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SAGES, GODS, AND HISTORY:
COMMENTARIAL STRATEGIES IN CHINESE
LATE ANTIQUITY

MICHAEL PUETT

COMMENTARIAL strategies developed in China are among the most extensive and radical in world history. The reasons for this are numerous, but one point stands out in particular. Although repeated attempts were made to claim that some of the earlier texts in China were containers of perfect knowledge or were divinely revealed, such positions tended to be minority views. The early texts were much more commonly seen as repositories of significant knowledge, but not necessarily perfect or complete, and not even necessarily written by figures more knowledgeable than the later readers.

Accordingly, one finds in early China a wide-ranging debate around questions such as the following: who wrote the early texts? If they were written by humans, why should they be followed? If they are to be followed, does one assume the texts to be accurate, or do they need to be re-written in order to be made into proper texts? Or, if they were written by divine powers, how can they be properly interpreted by humans?

Much of the debate came to turn on differing visions of sagehood. The term sage (sheng 聖) referred to the highest level of humans. Many of the early texts were ascribed to sages, but several of the commentators made at least implicit claims to being sages themselves. In some cases, the commentators claimed to be even greater sages than the earlier ones, or at least, by the fact that they arose later in history, possessors of greater knowledge. To counter such views, other commentators would attempt to provide arguments as to why the early sages – or at least their texts – were superior to those that came later.

To give simply one example among many. Zhu Xi, a commentator of the twelfth century, argued that four texts from early China represented the true Way. But he rested his interpretation of the four texts on new versions that he himself created by adding new characters and re-arranging sections, and then reading the newly-amended texts according to a cosmological framework noticeably absent from the texts under question. Moreover, Zhu Xi did so not out of a claim of possessing empirical evidence that the emendations he was making were historically accurate, or that the cosmology he was asserting could in fact be found in the texts; the claim for the new reading was rather based on his own implicit sageliness. And the reception of his arguments are even more telling: when later scholars came to agree that Zhu Xi was in fact a sage, they accordingly adopted the four emended texts as the standard. Indeed, Zhu Xi ultimately became the single most influential figure in the formation of the Neo-Confucian movement that would gain adherents throughout East Asia.

Needless to say, there is nothing unusual about commentators changing the texts they are reading, or interpreting those texts according to frameworks extraneous to the

texts under consideration. But what is striking in several instances in the Chinese tradition is how overt such moves could be, without attempts to legitimate the alterations through claims of historical knowledge (such as esoteric traditions), or through claims of divine support. If a commentator could successfully lay claim to sagehood, such alterations or mis-readings could be accepted.

And, conversely, those who opposed commentators altering earlier texts in such ways were forced as well to develop lengthy arguments for why the commentators should position themselves as less significant than the earlier sages and should content themselves with simply explaining what the earlier sages had written. Such an approach was rarely seen as the default position; it was rather one that would have to be defended at length.

The consequence of this debate is that one finds a tremendous complexity developing in China over reading strategies, the ways to legitimate these reading strategies, and the implications of adopting different commentarial approaches.¹

To introduce some of this complexity, I will look at several examples from one of the earliest stages in the debate – the period from the second century BCE through the early fourth century CE. This period witnessed the first attempts to articulate a relationship with the earlier texts, and many of the commentarial strategies that would later be employed were first developed during this period.

IMPERIAL COMMENTARY: THE HUAINANZI

I will begin with one of the earliest, and most telling, strategies. In the second century before the common era, China witnessed the formation of the first successful empire in Chinese history. This was a distinctive period in Chinese history, when claims to supersede the past were common. Perhaps the most extreme such claim can be found in the *Huainanzi*, a text compiled by Liu An, a major figure in the ruling Liu lineage. The *Huainanzi* claimed to be nothing less than a compendium of all knowledge and indeed a final summation of that knowledge.

One of the keys to this argument consisted of a dramatic claim concerning sagehood. Sages, according to the text, are the creators of the worlds within which the myriad things exist: «Sages create standards, and the myriad things are formed within them».² This emphasis on sagely creation led to a vision of history that was both progressivist and degenerative. On the one hand, the progressive creations of the sages took humanity from living in caves, eating berries, and having no clothes to one in which they had agriculture, states, etc. But these same innovations also broke humanity from the unity it once shared with the natural world. In distant antiquity, for example, humans lived in unity with the cosmos – but humans were also eaten by wild animals. When

¹ 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, 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, 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, 2004; MING DONG GU, *Chinese Theories of Reading And Writing: A Route to Hermeneutics And Open Poetics*, Albany, State University of New York, 2006.

² HUAINANZI, «Fanlun», Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series, hereafter referred to as ICS, 13/122/15.

sages created weapons, this solved the problem of wild animals, but it also introduced violence that in turn led to only more conflict – and in turn led to the need for yet more sagely inventions to control these new problems. A history of sagely creations, in other words, leads to a history that is at once both a progressive accumulation of innovations and a degenerative fall from an earlier harmony.¹

The history of knowledge is much the same. The great sages of the past who wrote great texts were all responding well to particular situations. But, because their responses were always immediate and partial, they also introduced mistakes that then had to be corrected later.² Again, a history of both progress and degeneracy.

