

# The Rhetoric of Hiddenness in Traditional Chinese Culture

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# Manifesting Sagely Knowledge

## Commentarial Strategies in Chinese Late Antiquity

MICHAEL PUETT

Allow me to begin by quoting a famous set of lines from the *Laozi* 老子:

Thirty spokes join together at one hub; the usefulness of the cart resides in its nothingness (*wu* 無).  
 Clay is pulled to make vessels; the usefulness of the vessel resides in its nothingness.  
 One cuts doors and windows to make dwellings; the usefulness of the dwelling resides in its nothingness.  
 Something (*you* 有) is what makes them beneficial; nothing (*wu*) is what makes them useful.<sup>1</sup>

三十輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。埴埴以為器，當其無，有器之用。鑿戶牖以為室，當其無，有室之用。故有之以為利，無之以為用。

The lines are written in a characteristically paradoxical style, with characteristically counterintuitive examples. In the case at hand, the text implies that we tend to assume that the usefulness of implements resides in their constituent parts, but in fact their usefulness resides in nothingness: the emptiness of a wheel hub, the emptiness in a vessel, the emptiness between the walls of a dwelling. Such an argument is part of the *Laozi's* overall valuation of *wu* 無,

“nothingness,” which is itself associated with the Way, *dao* 道. The text calls on the reader to focus on nothingness, with far-reaching implications that the text explores through its many chapters.

But let us now turn to the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to the *Laozi*,<sup>2</sup> a commentary probably written in the late second century of the common era.<sup>3</sup> The *Xiang'er* commentary begins with the first line of the same passage, the translation of which I will change to reflect the commentator’s reading:<sup>4</sup>

“Thirty spokes join together at one hub, but the usefulness of the cart resides in *whether it exists or not*.”

*Commentary:* When in antiquity there were not yet carts, the people were isolated. The Way sent down Xi Zhong to invent them [carts]. When foolish people obtained the carts, they desired benefits from them, and that is all. They did not think to practice the Way; and they were not aware of the spirits of the Way. But when the worthy saw them [the carts], they understood the kindness of the Way. They quietly trained themselves, and put an emphasis on obtaining the truth of the Way.<sup>5</sup>

“卅輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。”

古未有車時，退然，道遣奚仲作之。愚者得車，貪利而已，不念行道，不覺道神。賢者見之，乃知道恩，默而自厲，重守道真也。

The Way is here defined as a deity who intervenes to help humanity. The Way sends down sages to help humanity, and also calls on humanity to follow its precepts. In the case at hand, the Way saw that humans were isolated from each other without carts, so the Way sent down the sage Xi Zhong to invent carts and thus allow humans to have more interaction with each other. However, most humans, on seeing these newly invented carts, simply desired to gain benefits from them. Only those who were worthy focused on what really mattered, namely that the Way had sent down the carts as an act of kindness. They accordingly focused on training themselves according to the precepts of the Way.

In other words, the commentator is reading the word *wu* here not as “nothingness” but rather as “when they did not exist.” The worthy understood that their coming into existence was due to the Way, so they focused properly on the Way’s kindness; others only focused on the benefits of the carts themselves. In such a reading, there is no valuation of nothingness at all.

Before discussing the implications of such a reading, let us first continue with the commentary. The commentary reads the example of the clay in the same way:

“Clay is pulled to make vessels, but the usefulness of the vessel resides in *whether it exists or not*.”

*Commentary:* The same explanation as with the carts. (*Xiang'er*, line 128)

“埴殖爲器，當其無，有器之用。”亦與車同說。

And the same argument continues with the example of dwellings. The text attributes the invention of dwellings to the sage Huangdi, who was also sent by the Way:

One drills doors and windows to make dwellings, but the usefulness of the dwelling resides in *whether it exists or not*.

*Commentary:* The Way sent Huangdi to make them. This is also the same explanation as with the carts. (*Xiang'er*, lines 128–29)

“鑿戶牖以爲室，當其無，有室之用。”道使黃帝爲之，亦與車同說。

The commentator then elaborates on the argument in the discussion of the final line of the chapter. I translated the line above as “Something (*you* 有) is what makes them beneficial; nothing (*wu*) is what makes them useful.” Here I will again change the translation to reflect the commentator’s reading:

“*Those who have them* take them as beneficial; *those who do not have them* take them as useful.”

*Commentary:* These three things were at their basis difficult to invent. If there were no Way, they would not have been completed. When the common people obtained them, they merely desired their benefits but did not understand their origins. When the worthy people saw them, they turned back to [to their origins] and held fast to their usefulness. As for their usefulness, the Way is the basis. The minds of the worthy and foolish are like south and north, completely

dissimilar. The meaning of these three [lines] simply refers to the fact that it is like this. (*Xiang'er*, lines 130–133)

“有之以爲利，無之以爲用。”

此三物本難作，非道不成。俗人得之，但貪其利，不知其元。賢者見之，還守其用。用道爲本，賢愚之心，如南與北，萬不同。此三之義指如是耳。

The distinction between something (*you*) and nothing (*wu*) that animates the line is read throughout this passage as being between having (*you*) the created implements and not having them (*wu*). Gone is the entire argument contrasting the things that are there (the spokes of the wheel, the clay of the vessel, the walls of the dwelling) with the nothingness inside. The issue here is simply that there was a time before the implements existed, and now, thanks to the Way, sages have been sent down to create them for humanity. So humanity should now revere the Way for what it has done and should listen to the teachings of the Way.

As many scholars have noted, this is, to say the least, a rather odd interpretation of the *Laozi* lines. Stephen Bokenkamp, one of the leading analysts of the *Xiang'er* commentary, puts it beautifully:

It is difficult to escape the impression that the commentator has here misunderstood, or willfully suppressed, the meaning of this and the following lines of the *Laozi*, which argues that the utility of such things resides as much in emptiness as in substance. The more standard reading is: The utility of a wheel derives from the empty spot where the spokes join; the utility of a pot, from where there is no clay; and the utility of windows and doors, from the space within. The commentator seems to be reading “where they are not” as “when they were not,” which is equally possible grammatically, but nonsensical in this case. The reason for the commentator’s insistence on a historical explanation of these passages becomes clear once we realize the sorts of glosses he wishes to refute.<sup>6</sup>

To see what Bokenkamp is referring to here, let us return to the commentary:

Now, in the false arts practiced among the current generation, they accord with and follow the true text [i.e., the *Laozi*] to set up deceptive and clever words. [According to these practitioners,] the Way has a Heavenly hub, and human bodies also have a hub.

If one concentrates one's breath, it will become soft. The "spokes" refer to the form acting as the linchpin. They also [say] that one should nourish the embryo and refine the form, just like making the earth into pottery. They also say that there are doors and windows to the Way that reside within the human body. All of these are false teachings that cannot be used. Those who use them will be greatly deceived. (*Xiang'er*, lines 133–137)

The *Laozi* is the true text, but unfortunately false teachings have emerged that use "deceptive and clever words" to read metaphysical understandings into the text.

