15. On this point, see Tang Yijie 湯一介, *Guo Xiang yu Wei-Jin xuanxue* 郭象與魏晉玄學 (Wuhan: Hubei renmin, 1983).
 16. Xi Kang’s “Sheng wu aile lun” and Zhong Hui’s 鍾會 (225–264) treatise on four views of the root relationship between capacity and nature (“Caixing siben” 才性四本), according to Wang Sengqian 王僧虔 (426–485), were standard fare for debaters during the Southern Qi dynasty; see *Nan Qi shu* 南齊書, 33.598.

17. According to *Shishuo xinyu*, 4.21, “when Chancellor Wang Tao [Wang Dao 王導] emigrated south of the Yangtze River, he conversed on only three topics: ‘Musical Sounds Are Without Sorrow or Joy’ (*Sheng wu ai-lo* [Sheng wu aile]), ‘Nourishment of Life’ (*Yang-sheng*), and ‘Words Fully Express Meanings’ (*Yen chin-i* [Yan jinyi 言盡意]), and nothing else.” As translated in Richard Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü: A New Account of Tales of the World*, 102; cf. Yang Yong *Shishuo xinyu jiaojian*, 162.
18. For a general introduction, see Barbara Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Movements,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 134–64.
19. See the studies by Isabelle Robinet on the “Shangqing—Highest Clarity” and Yamada Toshiaki on “The Lingbao School” in *Daoism Handbook*, 196–224 and 225–55, respectively.
20. See Tang Yongtong, *Han Wei liang-Jin Nanbeichao Fojiao shi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1983), part 1.
21. Zong-qi Cai’s study on Liu Xie has been mentioned earlier. In addition, the companion volume also features the following: David R. Knechtges, “Court Culture in the Late Eastern Han: The Case of the Hongdu Gate School”; Jui-lung Su, “The Patterns and Changes of Literary Patronage in the Han and Wei”; Michael Nylan, “Wandering in the Ruins: The *Shuijing zhu* Reconsidered”; and Daniel Hsieh, “Fox as Trickster in Early Medieval China.”

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1

Sage Nature and the Logic of Namelessness

Reconstructing He Yan's Explication of Dao

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There is little question that the concept of *wu* 無, variously translated as “nothing,” “nonbeing,” and “negativity,” is central to the early medieval Chinese intellectual enterprise. Famously, the *Jin shu* 晉書 (History of the Jin dynasty [265–420]) relates that during the Zhengshi 正始 reign period (240–249) of the Wei dynasty (220–265), He Yan 何晏 (d. 249), Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), and others established the view, on the basis of their interpretation of the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, that all beings “have their roots in *wu*” (以無為本).¹ In this context, the concept of *wu* serves to bring out the meaning of Dao, which according to the *Laozi* can only be described as utterly profound and impenetrable, and in that sense “dark” or “mysterious” (*xuan* 玄), especially in that it remains “nameless” despite the fact that it is the “beginning” and “mother” of all phenomena.² The new sound of the Zhengshi era, to borrow a phrase from the fifth-century work *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, soon gained currency, which later scholars aptly labeled “inquiry into the profound” or “learning of the mysterious Dao” (*xuanxue* 玄學) and which captured the imagination of the educated elite well into the sixth century.³

The Wei-Jin rendition of *wu* is often presented as an “ontological” breakthrough, against earlier “cosmological” accounts that trace the origins of beings to the transformation of vital “energies” or “pneumas” (*qi* 氣).⁴ As a general characterization, the accent on ontology is useful because it highlights a key concern in early medieval Chinese thinking. Nevertheless, this does not render the meaning of *wu* explicit. Moreover, it should not be assumed that ontology was the only concern or that *xuanxue* was a monolithic movement. Metaphysics

and cosmology served a practical end, weaving an integral discourse with ethics and politics—*wu* not only “originates things” (*kaiwu* 開物) but also “completes affairs” (*chengwu* 成務), as the *Jin shu* goes on to say in its review of Zhengshi learning—and there was considerable disagreement among proponents of *xuanxue* on a variety of issues, such as hermeneutics and law. The concept of *wu* may have provided a point of departure, but it generated competing analyses of order, at least partly as a response to the perceived decline of the rule of Dao in an age of pronounced disunity after the demise of the Han empire (206 BCE–220 CE).