The text's claim for itself was that it would serve as both a culmination of this progressive history and yet also a restoration of the unity that had once existed in the past: it would develop a comprehensive understanding that would build on the previous innovations while also linking those innovations into a single unity with the rest of the cosmos. As such, it would also be a final summation of all knowledge. Unlike all previous texts, the *Huainanzi* would not provide a response to a certain moment; it would rather provide a guide for all time.³ As the *Postface* puts it:

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 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.⁴

And, by implication, such a comprehensive vision would erase the need for sages to continue arising and writing new texts. In short, the *Huainanzi* would be the endpoint of history, in support of a great, comprehensive empire that would also be in perfect connection with the rest of the cosmos.

Such a vision resulted in a distinctive commentarial strategy – one that I have elsewhere referred to as «violent misreading». Since it claimed superiority to almost all previous texts, which were by definition seen as limited and written from only one point of view, the *Huainanzi* would intentionally mis-read them, showing what they in fact should have said.⁵

In one telling example, the *Huainanzi* quotes a passage from the *Zhuangzi* that ridicules the attempt to provide a cosmogony, on the grounds that such an attempt always leads to an infinite regress of needing to posit an origin to the origin one had previously posited. The *Huainanzi* gives a line-by-line commentary to the *Zhuangzi* passage, and in the commentary the *Huainanzi* provides precisely the cosmogony that

¹ MICHAEL PUETT, *The Belatedness of the Present: Debates over Antiquity during the Han Dynasty, Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, edited by Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl, Heidelberg, Würzburger Sinologische Schriften, 2008, pp. 177-190.

² See the excellent discussion in GRIET VANKEERBERGHEN, *The Huainanzi and Liu An's Claim to Moral Authority*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2001. See also MICHAEL PUETT, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 159-160.

³ SARAH A. QUEEN, *Inventories of the Past: Rethinking the 'School' Affiliation of the Huainanzi*, «Asia Major», Third Series, 14.1 (2001), pp. 51-72; JUDSON MURRAY, *A Study of Yaolue (A Summary of the Essentials): Understanding the Huainanzi from the Point of View of the Author of the Postface*, «Early China», 29 (2004), pp. 45-108.

⁴ HUAINANZI, *Yaolue*, ICS, 21/228/28-31.

⁵ MICHAEL PUETT, *Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the Huainanzi*, «Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities», 72 (2000), pp. 29-47.

the Zhuangzi claims cannot be done. The commentator, in other words, is superior to the text under comment.

The only exception to this mis-reading is the Laozi (later called the Daode jing – the Classic of the Way and Power), which the Huainanzi presents as essentially correct, but written in such a complex language that few others can understand it. Chapter twelve of the Huainanzi, for example, consists of stories and anecdotes keyed to specific passages of the Laozi. The chapter presents itself as explicating to non-sages what the Laozi was actually saying. Here, the claim would appear to be that the Laozi is essentially correct, but that few others than the Huainanzi authors themselves possess the sagely wisdom necessary to understand the text.¹

THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF THE XIANG'ER COMMENTARY

But if this was an example of thinking at what appeared at the time to be the dawn of a new empire, the later weakening of the Han empire brought a new set of approaches toward the past masters.

With the decline of the Han, numerous millenarian movements began emerging. For our purposes, one of the most telling of the texts from this period is the Xiang'er commentary to the Laozi.² The commentary became a significant text for the Celestial Masters, a major millenarian movement that successfully formed an independent state from the Han during the second century CE.³ Indeed, the text was attributed to Zhang Lu, one of the movement's founding figures.

Of interest here is that the Xiang'er will read the Laozi in the precise opposite way than that done in the Huainanzi. For the Huainanzi, the Laozi is a work of a great human sage – indeed, the only previous sage that the Huainanzi authors are willing to see as at least to some extent their equal. Their only implicit criticism of the Laozi would appear to be that it is written too subtly, such that few others could understand it.

The Xiang'er commentary reads the Laozi on the contrary as a divine revelation. It is not the product of a human sage at all but rather the product of the highest deity – called the Way – that also occasionally takes human form as a figure named Laozi to provide guidance to humanity. This guidance is always in the form of written texts,

¹ SARAH A. QUEEN, *The Creation and Domestication of the Techniques of Lao-Zhuang: Anecdotal Narrative and Philosophical Argumentation in Huainanzi* 12, «Asia Major», 21.1 (2008). See also the introduction and translation of the chapter by Sarah Queen, in John S. Major, Sarah Queen, Harold D. Roth, and Andrew Meyer, translators, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009.

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 three through thirty-seven.

For excellent studies of the Xiang'er commentary, see RAO ZONGYI 饒宗頤, *Laozi Xiang'er zhu jiaojian* 老子想爾注校賤, Shanghai, Guji chubanshe, 1991; ÔFUCHI NINJI 大淵忍爾, *Shoki no dôkyô* 初期の道教, Tokyo, Sôbunsha, 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, pp. 29-77; and WILLIAM G. BOLZ, *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), pp. 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), pp. 1-27.

³ On the Celestial Masters, see in particular ÔFUCHI NINJI 大淵忍爾, *Shoki no dôkyô* 初期の道教, Tokyo, Sôbunsha, 1991; ISABELLE ROBINET, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, translated by Phyllis Brooks, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1997, pp. 53-77; and TERRY KLEEMAN, *Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1998.

since humans cannot otherwise understand the Way. Thus, the deity gave us the text of the Laozi, as well as precepts to guide our behavior.¹

Moreover, since the text was revealed by a deity to provide guidance for humanity, the Xiang'er commentary claims (in opposition to all other readings of the text) that the Laozi is in fact written in a very clear, direct style. The only reason the text appears to be subtle and complex is because humans mistakenly over-read it. If we simply take the text at its literal, obvious level, we can understand it clearly.