This refutation of metaphysical readings of the text makes it quite clear that the *Xiang'er* commentator is aware of other interpretations and rejects that particular approach. In contrast to these other readings, the approach taken here—and it is an approach repeated throughout the commentary—is to provide extremely concrete, mundane, almost deadening readings of the *Laozi* chapters, in which the words are read in such a way as to deny all of the paradoxes, puns, and counterintuitive twists: *wu* is simply read as "not existing," and references to the importance of the Way are read as calls to follow the dictates of a deity called the "Way."

Why, one might ask, would the *Xiang'er* commentary read the *Laozi* in this way?

### Reading in Chinese Late Antiquity

This paper will be an exploration of one particular strand among the commentarial strategies that developed in Chinese late antiquity in response to what many perceived to be a crisis of textual authority.<sup>7</sup> Authors during the first centuries of the Common Era felt themselves to be confronted with an enormous body of earlier texts. Some of these texts were presumably written by sages, but which texts were the sagely ones? And of those written by sages, how should one interpret them, given that there was an ever-proliferating set of competing reading strategies being developed for each text? Were the texts written clearly, so that even nonsages could understand them? Or are there hidden meanings embedded in the sagely texts, requiring a careful hermeneutic to bring their esoteric messages to the surface? Or, to give yet another option, were the sages of the past themselves limited and occasionally flawed, in which case the interpreter must himself be a sage willing to correct the errors of the original or perhaps even creatively and intentionally misread the original to bring out what ought to have been its proper meaning? In this latter strategy,

the goal is not so much to uncover a hidden meaning provided by the earlier sage as to establish a hidden truth that had eluded even the earlier sage himself.

All of these problems were greatly exacerbated by the fact that the pre-Han texts were also being applied to a period and set of concerns dramatically different than the ones for which they were originally written—a fact frequently referred to in the debate. To give one example that will be significant for the *Xiang'er*: a concern with immortality arose very late and became particularly pronounced during the first centuries of the Common Era—yet it is something rarely if ever even mentioned in the pre-Han textual corpus.

The arguments in the *Xiang'er* commentary will make much more sense once we place them within this larger debate concerning how to read the earlier texts.

### How to Read a Text

One of the most extreme positions in this debate was also one of the earliest. During the early Han period, it became common for a number of authors to claim themselves to be greater sages than the authors of the vast body of pre-Han material.<sup>8</sup> Usually this was implicit—as with Sima Qian's implicit claim to superiority vis-à-vis Confucius.<sup>9</sup> But in texts such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, it was quite explicit.<sup>10</sup> The *Huainanzi* claims that earlier authors only wrote in response to specific situations,<sup>11</sup> whereas the *Huainanzi* is an all-encompassing work in which everything is placed into a single comprehensive system that will be true for all time:

The book of Mister Liu observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of ancient times and the present, weighs affairs and establishes regulations, measures forms and puts forth what is fitting. . . . It thereby unifies all under Heaven, gives pattern to the myriad things, and responds to alternations and transformations. . . . It does not follow a path from one trace, nor hold fast to instructions from one corner. . . . Therefore, one can establish it regularly and constantly and never be blocked; one can promulgate it throughout all under Heaven and never make a mistake.<sup>12</sup>

若劉氏之書，觀天地之象，通古今之論，權事而立制，度形而施宜。 . . . 以統天下，理萬物，應變化 . . . 非循一跡之路，守一隅之指。 . . . 故置之尋常而不塞，（市）〔布〕之天下而不窳。

As I have argued elsewhere, this results in the *Huainanzi's* strategy of a “violent misreading” of earlier texts, in which earlier texts would be twisted, altered, or intentionally misread in order to place them into this enduring comprehensive system. In one striking example, the *Huainanzi* authors quote a set of lines from the *Zhuangzi* about the absurdity of trying to work out a cosmogony; the *Huainanzi* authors then provide a line-by-line commentary to that same *Zhuangzi* passage, in which each line is read as part of a grand cosmogony. This commentary is then used to provide the opening argument of a lengthy chapter on the importance of cosmogony for understanding how everything is ultimately interrelated in a single comprehensive system. The *Zhuangzi* passage is not only read in a manner contrary to its obvious point, it is also then used as an opening piece for a chapter devoted to doing precisely what the *Zhuangzi* passage was arguing ought not be done.<sup>13</sup>

This level of sagely arrogance was characteristic of the culture of the early Han, but in a less extreme form, the approach would continue to play a crucial role in later Chinese hermeneutic traditions as well. Indeed, the interpretive technique of the great Southern Song scholar, Zhu Xi, in part came out of this tradition of creative misreading, if in a much less arrogant form and with much less debasement of the earlier sages. For example, he would argue that the Four Books are correct—but only after he had altered them, rearranged them, added characters, and provided a cosmological framework wholly lacking in the original texts. None of this editing is based on a claim to have found philological evidence supporting the rewriting—the claim is simply that the rewritten texts are the proper ones. If the early sages really were true sages, this is what they must have written. And if they did not actually write the proper texts—well, that need not concern the reader who now has them.

Despite the continued application of the violent misreading approach, its history immediately following the Han was not so successful. The kind of arrogance vis-à-vis the past that was so common in the very early Han gave way soon thereafter to a reaction against such claims of surpassing the ancients. By the end of the Western Han, the dominant mode at court was to call for an end to what was seen as the imperial hubris of the Qin and early Han courts. Instead, calls were made to return to the culture of the Western Zhou—including a return to the simplicity of style associated with the Zhou as well as a return to those texts written during or written about the Zhou period. This ultimately resulted in, among other things, the claim that a proper explication of sagely knowledge was to be found in the Five Classics—a set of texts that were seen as having been written and edited well before the sagely arrogance of the Qin and early Han.

But, if this body of texts—the Five Classics as well as other pre-Qin works—ought to contain true knowledge, interpreters still faced the basic

problem of how to read them—particularly since they did not often clearly speak to contemporary concerns. And if they were not a full repository of true knowledge, then what was? By the time one gets into the Eastern Han, these concerns became increasingly acute.

One way out of this problem was to make a distinction between the esoteric and exoteric: the pre-Han corpus, by such a definition, is simply a product of exoteric writing, and the commentary would claim to be laying out an esoteric doctrine—usually based on a claimed oral transmission. One of the best examples of this approach is found in the Han Dynasty Chenwei 讖緯 materials, the so-called apocryphal texts, which provided an esoteric reading of the Classics.<sup>14</sup> What is hidden is therefore simply what was esoteric, and the commentary consists of making manifest this hidden, esoteric knowledge.