At the ethical level, the “nothingness” of Dao brought new questions that forced open the critical space that had been filled by Confucian traditions. Does *wu* annihilate Confucian virtues or can it subsume them under its mysterious fold? Can “nothingness” be realized or “embodied” (*ti* 體) in one’s being, and what does “embodying *wu*” (*tiwu* 體無) mean? Does it signal radical transcendence and thus a mystical state, or should it be understood metaphorically as pointing to a mode of being characterized by deep insight into the nature of things and a heightened spirituality? While any answer rests on a prior understanding of *wu*, to He Yan, Wang Bi, and most of their contemporaries, it is also inseparably linked to a conception of the nature of the “sage” (*shengren* 聖人), the human exemplar represented especially by Confucius. This is because only a sage can realize Dao completely in his being and action. Indeed, the entire project of order hinges on this; but is it the case that the sage is able to realize Dao because of his special inborn nature, or does “sagehood” follow from embodying *wu*? Related to this, as we shall see, is the often cited but easily misunderstood debate between He Yan and Wang Bi on the place of the “emotions” (*qing* 情) in the nature of the sage. As an ethical ideal, embodying *wu* naturally finds expression also in “nonaction” (*wuwei* 無為), which likewise forms a part of the mystery of Dao and thus requires explication.

Wei-Jin intellectuals shared similar concerns and a basic philosophical vocabulary. Overlaps in their approaches to the establishment and maintenance of order are to be expected, but they do not amount to uniformity. Rather, especially given the value placed on analytic rigor in “pure conversation” (*qingtan* 清談), the predominant intellectual activity of the time, what one should be able to find is internal coherence for particular conceptions of the mystery of Dao. In what follows, I examine He Yan’s understanding of Dao as *wu*, and the ethical landscape that develops from it. The evidence available is meager, and one will have to look beyond He Yan to search for clues, but what

can be gathered seems to reflect a coherent argument that centers on a particular construal of the “nameless” as “harmony,” which applies equally to the Dao and the sage. Following from this, as we shall see, He Yan could not but conclude that embodying *wu* was not a genuine ethical option for the “common” or “average” person. This provoked a sharp response from Wang Bi, for whom embodying *wu* was pivotal to the quest for sagehood. I will consider briefly the disagreement between them later in this discussion, so as to bring out a sense of the vibrancy of Zhengshi learning and the unfolding of *xuanxue*.

Dao and the Nameless

He Yan died accused of crimes against the state and perhaps for that reason most of his writings did not survive.⁵ While he was undoubtedly a leader of the early Wei elite, his exact contributions to the intellectual scene cannot be reconstructed with full confidence. As is well known, the Eastern Jin (317–420) scholar Zhang Zhan 張湛 quoted twice from He Yan in his commentary on the *Liezi* 列子.⁶ The two quotations were taken from He Yan’s “Discourse on Dao” (“Dao lun” 道論) and “Discourse on the Nameless” (“Wuming lun” 無名論). Though relatively short, they are demanding and have been read in different ways. In the former, He Yan writes:

Beings depend on *wu* in coming into existence, in becoming what they are. Affairs on account of *wu* come to fruition and become what they are. Now, one tries to speak about *wu*, but no words could describe it; name it, but it has no name; look at it, but it does not have any form; listen to it, but it does not give any sound. Then, indeed, it is clear that the Dao is complete. Thus, it can bring forth sounds and echoes; generate *qi*-energies and things; establish form and spirit; and illuminate light and shadows. What is dark obtains its blackness from it; what is plain obtains its whiteness from it. The carpenter’s square is able to make a square because of it; the compass is able to make a circle because of it. The round and the square obtain their form, but that which gives them their form itself does not have any form. The white and the black obtain their name, but that which gives them their name itself does not have any name.