The entire Xiang'er commentary is thus devoted to taking what would appear to be the most allusive and complex text in the tradition and reading it as a simple set of declarations from a god. The Way is read as a creator deity, and all of the puns and paradoxes that appear to dominate the text are denied. Moreover, the teachings of the Laozi are seen as being aimed at helping humans to achieve transcendence and attain long life – hardly themes that dominate other early readings of the Laozi.

An example of this commentarial approach can be seen in the reading of chapter thirty-seven of the Laozi:²

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.³

The paradox that would appear to motivate the lines is that the Way does nothing (wuwei 無為) but leaves nothing undone (wu buwei 無不為). The Xiang'er commentary, on the contrary, characteristically rejects the pun by reading the first wei as wei (偽, 'falsity'), and then reading the Way as a moral deity that can directly control everything:

"The Way is without falsity, and nothing is not done".

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.⁴

Human rulers, therefore, must always fear the Way and follow the precepts handed down by it:

"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.⁵

¹ The overall cosmology of the Xiang'er is of a deity who created the cosmos and hands down directives for humans. The primary earlier example of such a cosmology is the Mohists. I have argued elsewhere that the Xiang'er is in many ways extremely similar – in both argument and style – to the Mohists. Intriguingly, however, the Xiang'er never mentions the Mohists, but does attempt to read such a cosmology into the Laozi – one of the texts from the early tradition that would appear least amenable to the visions of the Xiang'er commentator. See my *Manifesting Sagely Knowledge: Commentarial Strategies in Chinese Late Antiquity*, in PAULA VARSANO, *Hiddenness in Chinese Literature* (forthcoming).

² My translations of the Xiang'er commentary, here and throughout this paper, have been aided tremendously by the superb translation given by Stephen Bokenkamp in his *Early Daoist Scriptures*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, pp. 78-148. I have also learned enormously from the studies given by 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), pp. 95-117.

³ Laozi, chapter 37.
⁴ Xiang'er, lines 572-573. I follow Bokenkamp in referencing the line number of the commentary as given in the photographic copy of the manuscript in ÔFUCHI NINJI 大淵忍爾, *Tonkô dôkyô: Zurokuhen* 敦煌道經: 圖錄編, Tokyo Fukutake, 1979, pp. 421-434. This will allow the reader to easily find both the original as well as Bokenkamp's excellent translation.

⁵ Xiang'er, line 574.

If the ruler does so, then those under him will also follow the precepts of the Way:

“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.¹

Gone here is any pun on the Way acting by not acting. The Way is simply a god who controls the world and hands down precepts to be followed.

A similar commentarial approach underlies the Xiang'er reading of chapter fourteen of the Laozi. At first glance, the chapter would certainly appear to be based upon a play of puns on the ineffability of the Way:

This is the shape of no shape,
the image of no thing.²

The Xiang'er does read the lines as referring to the ineffability of the Way itself, but takes the argument in a surprising direction. The reason the Way is ineffable is that it is the highest deity, lacking a form that humans can see. Accordingly, humans can only follow the precepts handed down by the Way, but cannot know the Way directly:

The Way is the most venerable. It is subtle and hidden, without shape, appearance, form, or image. One can only follow its precepts, although it cannot be seen or known.

The Way cannot be seen or understood. As such, we can only follow its teachings.

In commenting on the ensuing lines, the point is underlined:

This is called obscure and vague.
Looking upward, one cannot see its head;
Tracing it downward, one cannot see its back.

The brightness of the Way cannot be seen or understood. It is without shape or image.

If one grasps the Way of the ancients,
One can thereby follow its existence in the present.

How do we know that the Way now still exists? If we look at those in antiquity who obtained transcendence and long life, they all practiced it. One can thereby obtain an understanding that in the present vulgar age it still exists, and has not been cut off.

Since the Way cannot be seen or understood, how can we know that the Way even exists? It is by looking at the fact that (it claims) people in antiquity were able to achieve transcendence and long life. This demonstrates that the Way did hand down teachings that were being followed.

This connection with the past thus allows one to connect with the Way:

“One thereby knows the ancient beginnings. This is called the threads of the Way.”

If you are able to take the transcendentals and long-lived in antiquity as models, then those today who themselves strive to hold fast to the perfection of the Way can thus obtain the links to the Way.

The Xiang'er commentary thus reads the Laozi lines as referring to our relationship to the Way. Since the Way is so grand and indistinct, how can we know it is there? The an-

¹ Xiang'er, lines 575-576.

² Laozi, chapter 14.

swer, according to the commentary, is that we can look at the fact that people in the past followed the teachings of the Way and achieved transcendence and longevity. Thus, we can now practice the same teachings, and thereby obtain connection with the Way.

Knowledge is thus not a product of successive human insights, nor does complete knowledge depend upon connecting these insights into a unified whole. On the contrary, knowledge is handed down by a god in the form of clear teachings and precepts, and our goal as humans is simply to follow these precepts without interpretation. That the Xiang'er commentary would be so audacious as to make such claims in regard to the Laozi of all texts underlines the tremendous counter-intuitive power of the argument.