Others, such as the Eastern Han scholar Wang Chong 王充 (27–ca. 100), opposed any attempt to claim that a true body of knowledge was to be found in any corpus of previous texts or oral transmissions. Wang Chong's position was that all sages are imperfect and limited. Thus, what the world needs is an endless number of new sages arising, to build on the good work of the previous sages and to correct the previous sages' errors. Wang Chong accordingly spent a great deal of time both pointing out the errors of earlier sages like Confucius, and arguing against any restrictions on the recognition of new sages as such. Thus, although he certainly does not claim, as did the *Huainanzi* authors, to be a sage superior to those in the past, he does strongly assert the need for the emergence of new sages to continue writing new texts and building on the past. Each of these texts will be imperfect and limited, but the proliferation of new texts will allow an accumulation of knowledge and an ongoing correction of previous errors.<sup>15</sup>

Yet another move was that attempted by the Eastern Han commentator Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200). Zheng Xuan's solution was essentially to argue that authority should be granted not to a single text but rather to a time period. It was the Western Zhou that was correct, rather than a single corpus of texts. The texts that are of primary interest, then, are those that maintain some record or remnant of the practices of the Western Zhou. The goal of the interpreter is thus to work through these remnants and shards from the Western Zhou and from them to develop a sense of what the Western Zhou was like. Confucius, as a supporter of the Western Zhou and as a sage who edited works on that period, is obviously given a privileged position, but it is not the texts themselves that are authoritative. What matters is the degree to which they reflect, or could be read as shedding light on, the Western Zhou. Zheng Xuan's resulting hermeneutic consisted of working to reconstruct the

Western Zhou system by connecting and synthesizing the remnants found in the various texts associated with the dynasty.

One of the implications of such an approach is that new sages were, in fact, unnecessary: a period had already existed in which things operated properly. Thus, the goal of the reader is to understand this period and the texts that discuss it, not to have new sages claiming to create something better than what existed in the past.

One of the most ingenious solutions to the problem of where to locate true authority in the earlier textual tradition was provided by a section of the *Taiping Jing* 太平經 that probably belongs to the late Eastern Han.<sup>16</sup> The section explicitly calls on people not only to stop recognizing new sages but to not even try to decide which of the earlier texts are by sages and which are not. The section is also against interpretation: there is no reason to interpret texts at all. The call instead is for contemporaries simply to assemble absolutely *all* texts. Once they are assembled together, it will be clear what is sagely and what is not, and in their collectivity the assembled texts will yield a single sagely truth:

If the sages of higher antiquity missed something, the sages of middle antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of middle antiquity missed something, the sages of lower antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of lower antiquity missed something, the sages of higher antiquity may have obtained it. If one arranges these by category so they thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement.<sup>17</sup>

上古聖人失之，中古聖人得之；中古聖人失之，下古聖人得之；  
下古聖人失之，上古聖人得之。以類相從，因以相補，共成一  
善聖辭矣。

In a sense, then, there is nothing hidden: all knowledge is present in the texts, without any interpretation necessary. The problem is simply that the knowledge is partial in any one text, and there is no way to know when a text is right and when it is not. So the key is just to put all texts together. All knowledge will be manifest once everything is assembled.

Thus, in just this brief summary, we have seen several different options opening up in the Eastern Han. The kind of extreme sagely arrogance seen in the *Huainanzi* is largely absent—in fact, opposition to the extreme claim that a present-day author can provide a full summation of all knowledge is one of

the few topics on which there is relatively wide agreement in the Eastern Han. But there was a consensus on little else. Does one need an endless number of new sages to continue writing an endless number of new texts? Or has knowledge already been achieved at a certain time in the past, or in the sum of all texts already written? And if the latter, how does one read such material? How, in short, does one make manifest the hidden truth when there is no clear authority in the past or present to make such a determination?

### Following the Way in the *Xiang'er*

Within this production of texts and interpretive claims about earlier texts, the *Xiang'er* commentary makes a number of fascinating moves. Not unlike the *Huainanzi*, the authors of the *Xiang'er* commentary are interested in reading a number of things into an earlier text that would not obviously appear to be there; unlike the *Huainanzi*, however, it will not claim to be reinterpreting or providing any kind of new reading of the text—or even to be interpreting the text at all. Rather, it claims full subordination to the earlier text. It will also not appeal to any esoteric tradition; indeed, it will claim that the only reason the truth is hidden from other readers of the text is that they have foolishly tried to be overly clever in interpreting the text. While thus providing what could be construed as a strong misreading of the host text, it will on the contrary claim for itself complete subordination to the obvious meaning of the original, arrived at without any interpretation at all. It is simply a paraphrase of a straightforward, clear, and completely correct text.

Let us turn to a closer reading of the *Xiang'er* commentary. And let us look at another of the classic lines from the *Laozi*:

The Way constantly does nothing, yet nothing is not done.

If lords and kings are able to hold fast to it, the myriad things will transform themselves. (*Laozi*, chapter 37)

道（常）〔恒〕無為，而無不為。侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。

The power of these opening lines of the chapter would appear to lie in their paradox, in which the Way is doing nothing (*wuwei* 無為) but nonetheless (or, perhaps, consequently) still having nothing not done (*wu buwei* 無不為).

The *Xiang'er* commentary, on the contrary, reads the line a bit differently:

The nature of the Way is that it never does bad things. Therefore it is able to be spiritual, and there is nothing it cannot cause to occur. The person of the Way always patterns himself on this. (*Xiang'er*, lines 572–73)

道性不爲惡事，故能神無所不作，道人當灑之。

Gone is any sense here that the Way does nothing—*wuwei*. On the contrary, the Way simply does not do anything that is bad. As Bokenkamp has argued, probably the best way to translate the original line, if one is to make it accord with this reading, would thus be read *wei* 為 as *wei* 偽—“artifice, falsity”: “The Way is without falsity, and nothing is not done.”<sup>18</sup>

The commentary continues:

“If the kings and lords are able to hold fast to it.”

Even though the king is revered, he must always fear the Way, and the precepts must be followed. (*Xiang'er*, line 574)

“王侯若能守。”王者雖尊，猶常畏道，奉誠行之。

The Way is something that should be feared and whose precepts should be followed.

“The myriad things will transform themselves.”

If the king rules by patterning himself on the Way, the officials, people, and bad elements will all transform to the Way. (*Xiang'er*, lines 575–76)

“萬物將自化。”王者灑道爲政，吏民庶孽子，悉化爲道。

Here again, the Way is the source of good, and if the ruler will follow it, the populace will turn to the Way as well. The Way is not a technique of rulership based on nothingness, nor is it a cosmic force. It is rather a deity handing down proper precepts.