有之為有，恃無以生。事而為事，由無以成。夫道之而無語，名之而無名，視之而無形，聽之而無聲，則道之全焉。故能昭音響而出氣物，包形神而章光影。玄以之黑，素以之白，矩以之方，規以之圓。圓方得形，而此無形，白黑得名，而此無名也。⁷

The “Discourse on the Nameless” is longer and provides a succinct definition of Dao. For ease of reference, I divide the text into twelve sections. In the translation below, my primary concern is to try to draw out the structure of He Yan’s argument.

1. Acclaimed by the people, [things and affairs] then have a certain name. Without such acclaim, they do not have any such name.
為民所譽，則有名者也。無譽，無名者也。
2. In the case of the sage, however, he assigns a name to what is nameless and assigns acclaim to what is without acclaim. He says the nameless is “Dao” and that which does not have acclaim is “great.”
若夫聖人，名無名，譽無譽。謂無名為道，無譽為大。⁸
3. Then, what is nameless can be said to have a name, and what is without acclaim can be said to have acclaim.
則夫無名者，可以言有名矣。無譽者，可以言有譽矣。
4. But, are they used in the same way as [the names and social recognition attached to] phenomena that can be acclaimed and named? [That is, in assigning a name to the nameless, is the sage saying that it is the same as objects with definite properties that can be praised and named? The implication is that this cannot be the case, as the argument below will demonstrate.]
然與夫可譽可名者豈同用哉？
5. This is analogous to the way in which an entity that does not have anything [i.e., definite properties] is invariably thus [assigned a name as] an entity that has definite properties. [That is, we can describe an entity that does not have any definite properties only in terms of objects that have such properties—literally, “something” (*you*). However, this does not entail that the former is of the same category as the latter, as the next two sections will show.]
此比於無所有，故皆有所有矣。
6. Although [the nameless is mediated by the world of ordinary language and things and is in this sense] in the midst of entities that have definite properties, in principle it still belongs to the category of entities that do not have any such properties and is basically different from entities that have definite properties.
而於有所有之中，當與無所有相從，而與夫有所有者不同。
7. Things of the same kind resonate with each other no matter how far apart; things of different kinds always run counter to each other no matter how near. This may be likened to [the relationship between yin and yang phenomena, in which] the yin in the midst of yang and the yang in the midst of yin will each seek out and follow their own kind. Summer days are a yang phenomenon; yet the summer night [despite

being in the same season as—and hence “near”—the summer day] and the winter day far away belong together to the category of yin. Winter days are a yin phenomenon; yet the winter dawn and the summer day far away are both in the same yang category. Both are different from what is near to them and the same as what is far from them. If we understand fully why they are different in the one case and the same in the other, then we will recognize [the truth of] the discourse on the nameless [presented here].

同類無遠而相應，異類無近而不相遠。⁹譬如陰中之陽，陽中之陰，各以物類自相求從。夏日為陽，而夕夜遠與冬日共為陰。冬日為陰，而朝晝遠與夏日同為陽。皆異於近而同於遠也。詳此異同，而後無名之論可知矣。

8. Now, what was the reason that brought this about [i.e., why did the sage assign the name “Dao” to the nameless]?
凡所以至於此者何哉？
9. The Dao refers precisely to that which does not have anything. From the conception of the universe, [what we can name and perceive] are only objects with definite properties. That [the sage] nonetheless speaks of it [i.e., the nameless] as Dao is due to the fact that phenomena are able to function with regularity [as if traveling back and forth on a roadway, because of the Dao’s] not having any definite properties.
夫道者，惟無所有者也。自天地已來皆有所有矣，然猶謂之道者，以能復用無所有也。
10. Thus, although [the Dao] dwells in the realm of names, its nameless image remains submerged, in the same way that a distant [yin] substance is [buried deep] within a body of yang and we forget that it has other yin kinds far away. [That is, in view of the analysis presented in sections 5–7 above, although the Dao operates in the world of nameable objects, it remains categorically distinct but hidden, and its true namelessness is easily overlooked or misunderstood. A yin presence remains what it is, despite the fact it is embedded in a predominantly yang domain.]
故雖處有名之域，而沒其無名之象，由以在陽之遠體，而忘其自有陰之遠類也。
11. Xiahou Xuan [209–254] said, “Heaven and earth operate in accordance with what is naturally of itself so. The sage functions in accordance with what is naturally of itself so.”
夏侯玄曰：「天地以自然運，聖人以自然用。」
12. What is naturally of itself so is the Dao. The Dao is fundamentally nameless. Thus, Laozi said that he only forced himself to assign a name to it [*Laozi*, chapter 25]. Confucius praised the sage-king Yao as “far-reaching, [whose beneficent accomplishment] no one could name”