THE (ALMOST) REFORMATION OF THE EMPIRE

Millenarian movements awaiting a sage tend to find one, and the Celestial Masters did so in the somewhat unlikely figure of Cao Pi, who founded the Wei dynasty.¹ The Celestial Masters supported the Wei, and were thereafter spread throughout the realm.

The court of the Wei, meanwhile, focused on creating a new empire. We, of course, know they will fail, but this historical perspective should not lead us to under-appreciate the optimism and even hubris of the period. The rulers and scholars of the Wei court fully thought they were going to create a greater empire than the Han. Indeed, the claims to sagehood that emerged during this period rivaled anything that existed in the early Han, although it took a very different form.

CONVERSING WITH SAGES

Far from seeing themselves in a period of decline, a number of figures during the Wei dynasty began articulating a new relationship with the earlier masters – in particular seeing themselves as re-creating the world of Confucius and his disciples.² The claim here was that Confucius demonstrated his sagacity not through writing but rather through his actions and dialogues with disciples. Thus, this was a world of dialogue, not of texts. True sagehood would be demonstrated not by writing texts but by being able to spontaneously speak the right words at the right moment. Involved in this re-creation was an interest in what came to be known as *qing tan* – «pure conversation».³ In short, what we see developing among the scholars of the Wei dynasty is an attempt to divorce sagehood from writing and instead celebrate sagehood in terms of action and dialogue.

But, if these figures were re-creating the world of Confucius and his disciples, it was at a clearly higher level than Confucius himself, for several of these figures were actually employed at the court. Thus, the Wei was going to be the equivalent of a Han state that employed Confucius.

The *Shishuo xinyu* is a text devoted to anecdotes of these dialogues among figures of the time. A particularly telling one concerns Wang Bi – who we will be discussing in more detail below – and Pei Hui. Regardless of the veracity of the account, the story is nonetheless telling of the culture of the day.

¹ HOWARD L. GOODMAN, *Ts'ao P'i Transcendent: The Political Culture of Dynasty-Founding in China at the End of the Han*, Seattle, Scripta Serica, 1998.

² Wagner does a beautiful job of reconstructing this world. See in particular RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, pp. 16-21.

³ WANG BAOXUAN 王葆琰, *Zhengshi xuanxue* 正始玄學, Jinan, Qi Lu, 1987, pp. 327-329.

According to the story, Pei Hui asked Wang Bi about the relationship between Confucius and Laozi:

Generally speaking, nothingness (wu 無) is actually that which forms the basis of the ten thousand things. As such, the sage [Confucius] was unwilling to speak about it, yet Laozi elaborated on it without end. Why is this?

To which Wang Bi purportedly responded:

The sage embodied nothingness. Nothingness furthermore cannot be explicated. Thus, words necessarily reach to something (you 有). Laozi and Zhuangzi did not refrain from something; their constant explication is where they were insufficient.¹

Confucius, in other words, was the greater sage, because instead of writing about nothingness, he instead embodied it. He was thus able to generate a proper order amongst his disciples. In contrast, Laozi (as well as Zhuangzi) did write about nothingness, and this was why he was lesser than Confucius.

The highest sage, in other words, did not write. Writing is for lesser sages.²

WRITING AND SAGEHOOD

To explore these views, let us turn to Wang Bi, one of the most important of the figures from this period.³ To begin with, how do we explain the fact that Wang Bi did in fact write? Rudolf Wagner, one of the leading scholars of Wang Bi, observes the following:

He [Wang Bi] was a brilliant debater, but he stuck with the conservative form of the written word and the conservative genre of the commentary, while many of his peers gained their fame as profound philosophers through short oral interjections and epigrammatic remarks that, with all the liveliness of orality and sense of situation, truly imitated Confucius' form of communicating 'subtle words'; the brightest indicator of the Master's deep understanding of the weaknesses of the written word being his ostentatious non-writing of a book.⁴

Unlike many of his contemporaries, then, Wang Bi did write. But, as Wagner argues, he did so in a commentarial mode, rather than by authoring new works. And in this, of course, he could claim to be comparable to Confucius – not the Confucius who au-

¹ LIU YIQING 劉義慶, *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語, Shanghai, Shanghai guji, 1982, 4. 8, p. 199. See the excellent translation and discussion by Wagner in his *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator*, pp. 129-130.

² RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003, pp. 44-56.

³ My understanding of Wang Bi has been deeply influenced and greatly shaped by the following works: RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003; RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000; RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *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; TANG YONGTONG 湯用彤, *Tang Yongtong xuexu lunwen ji* 湯用彤學術論文集, Beijing, Zhonghua, 1983; WANG BAOXUAN 王葆琰, *Xuanxue tonglun* 玄學通論, Taipei, Wunan Tushu, 1987; WANG BAOXUAN 王葆琰, *Zhengshi xuanxue* 正始玄學, Jinan, Qi Lu, 1987; ALAN K. L. CHAN, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991; HOWARD L. GOODMAN, *Exegeses and exegeses of the Book of Changes in the third century AD: historical and scholastic contexts for Wang Pi*, Ph.D. dissertation; Princeton University, 1985.

⁴ RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 19.

thored the Spring and Autumn Annals but rather the Confucius who edited and commented on the other classics. To quote from Wagner again:

...a successful bid for interpretive control over a text such as the Zhouyi or the Laozi would bring a status similar to the first commentator and editor of the classics, Confucius himself...¹

Like Confucius, Wang Bi would thus comment on earlier texts, laying out the basic meanings for later, non-sagely rulers.