Indeed, as we are told in the commentary to another chapter, the Way comes down from on high, appoints rulers, and provides all the guidelines for how to rule. When these are followed, the Way sends down omens to signal the coming of Great Peace:

“Grasp the great image and all under Heaven will proceed.”

The ruler grasps the correct method and models himself on the great Way. All under Heaven returns to him. . . . As for the Way's transformation, it descends from on high. When it indicates the one to be called the ruler, it distinguishes the one man. In ruling there are not two rulers. That is why the thearchs and kings always practice the Way. Only thus will it reach the officials and people. It is not that only nobles of the Way (*dao shi* 道士) can practice it, with the ruler being excluded. Rather, the great sage ruler follows the Way and fully puts it into practice so as to educate and transform. Once all under Heaven is thus ordered, the omens of Great Peace will accumulate in response to the merit of humans. The one who brings this about is a ruler of the Way. (*Xiang'er*, lines 527–33)

“執大象天下往。”

王者執正灋，像大道，天下歸往。 . . . 道之爲化，自高而降，指謂王者，故貴一人。製無二君，是以帝王常當行道，然後乃及吏民。非獨道士可行，王者棄捐也。上聖之君，師道至行以教化。天下如治，太平符瑞，皆感人功所積，致之者道君也。

And even the spirits are also arrayed on behalf of the Way:

“Auspicious and not harmful.”

When rulers put in practice the Way, the Way comes back to them. Rulers also rejoice in the Way, knowing the spirits and celestial beings cannot be cheated or turned away from. They do not fear regulations and statutes, but do fear the Heavenly spirits. They do not dare engage in wrongdoing. (*Xiang'er*, lines 541–43)

“佳而不害。”

王者行道，道來歸往。王者亦皆樂道，知神明不可欺負。不畏灋律也，乃畏天神，不敢爲非惡。

In terms of statecraft, therefore, the key is for the ruler to follow the precepts handed down by the Way. Absent here entirely is the vision of state-

craft that played such a crucial role in the *Han Feizi* reading of the *Laozi*, and that would later interest Wang Bi—namely that the sage creates an order that the people come to think of as natural.<sup>19</sup> The *Xiang'er* commentary on the contrary reads such passages as simply saying that the successful ruler is one who follows the precepts. Take, for example, the following *Laozi* lines, which I will first translate as a Han Feizi or Wang Bi would read them:

When his achievements are completed and tasks finished,

The hundred families say: “We (*wo* 我) are like this spontaneously (*ziran* 自然).” (*Laozi*, chapter 17)

功成事遂，〔而〕百姓皆謂我自然。

The ruler sets up an order that the hundred families come to think of as simply natural. The *Xiang'er* commentary on the contrary reads the (*wo* 我) in the first person—as referring not to the hundred families but rather to the transcendent noble who has completed great achievements:

“The hundred families say that I (*wo* 我) was like this spontaneously (*ziran* 自然).”

“I” refers to the transcendent noble. The hundred families do not study the fact that I had to value and have faith in the words of the Way to bring about this accomplishment. They think I was like this spontaneously. One must make known to those not conscientious that they are expected to do as I have done. (*Xiang'er*, lines 242–43)

“百姓謂我自然。”

我，僊士也。百姓不學我有貴信道言，以致此功，而意我自然，當示不肯企及效我也。

According to the commentary, it is not that the people believe the system created by the sage to be spontaneous. The text is instead referring to a problem—that the follower of the Way, the “transcendent noble,” is incorrectly perceived by the people to have brought forth his accomplishments spontaneously. To the contrary, says the *Xiang'er*, the people need to be convinced to work hard in following the teachings of the Way and to have faith in the words of the Way.

In short, the commentary argues that the cosmos is a moral one, ruled over by a moral deity called the Way, who creates precepts for humanity, designates rulers to follow them, and offers rewards to those who do well and inflicts punishments on those who do not. The Way also organizes the various spirits in the cosmos to reward and punish as well.

### Morality in the *Xiang'er*

Such a moral reading of the *Laozi* is rather surprising, given that it contains several chapters that would appear to argue for a distinctly nonmoral reading of the Way. Let us look at a few of these passages, as well as the *Xiang'er* commentary to them.

“When the great Way was discarded, there was humaneness and propriety.” (*Laozi*, chapter 18)

大道廢，〔安〕有仁義。

Humaneness and propriety, the line appears to be saying, emerged only when the Way was discarded.

The *Xiang'er*, on the contrary, reads the line in precisely the opposite manner:

When the Way was used in high antiquity, it relied on the [conduct of the] people to establish names [of categories of conduct]. Since all practiced humaneness and propriety, all were of the same type, and the humane and proper were not distinguished. Now, the Way is not used, and the people are all dishonest and stingy. When there is a person who practices propriety, all uphold and distinguish him. Therefore it is now said that there are the qualities of [humaneness and propriety]. (*Xiang'er*, lines 244–46)

上古道用時，以人爲名，皆行仁義，同相像類，仁義不別。今道不用，人悉弊薄，時有一人行義，便共表別之，故言有也。

According to this reading, when the precepts of the Way were practiced in high antiquity, everyone was humane and proper, and thus there was no reason to distinguish particular people as having such attributes. It was only after the Way stopped being followed that those few who acted morally needed to be deemed as being humane and proper.

But what about those lines of the *Laozi* that would at least appear to state explicitly that Heaven and Earth are not moral? Take, for example:

“Heaven and Earth are inhumane. They take the myriad things as straw dogs.” (*Laozi*, chapter 5)

天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗。

The *Xiang'er* comments:

Heaven and Earth model themselves on the Way. They are humane to those who do good, and inhumane to those who do bad. Therefore, when they bring to an end the badness of the myriad things, they do not love them but see them as grass and as dogs. (*Xiang'er*, lines 32–4)

天地像道，仁於諸善，不仁於諸惡，故煞萬物惡者不愛也，視之如芻草。

Far from being a provocative claim that the Way is amoral, the line is read as an affirmation of the rigorous morality of the Way, in which the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. The statement that “Heaven and Earth are inhumane” is thus only in reference to those who act wrongly—such people are treated as straw dogs. But those who act properly, the commentary claims, are treated humanely.

The *Laozi* goes on to state the inhumaneness of the sage:

“The sage is inhumane, treating the hundred families as if they were straw dogs.”

聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。

The *Xiang'er* commentary reads the passage in the same manner as it did the previous line. The sage is humane to the good and inhumane to the bad:

The sage patterns himself on Heaven and Earth. He is humane to the good and inhumane to the bad. When it comes to the ruler correcting and bringing the bad to an end, he also sees them as if they were straw dogs. This is why when the people accumulate good merit, their essence and spirit communicate with the Way. If there are those who wish to attack and injure one, Heaven will

then save one. The common people are all just followers of straw dogs. Their essences and spirits are unable to communicate with Heaven. (*Xiang'er*, lines 35–7)

聖人灑天地，仁於善人，不仁惡人。當王政煞惡，亦視之如芻苟也。是以人當積善功，其精神與天通。設欲侵害者，天即救之。庸庸之人，皆是芻苟之徒耳，精神不能通天。

In short, a rigorously moral cosmos is read into the text. The Way is moral, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. Heaven and Earth pattern themselves on the Way and do the same. Proper sages model themselves on Heaven and Earth and thus also do the same.

