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

The *Wénzǐ* is not a popular text. Its glory days, with their peak in the reign of Táng emperor Xuánzōng, are long behind us. Centuries of criticism, starting in the mid-Táng, increasing in the Southern Sòng and coming to a head in the Qīng, stigmatized the text and made it fall from favor. Underlying this criticism is the belief that in Chinese philosophy, author, text and protagonist are one. Mencius wrote the *Mencius* in which he, as Mencius, develops his worldview. If one of the three elements is problematic, all three become suspect. How can Wénzǐ, a disciple of Lǎozǐ, converse with King Píng of Zhōu? How can a 6th century BCE text mention laws and decrees that were implemented only later in Chinese history? This must mean that the text is a partial or complete forgery—and forgeries are of no value. The Dìngzhōu discovery refueled interest in the *Wénzǐ*, but its scope remained limited to several Chinese, a few Japanese and one or two Western academics. The main problem in modern *Wénzǐ* research, in particular in studies published soon after the Dìngzhōu discovery was heralded, is that they appreciate the *Wénzǐ* in the same old hermeneutic framework—as an authentic, and for that reason highly relevant, pre-Qín text.

In this book, I have disjoined the trinity of author, text and protagonist. In my view, the author, or editor, is someone who speaks through the main protagonist and uses the text as a vehicle for promoting his own philosophy. The three need not be one; and in the *Wénzǐ*'s case they are not one. This approach affects another problem in modern *Wénzǐ* research, which is that many publications see the Ancient *Wénzǐ* and the Received *Wénzǐ* as one text. In my view, if two persons—author and editor—in different historical periods, for different audiences, out of different motives and with different notions of authorship, create two fundamentally different *Wénzǐ*'s, then these should not be seen as two versions of one text, but as two distinct texts, even if they have the same title. This approach is reflected in the structure of my book, which first analyzes the Ancient *Wénzǐ*, and then the Received *Wénzǐ*.

We do not know who created these *Wénzǐ*'s, as both author and editor adopted the pen name Wénzǐ. We can nonetheless acquire insight into their methods and motives, and therefore, into the role they envisioned for their respective texts in contemporary politico-philosophical debate. This enables a balanced appraisal of both

Wénzǐ's. The Ancient *Wénzǐ* may not be an “authentic pre-Qín text” by a disciple of Lǎozǐ, but it offers valuable insights into the intellectual history of the early Former Hàn dynasty. The Received *Wénzǐ*, even as a “forgery” of the third century CE, bears witness to major changes in Chinese culture and society of that period. Hence, both texts are important documents for understanding their historical contexts. This requires further study.

Since the publication of the Dingzhōu *Wénzǐ* transcription, now ten years ago, scholars have gradually accepted the idea of the Ancient *Wénzǐ* as an early Hàn dynasty composition. I have tried to determine as precisely as possible the date of this text and its function in contemporary debate, but more work is needed. For example, the relationship between the Ancient *Wénzǐ* and the *Huáinánzǐ* is not yet well understood. The two appear to support similar worldviews, but there are hardly any intertextual correspondences. A thorough understanding of the intellectual trends of the first decades of the Hàn dynasty requires an in-depth comparison of these two works and should also include related thinkers, such as Sīmǎ Tán 司馬談. For the Received *Wénzǐ*, I have tried to analyse as precisely as possible the dates, methods and motives of revision, but more work is needed here too. Rather than revering the Received *Wénzǐ* as the work of a disciple of Lǎozǐ or rejecting it as a worthless forgery, we may appreciate its actual contribution to contemporary debate. This requires comparative analysis with other texts from that period, such the writings of Hé Yàn 何晏, Wáng Bì 王弼 and Gě Hóng 葛洪, and even the commentaries on the *Lièzǐ* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

A passage in *Zhuāngzǐ* 20 describes the natural world as a place of hunting and being hunted, and of eating and being eaten. A cicada, enjoying the shade, does not notice the praying mantis that is about to snatch it. The mantis, in its turn, is not aware of the magpie that is preparing to attack it. The magpie is blind to the crossbow *Zhuāngzǐ* aims at it. And *Zhuāngzǐ* fails to see the approaching park keeper, who takes him for a poacher. The Ancient *Wénzǐ* resembles the cicada: having consumed a variety of pre-Hàn concepts and ideas it makes itself heard, but falls prey to a mantis-editor, who sinks his teeth into it to produce the Received *Wénzǐ*. The glitter of the Received *Wénzǐ* draws the attention of erudite magpie-scholars, who treasure it or thrust it aside. This is, of course, the chance of a lifetime to compare myself to *Zhuāngzǐ*, whose posture and position offer him an overview of cicada, mantis and magpie: I have

aimed my crossbow at all three. Now it is up to the park keeper-reader to criticize my work and raise *Wénzǐ* studies to higher levels.