THE ANCESTOR OF ALL THINGS

What did this mean in practice, and what kind of a commentary emerges from a commitment to the notion that written texts are by lesser sages?

To answer this, let us turn to Wang Bi's reading of the Laozi. As we saw above, the Xiang'er commentary reads the Laozi as a divine revelation. In contrast, Wang Bi will read it as the product of a sage – and not even the greatest sage. Indeed, if Wang Bi wished to compare himself to Confucius, it is entirely possible that Wang Bi thought himself to be a superior sage to the author of the text he is commenting on. Gone, in other words, is the claim seen in the Xiang'er of being strictly subservient to a text seen as being written by a clearly superior figure – in this case, the highest god. Intriguingly, however, Wang Bi will not attempt anything like the kind of violent misreadings found so frequently in the Huainanzi. On the contrary, he presents the Laozi as providing an accurate understanding of the working of nothingness (wu), and the approach is to explain this to rulers – presumably non-sagely rulers, since sages would not need this explained. Unlike the Xiang'er, then, Wang Bi's commentary will be based upon the interplay of nothingness (wu) and something (you) and will focus particular attention on explicating the paradoxes in the Laozi.

Wang Bi's opening lines to his Laozi weizhi lüeli immediately posit a radically different cosmology than that offered by the Xiang'er commentary, or by the Huainanzi.

Generally speaking, that by which things (wu) are generated and that by which achievements are completed is by necessity born from the formless and brought forth from the nameless. As for the formless and the nameless, this is the ancestor of the myriad things.²

In contrast to the Xiang'er, the cosmology posited here is of a generative process in which the myriad things are not created by a deity but instead spontaneously emerge from the formless.

ANTIQUITY AND THE PRESENT

Such a cosmology will also become the basis of his hermeneutics, as well as the basis of his arguments concerning the past.

Let us return to chapter 14 of the Laozi. As we saw above, the Xiang'er commentary read these lines as a support for the importance of following the precepts of the Way. Wang Bi, on the contrary, reads the chapter as providing an explanation of how the na-

¹ RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 19.

² Lou Yulie 樓宇烈, editor, *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋, Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1980, p. 195. See the excellent translation by Rudolf G. Wagner in his *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, p. 83.

ture of the Way allows those in the present to understand antiquity. Let us return to the Laozi lines, although we will have to translate them differently to account for Wang Bi's reading. We will pick up with the fourth line of chapter fourteen:

Looking upward, one cannot see its beginning;
Tracing it downward, one cannot see what comes after.
If one grasps the way of antiquity,
One can thereby guide that which emerges in the present.¹

Wang Bi comments:

Although antiquity and the present are different,
their Way remains constantly.
He who grasps it is able to guide things (wu).

In this reading, the problem is not how to know the past to understand the Way. The issue is rather how we in the present can know antiquity – and the Way is what allows this to be possible. Moreover, the Way that can be found in both antiquity and the present is precisely what allows those who understand it to guide things (wu) – something that was not at all a concern for the Xiang'er commentary.

The Laozi continues:

One thereby knows the beginnings of antiquity.
This is called the thread of the Way.

Wang Bi further comments:

Being without form and without name is the ancestor of the myriad things.

Although the present and antiquity are different,
Times have changed, and customs have been altered,
None have not followed this so as to complete their ordering.

This is why he can “grasp the way of antiquity in order to guide that which emerges in the present.”

Although antiquity is distant, its Way remains.

This is why, although one exists in the present, one can thereby know the beginnings of antiquity.

The Way is not a deity that cannot be seen but that nonetheless hands down precepts for humanity. The Way is rather that which – precisely by being without form and without name – can thereby serve as the ancestor to the myriad things.

For the Xiang'er commentary, the Way has given humans precepts beginning in antiquity. Thus, for those in the present, studying the past followers of such precepts helps us to understand what the Way is asking of us. For Wang Bi, in contrast, the issue is how we can use the Way to understand antiquity. And the answer is that the processes described in the Laozi are the same in antiquity and the present: all things emerge from the formless and nameless. Those who understand this principle are able to guide things. Since this was as true in antiquity as it is now, one who also understands this principle can thus understand antiquity.

Thus, unlike the concern in the Xiang'er commentary to convince followers to practice the precepts of the Way – understood as a high deity – Wang Bi's reading of the

¹ Laozi, chapter 14.

Way is in terms of a principle that allows us to understand antiquity and control phenomena.

THINGS AND NOTHING

But if understanding the Way allowed humans in antiquity and humans in the present to guide things, then what precisely is this relationship between the Way and things? Turning to chapter 21 of the Laozi:

Obscure, indistinct, in its midst there is a thing (wu 物);
Indistinct, obscure, in its midst there is an image.

Wang Bi comments:

By means of being without shape, it initiates things,
Being unbound, it completes things.
Thereby initiated, thereby completed,
They do not know how they are so.

The Way, being itself without shape, is that which initiates and completes things. But they do not know how they are so initiated and completed.

Moreover, this fundamental aspect of the world has always been the case:

From antiquity to the present, nothing has been completed without following this.

Change is thus not a progressive accumulation of innovations. It is rather an endless process of emergence from this nothing – at various times called the shapeless, the nameless, or the ancestor, and this process has always been the same.

