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The Wenzi: creation and manipulation of a Chinese philosophical text
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Preface

The *Wénzǐ* 文子 is an ancient Chinese politico-philosophical treatise. It was written some two thousand years ago, and traditionally ascribed to a disciple of Lǎozǐ 老子, the alleged founder of Daoism.

I first heard of the *Wénzǐ* in 1995 as a Leiden University exchange student at Beijing Language and Culture University, through an interest in Daoist writings that I shared with a Russian exchange student who had recently read this text. I became better acquainted with the *Wénzǐ* in 1998 at Cambridge University, where I wrote a comparative paper on the first chapter of the *Wénzǐ*, the first chapter of the *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 and the last canon of the *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* 黃帝四經. The intertextual relation between these three writings is obvious even from their titles: “The Origin of the Way” 道原 in *Wénzǐ* and *Four Canons* and “Tracing the Way to its Origin” 原道訓 in *Huáinánzǐ*. This paper introduced me to the world of texts and intertextuality and of authorship and originality. It also reinforced my interest in the field of early Chinese thought—a fascinating blend of archaeology, philology and philosophy—and in the *Wénzǐ* in particular.

The *Wénzǐ* is an important text. In its long history of circulation, it was once read in the highest echelons of society, by philosophers, priests, librarians, literary critics, ministers and emperors. The *Wénzǐ* is also a controversial text that provokes widely divergent appraisal. Some appreciate the text as an authentic ancient treatise, others denounce it as a worthless forgery. The question of its authenticity has occupied scholars for centuries, and left them divided.

The archaeological discovery in 1973 of a Hàn dynasty *Wénzǐ* manuscript, written on strips of bamboo, refueled the debate. It led to significant insights, but also to more questions. The main issue in current *Wénzǐ* research, though seldom explicitly voiced, concerns the relationship between the bamboo manuscript and the received text. Most scholars maintain, often implicitly, that the similarities between the two dominate and that the bamboo manuscript and the received text are merely two versions of one text. A few others argue that the differences prevail and that they should be seen as two distinct texts. I subscribe to the latter view, which sees the bamboo manuscript as a copy of the Ancient *Wénzǐ*, that is, the *Wénzǐ* as it circulated

prior to the radical revision that generated the Received *Wénzǐ*, that is, the *Wénzǐ* that was transmitted to the present day. This view means that statements about the one text are not automatically valid for the other, and it enables fair judgment of the bamboo manuscript and the received text, each in their own right. This view also motivates the structure of my book, in which I first analyze the Ancient *Wénzǐ*, and then the Received *Wénzǐ*.

Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the 1973 discovery and the unearthed bamboo *Wénzǐ* manuscript. Chapter 3 is a philological analysis of the Ancient *Wénzǐ*: When was this text written? Who wrote it? Who are its protagonists? Chapter 4 explores the philosophy of the Ancient *Wénzǐ*: Where does it stand in contemporary politico-philosophical debate? Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the process of revision that generated the Received *Wénzǐ*. Chapter 7 analyzes its date and authorship: When was the *Wénzǐ* revised and by whom? Chapter 8 explores the philosophy of the Received *Wénzǐ*: Where, in its turn, does the received text stand in contemporary politico-philosophical debate? Chapter 9 studies *Wénzǐ* reception, with reference to questions that far exceed ancient Chinese politico-philosophical discourse. How do readers interpret the text? What motivates its different—even diametrically opposed—receptions? What does this tell us about different notions of authorship and authenticity?