[*Lunyu* 論語 8.19]. Later in the same passage, he said that Yao was toweringly majestic in his accomplishment. In this instance, he was forcing himself to give Yao a name, taking a term that is commonly recognized by everyone in the world and applying it to Yao. How could it be otherwise that Yao's accomplishment had a name and Confucius still maintained that no one could name it? Precisely because Yao's accomplishment is nameless, one can therefore justifiably choose from all the names in the world to name it. But is that really its name? This should be sufficient to make clear [the nature of the nameless]; if anyone still fails to comprehend this, it would be like someone who sees the loftiness of Mount Tai but says that the original *qi*-energy is not vast and overflowing.

自然者，道也。道本無名。故老氏曰彊為之名。仲尼稱堯蕩蕩無能名焉。下云巍巍成功。¹⁰ 則彊為之名，取世所知而稱耳。豈有名而更當云無能名焉者邪？夫唯無名，故可得遍以天下之名名之。然豈其名也哉？惟此足喻而終莫悟，是觀泰山崇崛而謂元氣不浩芒者也。¹¹

The Language of *Wu*

From the surviving fragments of He Yan's two "Discourses," three related ideas of particular philosophic interest may be delineated. First, the Dao is "that which does not have anything." Second, the Dao is nameless and complete. Whereas the "Discourse on the Nameless" takes pains to distinguish the nameless Dao from beings, even though one has to rely on ordinary language to approach it, the "Discourse on Dao" connects the Dao's namelessness with its being complete. Third, beings depend on *wu* in coming into existence, which defines what they are. These, of course, need to be explained; but, first, a linguistic point may be in order.

The Dao is that which "does not have anything" (*wu suo you* 無所有). Is "*wu suo you*" a technical term? According to one translator, the phrase should be taken to mean that the Dao "has nothing that it has"; to another, He Yan is saying that the Dao "never possesses anything."¹² The construction "*wu suo x*" is common in early medieval Chinese literature. The "*suo*" in this construction functions as a grammatical marker, which combines with "*x*," usually a verb, to form a noun phrase, the object of *wu*; but generally it does not appear to be semantically significant.¹³ For example, He Yan's commentary to *Lunyu* 15.8 reads: "[智者] 所言皆是，故無所失者也。"¹⁴ Suppose we shorten the second clause to "故無失者也," that is, removing "*suo*" after "*wu*," we would still be reading it in the sense of "therefore [the wise] do

not miss.” Similarly, He Yan’s commentary to *Lunyu* 4.10 contains the phrase, “[君子] 無所貪慕也”—“there is nothing that [the *junzi*] covets or envies.” The same interpretation should hold if the phrase reads “無貪慕也” instead. In Wang Bi’s commentary to the *Laozi*, the people are said to be “無所欲求”: “They do not desire or strive after anything.”¹⁵ If objects of desire are not displayed, Wang Bi also says, then “there is nothing that will disturb the hearts or minds [of the people]” (心無所亂).¹⁶ In these instances also, the presence of “*suo*” does not seriously affect interpretation. In short, “*wu suo you*” here seems to reflect stylistic interest rather than technical philosophical usage or, as one scholar has suggested, Buddhist influence.¹⁷