This same point is reiterated again and again in the commentary:

For those who themselves achieve sincerity, Heaven will itself reward them. As for those who do not achieve sincerity, Heaven will itself punish them. Heaven's discernment is greater than any human's. It always knows who reveres the Way and fears Heaven. (*Xiang'er*, lines 280–81)

自當至誠，天自賞之；不至誠者，天自罰之。天察必審於人，皆知尊道畏天。

Revere the Way, and you will be rewarded. As the reader has probably realized by now, the commentary makes this point many times.

## Sages

But this raises a problem. If the loss of the Way was not coincident with the emergence of human artifice (including morality distinctions), then why has a decline occurred? One of the reasons is that people listen to false texts, written by false sages. Let us return to the commentary to chapter eighteen of the *Laozi*:

“When wisdom and intelligence emerged, there was the great falsity.” (*Laozi*, chapter 18)

智慧出，〔安〕有大偽。

Although the line might appear to be yet another statement of how human craft has resulted in a loss of the Way, the *Xiang'er* commentary reads the line as simply referring to the emergence of false texts:

The true Way was hidden, and aberrant texts emerged. In the present age, the proliferating false arts are proclaimed as teachings of the Way. All of these are great falsities and cannot be used. What are these aberrant texts? Of the Five Classics, half fall under [this category] of aberrance. Apart from the Five Classics, all books, transmissions, and records are aberrant texts created by corpses. (*Xiang'er*, lines 246–48)

真道藏，耶文出。世間常偽伎稱道教，皆為大偽不可用。何謂耶文？其五經半入耶，其五經以外，衆書傳記，尸人所作悉耶耳。

We will return to the statement about the corpses momentarily. The point to emphasize here is that the emergence of false texts was one of the causes of humanity's failure to follow the Way. And the problem of the present day is that these false teachings have continued to proliferate. The Five Classics themselves are only half-correct, and all of the other books and records are false teachings of this sort.

This is indeed a recurrent argument throughout the commentary: fraudulent sages, writing false texts that the populace follows, are one of the central causes of decline. True sages, on the contrary, are sent by Heaven. We have already seen this latter theme in the passages quoted at the beginning of this paper: major innovations for humanity were created by sages who, like Xi Zhong and Huangdi, were sent down by Heaven.

This same theme is read into passages of the *Laozi* that would appear to be against sages altogether. The *Xiang'er* instead reads the passages as being against fraudulent sages only:

“If one cut off the sages and discarded knowledge, the people would benefit a hundred times over.”

This refers to fraudulent sages who know aberrant texts. [True] sages are put forward by Heaven. When they are born, there will always be signs made manifest. The Yellow River and Luo River announce their names. And so, [the sages] constantly proclaim the truth, never reaching the point of accepting what is false. (*Xiang'er*, lines 266–68)

“絕聖棄知，民利百倍。”謂詐聖知耶文者。夫聖人天所挺，生必有表，河雒著名，然常宣真，不至受有誤。

Sages are sent by Heaven, which also therefore provides signs to humanity that these are in fact true sages. Unlike the sages discussed by Wang Chong, true sages are infallible. They are human, but they are sent by Heaven, and thus cannot be wrong.

Unfortunately, people often do not follow the words of true sages:

Those who practice aberrant ways do not trust the words of enlightened sages. Thus, for thousands and hundreds of years the great sages have expounded the truth and cleared away repeatedly the aberrant texts. (*Xiang'er*, lines 268–69)

耶道不信明聖人之言，故令千百歲大聖演真，滌徐耶文。

The true sages have appeared repeatedly to clear away the aberrant texts, since, once people start practicing the aberrant ways, they do not listen to the true sages. Thus, as we have seen, the sages have given humans the basic inventions they need to thrive, and have continued to appear to save humanity from the endless growth of new, aberrant texts written by false sages.

Such work is necessary in the present day as well:

The people of today are not in their proper state. They copy in their entirety the classics and, without hearing the truth of the Way, proclaim themselves sages. They do not cleave to the underlying sense [of the text as a whole], but gauge their own [ideas] by the texts' chapters and sections. They are not able to obtain the Way. (*Xiang'er*, lines 269–70)

今人無狀，載通經藝，未貫道真，便自稱聖。不因本而章篇自揆，不能得道。

Sages have emerged throughout history to teach humanity to stop following the aberrant ways, and the commentary would appear to be making the same claim for itself: the present age is one dominated by aberrant texts, the followers of which proclaim themselves to be sages. They cannot obtain the Way, and the aberrant texts thus need to be cleared away by a true sage.

And what would this Way consist of? The commentary continues:

They speak of themselves first and do not guide the people in the true Way so that they can obtain long life, practicing the good and striving [to perfect] themselves. They instead say that transcendents naturally have bones that are inscribed [for long life]; and that this is not something one can arrive at through practice. They say that there is no Way of life, and that the books of the Way only take advantage of the people. . . . Thus, you must cut off the false sages and their aberrant knowledge; do not cut off the true sages and their knowledge of the Way. (*Xiang'er*, lines 270–77)

言先爲身；不勸民真道可得僊壽，修善自勤，反言僊自有骨錄；非行所臻，云無生道，道書欺人。 . . . 是故絕詐聖耶知，不絕真聖道知也。

If humans were to listen to the true sages, they would be able to obtain the Way of life, meaning that they actually could become transcendents and live forever. The people of the present day argue that long life is only due to fate—something inscribed in the bones of some people at birth. The true Way, on the contrary, teaches that people can indeed become transcendents.

### Life and Death

And here we arrive at another point in the argument: not only is the true Way the way of life; the aberrant teachings are of death:

The Way is life; aberrance is death. The dead belong to the earth; the living belong to Heaven. (*Xiang'er*, line 295)

道生耶死，死屬地，生屬天。

Indeed, life and death were established by the Way as part of the same moral cosmos that the commentary discusses repeatedly: life was established by the Way in order to reward the good, and death was established by the Way in order to punish the bad.