THE POLITICAL ORDER OF WANG BI

If this is Wang Bi's claim concerning the Way, then what are the implications for the political system being advocated? We turn to chapter seventeen of the Laozi:

When his achievements are completed and tasks finished,
The commoners say, "We were like this spontaneously (zi ran)".¹

The Xiang'er commentary characteristically reads the lines in terms of the precepts of the Way:

"We" refers to the transcendent noble. The hundred families do not study our valuing and having faith in the words of the Way in order to bring about this accomplishment. They think we are so spontaneously. One ought to make known that those not willing are expected to reach the point of imitating us.²

The Xiang'er commentary is reading the "we" as referring not to the families but to the transcendent nobles – those who have followed the precepts of the Way and who will hopefully be imitated by the rest of the populace. The concern of the Xiang'er commentary is that families will think that transcendent nobles are naturally transcendent, instead of realizing that they made their accomplishments because of their faith in the Way – the same faith that hopefully all families will come to adopt.

¹ Laozi, chapter 17.

² Xiang'er, lines 242-243.

Wang Bi, on the contrary, reads the lines as referring to the relationship of the populace to the ruler. I will again quote the Laozi lines, changing them slightly to fit Wang Bi's reading:

When his achievements are completed and tasks finished,
The hundred families say: "We are like this naturally (ziran)."¹

Wang Bi comments:

... the hundred families do not know how they are like this.²

In contrast to the Xiang'er reading, Wang Bi sees the figure completing tasks as being the ruler, not the transcendent noble, and sees the "we" as referring to the families, rather than to the nobles. Thus, it is the ruler who is accomplishing tasks, and the hundred families, instead of seeing this as having been a result of the ruler's actions, think that the resulting order is simply natural. Clearly, then, the families' error is for Wang Bi a good thing: they do not realize that the order in which they live was in fact created by the ruler. Instead, they mistakenly think that this is simply a natural way of the world. The implication, of course, is that the order created by the ruler, being seen by the populace as natural, will not be opposed.

As Wagner astutely notes:

From this follows the paradox that, although the entire social order with the people's "achievements completed and processes followed through" is in the last count due to the Great Man's being in the ruler's position, as they come about without his interference in any manner, the Hundred Families are bound to assume that this regulation will ensue from the interrelated regulation of the structure of their own natures.³

By becoming like the nothingness that generates a given order, the ruler can equally generate an order that the populace will mistakenly believe to be perfectly natural. The ruler is thus able to guide things in the same manner that the Way does.

THE SAGE AS ANCESTOR

Overall, then, Wang Bi's argument involves a dramatic re-instatement of the role of the sage. But the emphasis is not on the sage as a radical creator (the sort of claim one finds in the Huainanzi), nor is it of the sage as a follower of a high deity (as in the Xiang'er). The emphasis is rather on the sages as providing the ground within which an order will arise – a ground that is mistakenly seen by those within it as a natural order.

The sage thus serves as the ancestor of the people – not literally, and not even historically, but rather by creating an order that is never seen as having been created, and functioning to the populace as nothingness serves as an ancestor to all things.

¹ Laozi, chapter 17.

² My translations here and throughout of Wang Bi's commentary have been aided greatly by the following works: RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *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; PAUL J. LIN, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1977; RICHARD J. LYNN, *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. Wagner also provides what is now the best critical edition of Wang Bi.

³ RUDOLF G. WAGNER, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2000, p. 187.

In terms of commentary, such a claim also provided the basis for claiming an understanding of earlier sages – including sages like Confucius who did not write. Sages can see the order that emerged from an earlier sage, and, recognizing that it was a product of a sage, the later sage can understand the former. Sagehood thus comes to be dramatically divorced from texts, and history is no longer seen as progressive.

Indeed, history as a steady accumulation is rejected here altogether. There is no sense of the past as distant and unknowable, or of the present as dramatically different from the past (either in terms of progressive development or degeneracy). The sages of the past operated by the same principles as the sages of today, and they are thus fully knowable by those in the present. There is also no basis for claiming that sages of today are or are not any greater than those of before.

PRESENT AT THE CREATION

Thus, although Confucius did not write, Wang Bi can still understand him. Confucius embodied nothingness, and Wang Bi, understanding the workings of nothingness, is able to understand Confucius and the other ancients – not because there are texts to guide us but rather because of the nature of the Way itself. Indeed, if sages can thus understand antiquity by means of this principle, texts become irrelevant. Texts are only needed for the non-sages.

Wang Bi is, in a sense, claiming to have been present at the creation – present when Confucius was talking to his disciples and present when Confucius was editing earlier texts for the later, non-sages to come. Such a claimed presence was not, of course, historical, nor was it based on a claimed reconstruction of Confucius through textual remains. The basis of the claim was rather through the nature of nothingness itself.

Like the second chapter of the *Huainanzi*, Wang Bi is presenting himself as a sage who can truly understand what other sages have written, and his own work is thus presented as making that sagely knowledge available to non-sages. But, unlike the *Huainanzi*, Wang Bi is not trying to present a comprehensive vision that would explain everything and thus bring to an end the need to produce more texts – in other words, a final summation of all sagely knowledge. Wang Bi's move is quite different: if, like the *Huainanzi*, his goal is to provide guides for non-sages, Wang Bi nonetheless demonstrates no interest in writing an encyclopedic summation of all possible knowledge.