In He Yan’s definition, the sense in which the Dao is said to “have nothing” remains unclear. Generally, beings (*you* 有) are characterized by definite properties such as form and name. This is a baseline interpretation that should apply to all Wei-Jin thinkers. As such, “*wu suo you*” would mean that the Dao does not have any definite, discernible, or nameable properties. This explains the translation above. Still, it is difficult to pinpoint the meaning of *wu*. Is the Dao so defined because it is something that exists but cannot be described, in which case one may translate *wu* as “nothingness,” or does *wu* signify ontological absence or negation, an abstract “nonbeing” transcending the domain of beings altogether? Moreover, is the concept of *wu* primarily concerned with cosmogony, or does it suggest also a continuing relationship with beings? The *Liezi* evokes the concept of “great change” (*taiyi* 太易), which marks the absolute “beginning” prior to the birth of the cosmos where *qi* is not yet “seen” or manifest (*wei jian qi* 未見氣), and which Zhang Zhan likens to the “great ultimate” (*taiji* 太極) of the *Yijing* 易經 and the “undifferentiated and complete” (*huncheng* 渾成) Dao in the *Laozi*.¹⁸ The term “great change” appears also in several Han works. In one of these, the influential scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) explains, “Great change means *wu*.”¹⁹ Leaving aside the provenance of the concept, is this similar to what He Yan meant by “*wu suo you*”?

On the one hand, for reasons to be explained below, most likely He Yan is suggesting that the Dao refers to an unfathomable “energy” source that eludes sensory perception, a mysterious something, as it were, of which nothing can be said but which gives rise to the transformation of the yin and yang *qi*-energies. Although the Dao does not have phenomenal attributes, it is nonetheless an ontological presence, on which beings depend in becoming what they are. In this respect, He Yan probably would not object to a concept such as “great change” in an account of the cosmogonic process. But, on the other

hand, He Yan did not offer an account of the cosmogonic process. Of greater concern seems to be the continuing presence of Dao in the workings of nature, which the concept of *wu* can help to illuminate. In other words, it may be assumed that the language of *wu* was introduced for a reason. However, this need not imply that there is something wrong with the established cosmological picture. In He Yan's case, I suspect the point is not to provide a new explanation of the origins of beings; rather, it is to bring to light the practical dimension of the unfathomable Dao. Important clues in this regard can be gathered from He Yan's understanding of "human nature" (*xing* 性)—taking the term "*xing*," which can refer to the nature of things as well, in its narrower sense here—and particularly that of the sage.

The Dictates of *Qi*

Commenting on *Lunyu* 5.13, in which the disciple Zi Gong 子貢 shared that Confucius's view on *xing* could not be heard, He Yan explains that "nature is that which human beings receive and which enables them to live" (性者人之所受以生者也). This must be interpreted in the light of the then prevalent belief that being is constituted by *qi*-energies. At the most basic level, this means that *qi* makes life possible. Further, human beings are born with certain "capacities" (*cai* 才), which can be traced to their individual *qi* constitution or endowment. One's *qi*-endowment may be "thick" or "thin," to use a stock phrase of the period, which encompasses both qualitative and quantitative measures. This determines one's capacity, be it physical, intellectual, emotional, or moral, and this is what is meant by one's inborn "nature" (*xing*). Put differently, reflections on "life" (*sheng* 生) move readily from sheer biological existence to *xing*, *sheng* with definite content, understood as capacity arising from the natural allotment of *qi*-energies that each person receives ultimately from the energy source that has come to be named, in a rough and ready manner, "Dao."

The concept of *qi*, of course, has a long history; suffice it to say that He Yan seems to have accepted some version of it. In the *Lunyu* (15.29), Confucius declared that it is human beings who can broaden the Dao and not the other way round. Often, this is taken to be a clear expression of Confucian "humanism." As He Yan understands it, however, this means: "For those whose capacity is large, Dao follows as large; for those whose capacity is small, Dao follows as small. Thus [Confucius concludes that the Dao] cannot broaden [the capacity of] human beings" (材大者道隨大, 材小者道隨小, 故不能弘人也). In this

context, “Dao” should refer to the extent of one’s achievement, namely, the end result of putting one’s capacity to proper use. Some may challenge He Yan’s interpretation; but the point remains that this reading would not be meaningful unless one assumes that Dao is understood in terms of *qi* and that it is *qi* that determines one’s nature, defined as substance, material, or stuff (*zhi* 質), or more precisely in view of its measurability and functionality, capacity. Determined at birth by one’s *qi*-allotment, capacity cannot be altered. This has important ethical implications, which will be considered later.