The Way established life in order to reward the good, and established death in order to punish the bad. As for death, this is what all men fear. The transcendent rulers and nobles, like the common people,

know to fear death and enjoy life; it is what they practice that is different. . . . Although the common people fear death, they do not try to trust in the Way, and they enjoy committing bad acts. Is it surprising that they are not yet trying to escape from death? The transcendent nobles fear death, trust in the Way, and hold fast to the precepts. Therefore they join with life. (*Xiang'er*, lines 299–303)

道設生以賞善，設死以威惡，死是人之所畏也。僊王士與俗人，同知畏死樂生，但所行異耳 . . . 俗人雖畏死，端不信道，好爲惡事，奈何未央脫死乎！僊士畏死，信道守誠，故與生合也。

As the commentary states bluntly, those who follow the Way will live, and those who do not will die:

Those who practice the Way live; those who lose the Way die.  
(*Xiang'er*, lines 374–75)

行道者生，失道者死。

Indeed, the text goes so far as to see those who do not follow the Way as simply moving corpses:

The bodies of those who do not understand the Way of long life are all just corpses that move. It is not the Way that moves them; theirs is entirely the motion of corpses. The reason that people of the Way are able to obtain the long life of transcendents is that theirs is not the movement of corpses. They are different from the vulgar. Thus, they are able to fulfill the potential of their corpse and command themselves to become transcendent nobles. (*Xiang'er*, lines 72–4)

不知長生之道。身皆尸行耳，非道所行，悉尸行也。道人所以得僊壽者，不行尸行，與俗別異，故能成其尸，令爲僊士也。

This clarifies a sentence we saw earlier: “Apart from the Five Classics, all books, transmissions, and records are aberrant texts created by corpses.” Those not following the Way are moving corpses—and soon they will die and stop moving altogether.

Here again, we are dealing with an argument that would appear not only to have little textual support in the *Laozi*, but in fact seems to contradict

directly one of the primary arguments of the text. The fact that everything that lives will ultimately die would appear to be a basic aspect of the *Laozi*'s cosmology:

“The myriad things become active together,  
And I thereby watch them turn back.  
All of the things are teeming and multifarious,  
But each returns to its root.” (*Laozi*, chapter 16)

萬物並作，吾以觀〔其〕復。夫物芸芸，各復歸其根。

Things live, things die; things become active, things decline. The true follower of the text is one who can understand these processes and act accordingly, seeing where true strength lies, and seeing the inevitable moment when things, at the height of their power, will begin their decline.

Now, the *Xiang'er* reading. To reflect how it impinges on the original lines of the *Laozi*, I will again modify slightly the translation, changing the translation of *fu* (復) from “turn back” to “come back”:

“The myriad things become active together,  
And I thereby watch them come back.  
All of the things are teeming and multifarious,  
But each returns to its root.”

The myriad things contain the essence of the Way. “Becoming active together” refers to when they are first born and arise. “I” is the Way. When it watches the essences [of the myriad things] come back [to it], they are “returning to their root.” Thus, it commands people to treasure and be careful with their root. (*Xiang'er*, lines 216–18)

“萬物並作，吾以觀其復。夫物云云，各歸其根。”萬物含道精，並作，初生起時也。吾，道也。觀其精復時，皆歸其根，故令人寶慎恨也。

The “I” is not the follower of the Way; it is rather the Way itself. The Way gives each thing its essence—its life force. The Way watches things as they emerge with this essence, and commands them to treasure it. When they fail to do so, they die.

At this point, the reader may plausibly begin wondering if the commentary simply misunderstood the *Laozi* altogether. But the fact that the

commentary critiques other commentaries to the text, while clearly understanding their meaning, makes this a dubious argument. As seen in the first passage from the text discussed in this paper, the *Xiang'er* clearly understood the metaphysical reading of the *Laozi*, but is arguing explicitly against it.<sup>20</sup>

So, then, how are we to understand such a reading of the *Laozi*?

### The Revelation of the Way

The overall argument of the *Xiang'er* is in many ways remarkably like that seen in the writings of the Mohists. As with the Mohists, an active deity has created the cosmos, organized spirits to reward the good and punish the bad, sent down sages to create things needed by the populace, and designated figures to act as rulers.<sup>21</sup> The Mohists called this deity Heaven, while the *Xiang'er* commentary calls it the Way (to which Heaven is subordinate), but otherwise the argument is remarkably similar.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, just as the argument of the text reads like early Mohism, so does the writing style. The writing contains no elusive prose, no poetry, no subtle allusions. It exemplifies extremely straightforward argumentation, provided in clear, almost boring prose, with basic points being repeated over and over again. It reads, in other words, like early Mohist writings. And the commentary itself defends such clear prose as itself the style of the Way:

“When the Way emits words, they are tasteless and without flavor.”

The words of the Way are opposed to the extreme cleverness of the vulgar. [Circulated] among the vulgar people, they are truly without flavor. [Passed around] among the flavorless (i.e., the sages), they harbor the flavor of great life. Thus the flavor of the sages is the flavor of the flavorless. (*Xiang'er*, lines 549–50)

“道出言，淡無味。” 道之所言，反俗絕巧，於俗人中，甚無味也。無味之中，有大生味，故聖人味無味之味。

The vulgar use cleverness to express themselves, and only appreciate clever words; the words of the Way are flavorless, without rhetorical embellishment, and thus can only be fully apprehended by those who are attuned to their essence.

Such a statement could almost serve as a self-description of the style and claims of the commentary itself. The *Xiang'er* commentary is strongly opposed to the view that the *Laozi* requires subtle or complex interpretation. On the

contrary, the power of the *Xiang'er* commentary comes from the claim that the text is in fact perfectly clear, and that others have obfuscated this clear message by reading a complex metaphysics into it.

Even the evocative, pregnant puns in the *Laozi* are denied: as we saw above, the famous line “of doing nothing but leaving nothing undone” simply becomes a statement that the Way always acts properly. Neither literary style nor metaphysical claims are allowed to be present in the text at all.

It is also clear that the commentary presents itself as the product of a sage who does understand the Way, and who is therefore trying to eradicate the vulgar and demonic texts and interpretations that are dominant in the present age. Since humans do listen to false sages, the world is filled with such aberrant texts and false teachings. As the *Xiang'er* makes clear, only sages sanctioned by the Way are to be listened to, and thus only texts produced by Way or by sages sanctioned by the Way should be followed. The commentary itself is such a work.

But then what about the text is the commentary explicating? What is the *Laozi* itself? We have already seen the hint of the answer in a passage quoted above. I will quote it again, here focusing on a different element:

“The myriad things become active together,  
And I thereby watch them come back.  
All of the things are teeming and multifarious,  
But each returns to its root.”

The myriad things contain the essence of the Way. “Becoming active together” refers to when they are first born and arise. “I” is the Way. When it watches the essences [of the myriad things] come back [to it], they are “returning to their root.” Thus, it commands people to treasure and be careful with their root. (*Xiang'er*, lines 216–18)

“萬物並作，吾以觀其復。夫物云云，各歸其根。”萬物含道精，並作，初生起時也。吾，道也。觀其精復時，皆歸其根，故令人寶慎恨也。

The “I” in the text is the Way itself.