Instead of resting his claim to sagehood upon the authorship of a grand encyclopedic work that would stand as a culmination of the progressive accumulation of all previous knowledge, Wang Bi's arguments are based on something of the opposite claim: by commenting on works that contain (in different ways) a basic explanation of the nature of generation and change, Wang Bi is able to explicate fundamental principles that would underlie all phenomena and would explicate how a ruler can thereby create order. The claim to sagehood comes from an argument concerning the nature of emergence rather than an ability to explicate all of history and all of the cosmos. If the model of the *Huainanzi* is of the sage as a radical creator of innovations, the sage for Wang Bi is as an unperceived ancestor of a new order.

Wang Bi thus places a strong emphasis on sages, but not on overt creation. In particular, there is thus a rejection of the progressivist / degenerative history in the form given in the *Huainanzi*. Wang Bi does not claim to be building upon and synthesizing the creations of previous sages. On the contrary, he is claiming to understand the process-

es by which sages bring order to the world – processes which hold steady quite apart from historical change.

The goal is thus not to mis-read texts in order to show the commentators' superiority to the earlier sages but rather to choose those texts with an accurate understanding of the workings of emergence and to explicate those processes to (non-sagely) rulers.

AN ERA WITHOUT RECOGNIZED SAGES: GE HONG

If this was Wang Bi's vision for the new empire that would re-establish order for the first time since the fall of the Han, it was a vision that failed. The Wei/Jin empire failed to restore unity to China, and indeed in the early fourth century northern China fell altogether to foreign armies, thus forcing the Jin rulers to flee southward. At this point, almost two centuries since the fall of the Han and with a court ruling only the south-eastern corner of what the Han had once controlled, a sense of clear decline set in. Such a sense in turn led to a new set of debates as to why unity seemed so impossible to achieve again.

Writing in the early fourth century, Ge Hong made an argument as to the nature of the problem.¹ But let us turn first to his reading of Laozi. Ge Hong does accept that Laozi was a practitioner of arts of transcendence, but Ge Hong explicitly rejects that Laozi was a god. As he argues in his *Shenxian zhuan*, Laozi was very advanced in his attainment of the Way, but "he was not of a different kind of being."² Unlike the Xiang'er commentary, Ge Hong explicitly sees Laozi as a human being, not a god. But unlike Wang Bi, Ge Hong claims that Laozi did become a transcendent. And he became a transcendent by learning the artificial techniques invented over the millennia by humans.

The word artificial is crucial here. Ge Hong hopes to make a strong re-assertion of the importance of sagely creation.³ For Ge Hong, history consisted of a progressive creations of the sages:

It is like boats and carts being substituted for walking and fording, and writing in ink replacing knotting ropes: all of these later inventions (zuo) are better than the former activities.⁴

¹ My understanding of Ge Hong has been helped immeasurably by the excellent work of ROBERT CAMPANY. See his: *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; *Two Religious Thinkers of the Early Eastern Jin: Gan Bao and Ge Hong in Multiple Contexts*, «Asia Major», 18.1 (2005), pp. 175-224; *Living off the Books: Fifty Ways to Dodge Ming [Preallotted Lifespan] in Early Medieval China*, in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christopher Lupke, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2005, pp. 129-150; *On the Very Idea of Religions (in the Modern West and in Early Medieval China)*, «History of Religions», 42.4 (May 2003), pp. 287-319; *Ingesting the Marvelous: The Practitioner's Relationship to Nature According to Ge Hong (283-343 C.E.)*, in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways within a Cosmic Landscape*, ed. Norman Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 125-147.

² "Laozi," *Taiping guangji*, compiled by Li Fang et al., Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1961, 1.1a. See the excellent translation by ROBERT CAMPANY in his, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p. 196.

³ MICHAEL PUETT, *Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity: Ge Hong's Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi)*, «Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident», 29 (2007), pp. 95-119.

⁴ GE HONG, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 30; Yang Mingzhao, editor, *Baopuzi waipian jiaojian*, Beijing, Zhonghua shuju 1985, p. 78. Here and throughout my discussion of Ge Hong, my translations of the Baopuzi have been aided greatly by those given by JAY SAILEY in his *The Master Who Embraces Simplicity: A Study of the Philosopher Ko Hung, A.D. 283-343*, San Francisco, Chinese Materials Center 1978 and James Ware in his *James Ware, translator, Alchemy, Medicine, and Religion in the China of A. D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung*, New York, Dover Publications, 1966.

In terms of knowledge, this meant a progressive accumulation of texts written by sages on which the next generation of sages could build.

In general, the lesser arts of hewing, paring, carving, and painting, and the easier activities of archery, chariotry, and riding all require practice before one can become good. How much more so the breadth of human patterns, the distance of the way and the power, the alternation of yin and yang, and the dispositions of ghosts and spirits.¹

In contrast to Wang Bi, therefore, Ge Hong sees Confucius and Laozi as both equally sages, but belonging to two different lines of knowledge. One body of accumulated knowledge teaches politics and ethics, and another body of accumulated knowledge teaches humanity how to attain transcendence. Both of these are artificial arts of humanity. Confucius was a crucial sage in the development of the former body of knowledge, and Laozi was a crucial figure in the second: «Confucius is the sage of the classicists, and Laozi is the sage for those obtaining the Way».² Both figures were equally human, and both were equally sages. And each was limited: Confucius understood nothing about transcendence, and Laozi contributed little to ethics. But each made key contributions to their respective traditions of knowledge.