Once it is recognized that He Yan operated from a *qi*-based conceptual framework, a coherent picture of Dao begins to form. The concept of “nothingness” proves useful because it can bring out the different senses in which the Dao acts as the “roots” of beings. As the source of vital *qi*-energies, nonmanifest and undifferentiated, it is indeed “*wu suo you*” in that it does not have any discernible characteristics. At the same time, as the source of nature and capacity, the Dao represents a deep ontological presence within each being. Whereas concepts such as “great change” or “original energy” (*yuanqi* 元氣) tend to privilege the role of Dao as the “beginning” of things, the concept of *wu* seeks to do justice also to its pervasive influence, literally an inflow of *qi* that informs individual nature.

The *Jin shu* account of Zhengshi learning referred to earlier also explains that *wu* is that which the yin and yang *qi*-energies depend on in their creative transformation, that which all beings depend on in acquiring their form, and that which the morally worthy depend on in acquiring their virtuous character (陰陽恃以化生，萬物恃以成形，賢者恃以成德).²⁰ This suggests that the author had similarly understood *wu* in terms of *qi*. There is speculation that the *Jin shu* may be quoting from He Yan here. In any case, the suggestion is that He Yan considered nature and capacity to be determined by *qi*. During the Zhengshi era, there was in fact intense debate on the relationship between capacity and nature. The debate precisely centered on whether capacity was inborn, or whether it was the product of learning and repeated practice. Four main views had been reported—that nature and capacity are “identical” (*tong* 同), that they are “different” (*yi* 異), that they “converge” or “coincide” (*he* 合), and that they “diverge” (*li* 離) from each other.²¹ It would be surprising if He Yan was not aware of them or that he was unconcerned with the subject. Although there is no record of where he stood on the matter, he would have supported the identity or convergence of capacity and nature, that is, the first or the third position, for they both take capacity to be essentially inborn.

Sage Nature

Of particular interest to the present discussion is that this would commit He Yan to the view that “sage nature” is inborn. And this clarifies further the sense in which the Dao is said to have “nothing.” Twice in his commentary to the *Lunyu* (14.35 and 16.8), He Yan follows the *Yijing* in asserting that “the virtuous character of the sage merges with that of heaven and earth” (聖人與天地合其德). This may mean something specific to its original audience, but now little can be inferred from it other than the sage’s exalted status. The pervasive influence of *qi* would make this kind of “merging” possible, but this does not quite tell us what characterizes the nature of the sage. It seems reasonable to assume that sage nature is defined by an exceedingly rich, fine, and abundant *qi*-endowment, which translates into optimal capacity on all fronts. Is the sage, then, a superhero who can accomplish anything? Liu Shao 劉邵, He Yan’s senior contemporary, discusses the nature of the sage in his *Renwu zhi* 人物志 (An Account of Human Capacities), which may shed light on this question.

According to Liu Shao, all living things are constituted by the “primordial one” (*yuanyi* 元一), that is, original, undifferentiated *qi*-energy. Individual nature is formed by the endowment of a specific measure of the yin and yang *qi*-energies. This endowment then generates a particular configuration of the “five agents” or “phases” (*wuxing* 五行), which gives shape to the human being (凡有血氣者, 莫不含有元一以為質, 稟陰陽以立性, 體五行而著形) and brings about different capacities and capacity of varying strengths, which in turn account for different inborn capabilities (人材不同, 能各有異 . . . 能出於材, 材不同量).²²

Thus, typically human nature consists of partial and limited capacities (*piancai* 偏材), which cannot be changed (偏材之性, 不可移轉), although learning may enhance capacity to some extent.²³ For most people, Liu Shao suggests, a particular capacity will dominate and influence the rest (偏至之材, 以勝體為質者也),²⁴ perhaps not unlike the way in which a strong ingredient—i.e., given sufficient purity and quantity—would overwhelm the other flavors, say, in a soup. Certain individuals may be blessed with a combination of strengths; for example, Liu Bang 劉邦, the founder of the Han dynasty, commands both superior intelligence (*ying* 英) and courage (*xiong* 雄).²⁵ Nevertheless, this still pales in comparison with the sage, whose nature is categorically different from that of ordinary individuals.

The sage is endowed with a nature that is a perfect blend of the finest qualities, according to the *Renwu zhi*. This is fundamentally different