This is not just a passing statement. To give another example:

The reason I can suffer great calamity is that I have a body. When I reach the point of no longer having a body, how could I suffer calamities? (*Laozi*, chapter 13)

吾所以有大患者，為吾有身〔也〕。及吾無身，吾有何患？

The *Xiang'er* commentary explains:

“I” refers to the Way. It desires to be without a body. It simply desires to nourish spirits; that is all. And it desires to compel humans to model themselves on this. (*Xiang'er*, lines 154–55)<sup>23</sup>

吾我，道也。誌欲無身，但欲養神耳。欲令人自灑。

“I,” again, is the Way.

So why should we trust the words of the text? Because the author of the *Laozi* was not a human at all. The text was rather a revelation issued by the Way itself, and Laozi is not a (possibly limited) human sage but, rather, a god.<sup>24</sup> And once the *Xiang'er* defines the *Laozi* as a divine revelation, there is no possibility of seeing the text as anything other than containing accurate knowledge. The commentary thus restricts, if it does not obviate, the possibility of self-proclaimed sages creating anew, creating wrong texts, or interpreting the text: the Way has already stated its views, in clear language, and the commentary is sweeping away all clever interpretations to highlight the clear, straightforward words of the revelation itself.

It is as if, in order to work around the debates of the time concerning sages and textual authority, the *Xiang'er* commentary opted out of the entire problem by appealing to a Mohist vision of a deity handing down true knowledge, sending down sages, and rewarding the good and punishing the bad.<sup>25</sup> But the *Xiang'er* has done the Mohists one better: here, that deity has in fact handed down a revelation.

This claim of divine revelation as a basis for legitimacy—thus stepping completely outside of the debates concerning sagely authorship that were so pervasive in Chinese late antiquity—would become increasingly significant over the ensuing centuries. Increasingly, the debate would concern not just who was a sage, but whether the author was human or divine.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the Han and immediately post-Han Dynasty debate over textual and sagely authority, with its consequent concerns over how to read earlier writings, revolved around the issue of sagehood. Barring the existence of a single, perfect sage who had written a text that contained all knowledge—an arrogant claim that only a few figures like the *Huainanzi* authors would make—then all of our previous texts are at best written by limited,

imperfect sages. And even if there had been a sage who one could claim was perfect, there would still exist the problems of whether that sage's texts had survived in perfect form and, even if they had, whether and how the latter-born could understand that sage's texts. The resulting debate generated a plethora of increasingly complex hermeneutic strategies.

The *Xiang'er* commentary takes a distinctive position within this debate. It opts out of the problem of sagely authorship altogether by reading Laozi as the Way itself, and reading the text of the *Laozi* as a revelation of this Way. It also opts out of the problem of providing criteria for deciding which earlier sages were truly sages worth following by simply stating that the true sages were those sent down by the Way. And, finally, it opts out of the problem of interpretation by arguing that the message of the text is straightforward and clear—not only is subtle interpretation unnecessary, but the habit of complex interpretation is precisely why the other commentators have misunderstood the clear meaning of the work.

What makes this commentary surprising is precisely that such a hermeneutic is applied to, of all things, the *Laozi*, a text that would appear to provide a highly elusive argument, relying heavily on a range of subtle rhetorical devices, paradoxes, and puns. Thus, the consistent approach of the *Xiang'er* commentary is to deny the paradoxes, ignore the puns, and read the text as giving a clear, straightforward argument. The Way is a deity that sends down sages to guide humanity and sends down moral precepts for humanity to follow, and that rewards those who follow the precepts and punishes those who do not. It is a perfect Mohist system, with a perfect Mohist style of writing, applied to one of the most subtle and elusive texts in the entire tradition. Indeed, with the possible exception of the *Zhuangzi*, there are few if any other texts from the pre-Han period that are less amenable to such a framework.

When one reads Han commentaries to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, one sees an incredibly complex hermeneutic applied to a seemingly simple annal. With the *Xiang'er*, one sees the opposite move: a seemingly mundane hermeneutic applied to an incredibly elusive and subtle text. And that this is an intentional hermeneutic—as opposed to, well, a bad reading—is clear from the type of critique this commentary applies to the hermeneutic strategies of other commentaries to the same text.

One could call the *Xiang'er* commentary as violent a misreading as anything attempted in the *Huainanzi*. But in contrast to the sagely arrogance that characterizes the *Huainanzi*, the *Xiang'er* presents itself as anti-interpretive, simply paraphrasing the revealed teachings of the text. If the *Huainanzi* proclaims its superiority to the text being commented on, the *Xiang'er* proclaims its complete subordination to a text that is absolutely correct (being the result

of divine revelation). In other words, if it is a misreading, it is a misreading that legitimates itself by claiming to be the precise opposite: a clear paraphrase of a clear text. The author of the commentary is thus himself a sage, or at the very minimum, the equivalent of the worthies who, after the Way sent Xi Zhong to create carts, recognized the significance of those carts. Under this latter interpretation, the author would be a worthy who has recognized the significance of what the Way has handed down and is now explaining it to others. Instead of presenting itself as a grand sagely corrective of an earlier great but perhaps flawed text, this commentary claims to be simply a paraphrase of a divine revelation—a revelation that, by definition, cannot be flawed in any way.

The *Xiang'er* commentary is an audacious response to the problem of hiddenness. Truth is not hidden in earlier texts—even, or especially, in those that seem most abstruse—and they do not require a complex hermeneutic to bring it to the surface; it does not lie buried in an esoteric teaching that can be unmasked through the discovery of an oral transmission or a secret code. The truth is rather hidden in plain sight, missed simply because there are too many self-proclaimed sages who refuse to subordinate themselves to the obvious meaning of a very straightforward and clear text.

## Notes

1. *Laozi*, chapter 11.

2. The *Xiang'er* commentary was discovered at Dunhuang (S 6825). It is unfortunately only a portion of the full text, consisting of commentary to chapters 3 through 37. The text is attributed in the received tradition to either Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (34–156), who purportedly received revelations from the god Laozi in 142, or to his grandson Zhang Lu 張魯, who founded the Celestial Masters movement.

For excellent studies of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校箋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1991); Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾, *Shoki no dōkyō* 初期の道教 (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1991); Stephen Bokenkamp, “Traces of Early Celestial Master Physiological Practice in the *Xiang'er* Commentary,” *Taoist Resources* 4.2 (Dec., 1993): 37–51; Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 29–77; William G. Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu in Light of the Ma-wang-tui Silk Manuscripts,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45 (1982): 95–117. For a discussion of the cosmology of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Michael Puett, “Forming Spirits for the Way: The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary to the *Laozi*,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004): 1–27.