One of the concerns for Ge Hong, however, was that this progressive accumulation of knowledge through the creations of the human sages was coming to an end. Ge Hong was in particular concerned that beliefs in divine revelation on the one hand and in an over-reverence for past sages on the other was destroying the process of each human generation building on the creations of its predecessors. In both cases, it would mean a failure to devote oneself to the patient work of accumulating new knowledge by instead resting one's hopes on spirits and earlier teachings: «The people of today follow the spirits and value the old and ancient, but they downgrade and treat lightly the current times».³

This is why Ge Hong had particular vehemence for those who «falsely cite Laozi and Zhuangzi»⁴ and «embrace emptiness and protect vacuity».⁵ Such tendencies involved an embrace of spontaneity, and resulted in an attempt to divorce sagehood from writing. But, by divorcing sagehood from the crucial processes of history, they simply become purely licentious figures who would then define their licentiousness as sageliness.

As a consequence of these trends, the progressive accumulation of knowledge that is crucial for human history has been stopped. And Ge Hong's writings in the *Baopuzi* are largely an attempt to summarize knowledge as it has progressed to his day and to argue that this accumulation of sagely creations must continue.⁶

Ge Hong in many ways thus supports the views of sages and innovation seen in the *Huainanzi*. He strongly asserts a progressivist vision of history, based upon the accumulated creations of the sages. But, unlike the *Huainanzi*, Ge Hong is committed to the notion that all sages (including himself) are limited. Thus, there can be no final sum-

¹ GE HONG, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 3, p. 114.

² GE HONG, *Baopuzi neipian*, chapter 7; Wang Ming, editor, *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, Beijing, Zhonghua shuju 1985, p. 138.

³ GE HONG, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 32, p. 118.

⁴ GE HONG, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 25, p. 632.

⁵ GE HONG, *Baopuzi waipian*, chapter 25, p. 633. See the excellent discussion by Robert Campany in his *Two Religious Thinkers of the Early Eastern Jin: Gan Bao and Ge Hong in Multiple Contexts*, «Asia Major», 18.1 (2005), 175-224

⁶ See PUETT, *Humans, Spirits, and Sages in Chinese Late Antiquity: Ge Hong's Master Who Embraces Simplicity (Baopuzi)*.

mation of knowledge: sages must continue appearing and writing texts, so that the progressive accumulation of insights can continue.

Moreover, there appears to be no inherent degeneration in this vision: the progressive accumulation of knowledge continues without a sense of a potential loss through that accumulation. Indeed, the only loss seems to be a product of the growth itself: texts on politics and immortality have become so numerous that it is now very difficult for a single figure to master them all. In describing both the political arts and the arts of transcendence, Ge Hong clearly thinks he has managed to master both. But not only does he not present his text as a unity of the two, he on the contrary divides the work into two parts, with politics and transcendence being presented in the outer and inner portions of the *Baopuzi*, respectively. He makes no attempt to unify them into a single body of knowledge. This lack of a belief in a final summation leads him to be less prone to undertake the kind of violent misreadings seen in the *Huainanzi*.

But the fact that all sages – and thus all previous texts – are seen as limited equally leads him to be uninterested in providing close commentaries to single texts like the *Laozi* that would supposedly provide universal guidelines for human behavior. His goal is rather one of sifting through the entire body of earlier texts, finding their insights, and organizing the accumulated knowledge that humans have thus far built up.

Knowledge, in short, is human and limited. But, because of a gradual accumulation of (limited) sagely creations, the latter-born have access to greater arts than the earlier sages. The goal of studying earlier works is thus to organize that earlier knowledge so that the latter-born can continue to build upon it. Previous texts are crucially important – not because they provide complete knowledge but simply because many of them have provided key insights in this progressive human accumulation of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

We often associate China with being a tradition in which an emphasis is placed on following the past. On the contrary, however, there existed a lengthy debate as to the nature of the past, the reasons or necessity for following it, and the implications of doing so. One finds accordingly a complex set of arguments as to how to read earlier texts, the degree to which one should or should not claim oneself to be subservient to the earlier texts, and the degree to one should see the earlier texts as repositories of full knowledge.

Indeed, of the texts we have analyzed, only the *Xiang'er* commentary presents itself as simply explicating a text written by someone (or, in this case, something) superior to the commentator. And this is quite ironic, given that the *Xiang'er* commentary provides perhaps the most surprising reading we have seen from any of the early texts: while claiming to be simply following the dictates of a divinely revealed text, the *Xiang'er* claims that the *Laozi*, of all texts, is precisely that – a divinely revealed set of teachings offering clear guidelines for humans to follow.

All of the other commentators actually place themselves in a position of superiority to the earlier texts under consideration. This is most clearly the case with the *Huainanzi*, but implicitly so with *Wang Bi* as well. And even *Ge Hong*, by stint of coming later in what he sees as a tradition of progressive accumulation and of having mastered two separate strands of knowledge, would see himself as superior to all of the earlier texts he is discussing.

What is striking in this study is the degree to which a perceived subservience to an earlier tradition is in fact a minority position. Given this debate, the later moves by and reception of Zhu Xi become completely understandable.

In any tradition, there is always a perceived disjunction between the readers and the earlier texts. But in few other traditions is this disjunction played upon so forcefully and strongly as in China. The result has been the production of an astounding body of reading strategies and commentarial approaches that deserve to be brought into our larger comparative discussions of hermeneutics.

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