3. For helpful summaries of the scholarship on the dating of the *Xiang'er* commentary, see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 58–62; Barbara Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Movements,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 146.

4. My translations of the *Xiang'er* commentary, here and throughout this paper, have been aided tremendously by the superb translation by Stephen Bokenkamp in his *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 78–148. I have also learned enormously from the studies collected in Rao Zongyi 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校牋 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1991); and William G. Boltz, “The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the ‘Hsiang Erh’ Lao-tzu in Light of the Ma-wang-tui Silk Manuscripts,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 45 (1982): 95–117.

5. *Xiang'er*, lines 124–27. I follow Bokenkamp in referencing the line number of the commentary as given in the photographic copy of the manuscript in Ōfuchi Ninji 大淵忍爾, *Tonkō dōkyō: Zurokuhen* 敦煌道經: 圖錄編 (Tokyo: Fukutake, 1979), 421–34. This will allow the reader to easily find both the original and Bokenkamp’s excellent translation.

6. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 91n.

7. For excellent discussions of hermeneutic strategies in early and medieval China, see John B. Henderson, *Scripture, Canon, and Commentary: A Comparison of Confucian and Western Exegesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Cai Zong-qi, *A Chinese Literary Mind: Culture, Creativity, and Rhetoric in Wenxin diaolong* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Cai Zong-qi, *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties* (Hawaii: University of Honolulu Press, 2004); Ming Dong Gu, *Chinese Theories of Reading And Writing: A Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006).

8. Michael Puett, “The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of Sagely Writing in Early China,” in *Books in Numbers*, ed. Wilt Idema (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Library, 2007), 23–47.

9. Puett, “Review of Stephen Durrant’s *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57.1 (June 1997): 299–301.

10. For a superb analysis of the *Huainanzi* argumentation, see Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s Claim to Moral Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). For excellent analyses of the *Huainanzi* postface, which strongly asserts the text’s superiority over previous texts, see Sarah Queen, “Inventories of the Past: Rethinking the ‘School’ Affiliation of the *Huainanzi*,” in *Asia Major*, Third Series, 14.1 (2001): 51–72; Judson Murray, “A Study of ‘Yaolüe,’ (A Summary of the Essentials): Understanding the *Huainanzi* from the Point of View of the Author of the Postface,” *Early China* 29 (2004): 45–108. For a brief discussion of the implications of such claims in the postface, see Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 159–60.

11. *Huainanzi*, “Yaolüe,” Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (hereafter, *ICS*), 21/227/20–21/228/26.

12. *Huainanzi*, “Yaolue,” *ICS*, 21/228/28–31.

13. Michael Puett, “Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the *Huainanzi*,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000): 29–47;

Puett, "The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of Sagely Writing in Early China," in Idema, *Books in Numbers*, 23–47.

14. See the outstanding work of Jack Dull, *A Historical Introduction to the Apocryphal (Ch'an-Wei) Texts of the Han Dynasty* (PhD diss. University of Washington, 1966) and Hans Van Ess, "The Apocryphal Texts of the Han Dynasty and the Old Text/New Text Controversy," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series 85.1/3 (1999): 29–64.

15. Puett, "The Temptations of Sagehood"; and Puett, "Listening to Sages: Divination, Omens, and the Rhetoric of Antiquity in Wang Chong's *Lunheng*," *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2005–2006): 271–281.

16. My understanding of the *Taiping jing* has been aided tremendously by Max Kaltenmark, "The Ideology of the *T'ai-p'ing ching*," in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, eds. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 19–45; Xiong Deji 熊德基, "Taiping jing de zuozhe he sixiang ji qi yu Huangjin he Tianshidao de guanxi" 太平經的作者和思想及其與黃巾和天師道的關係, in *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究 4 (1962): 8–25; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the *Taiping jing*, Part One," *Acta Orientalia* 50 (1989): 133–71; Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the *Taiping jing*, Part Two," *Acta Orientalia* 51 (1990): 173–216; Petersen, "The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping jing*," *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 3 (Autumn 1990): 1–41; Barbara Hendrischke, "The Daoist Utopia of Great Peace," *Oriens Extremus* 35 (1992): 61–91; Barbara Hendrischke, "The Concept of Inherited Evil in the *Taiping jing*," *East Asian History* 1991 (2): 1–30.

The section under discussion here concerns the dialogues between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. Most scholars of the text agree that this portion of the text belongs to the late Eastern Han. See the excellent summary by Barbara Hendrischke, "Early Daoist Movements," in Kohn, *The Daoism Handbook*, 143–145. For an outstanding translation of significant portions of this section of the text, see Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace: The Taiping jing and the Beginnings of Daoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

For a fuller discussion of how the arguments of the section may fit into the Eastern Han contexts, see my "Temptations of Sagehood," and "The Belatedness of the Present: Debates over Antiquity during the Han Dynasty," in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, eds. Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (Heidelberg: Würzburger Sinologische Schriften, 2008), 177–90.

17. Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 132.352.

18. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 140.

19. See the excellent discussion by Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 187.

20. For another such critique, see *Xiang'er*, line 98.

21. Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 51–56.

22. I have argued elsewhere that a number of the texts associated with millenarian movements in Chinese late antiquity appealed to Mohist views. The Mohists were the only major community from the pre-Han period that wrote texts claiming Heaven to be a moral deity who had created a moral cosmos and who presided over a pantheon of spirits directed toward rewarding the good and punishing the bad. A number of millenarian movements, many of which would later be characterized as Daoist, embraced such a cosmology, with the added view that this moral deity was now, in the midst of a general social crisis, handing down revelations to help humanity. One of these movements was the Celestial Masters, which was founded by Zhang Lu, to whom the authorship of the *Xiang'er* has traditionally been assigned. See Puett, "Forming Spirits for the Way," 9; Puett, "Sages, Gods, and History: Commentarial Strategies in Chinese Late Antiquity," *Antiquorum Philosophia* 3 (2009): 75; Puett, "Becoming Laozi: Cultivating and Visualizing Spirits in Early Medieval China," *Asia Major*, Third Series, 23.1 (2010): 227–38, 249–52; and Puett, "Sages, the Past, and the Dead: Death in the *Huainanzi*," in *Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*, eds. Amy Olberding and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 244–46.

23. For a fuller discussion of this passage, see Puett, "Forming Spirits for the Way."

24. For an excellent discussion of the deification of Laozi, see Anna Seidel, *La Divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoisme des Han* (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1992); Livia Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, 1998).

25. This is not meant to imply that the entire cosmology of the *Xiang'er* is similar to the Mohists. We have already seen that the *Xiang'er* contains an entire vision of transcendent immortality—something completely foreign to the Mohists. And elsewhere I have discussed the *Xiang'er* argument for humans producing spirits—certainly not something the Mohists would have argued. See Puett, "Forming Spirits for the Way."