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The Wenzi (Wen Tzu) Treatise

Paul VAN ELs

The *Wenzi* (*Master Wen*) is a treatise with Daoist hues that consists of 12 chapters with a total of nearly 40,000 graphs. Little is known of the master after whom the book is named. Ban Gu (32–92 C.E.) states in his *Hanshu* that *Wenzi* was a disciple of Laozi (according to tradition, sixth century B.C.E.), the patriarch of Daoism. Whether or not there existed a Master Wen among the disciples of Laozi, whose historical identity also remains shrouded in mystery, the author or authors of the *Wenzi* certainly felt inspired by Laozi’s teachings. Not only is a large portion of the *Wenzi* explicitly attributed to its spiritual mentor (many sections start with the phrase “Laozi said . . .”), but the text also includes numerous citations from the *Daodejing*. The *Wenzi* explains these citations or uses them as authoritative statements to reinforce its own argument. In its development of Laozi’s thought, the *Wenzi* readily borrows concepts of pre-Qin texts of entirely different philosophical leanings, including *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*, and *Guanzi*. The *Wenzi* thus exudes the atmosphere of a text of the late Warring States period or the Han dynasty, as it represents a new, syncretic form of Daoism that is based on the philosophy of Laozi and, to a lesser extent, Zhuangzi, but is also informed by ideas of other philosophical schools.

Textual History of the *Wenzi*

The initial creation of the *Wenzi* took place more than 2,000 years ago, perhaps even in the Warring States period, as many contemporary scholars believe. Between the moment of its creation and the third century

C.E., this original *Wenzi* underwent major revisions, in which large amounts of external material (mainly from the *Huainanzi*) were blended into the text. In this new form, the text was transmitted to the present day.

In the centuries following these revisions, the *Wenzi* provoked widely differing opinions among its readers. It was praised for its “sparkling clarity” by the literary critic Liu Xie (c. 465–522) and granted the honorific title *Tongxuan zhenjing* (*True Scripture on Penetrating the Mysteries*) by the Tang emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756). Soon afterward, however, scholars started focusing on its frequent quotation of other texts and noted that no less than three-quarters of the content of the *Wenzi* also appeared in the *Huainanzi*. Since the vast majority of scholars argued for the historical priority of the *Huainanzi*, the *Wenzi* was commonly branded a forgery and became a marginalized text.

The centuries of neglect abruptly ended in 1973, when a fragmentary bamboo manuscript was discovered in Ding County (Hebei Province), in a tomb dated 56 B.C.E. The unearthed slips contain a copy of the original *Wenzi*, that is, as it had existed before its revision. The manuscript proves that the transmitted *Wenzi* was not a third-century forgery but the revision of an authentic Han or even pre-Han work.

Relationship between *Wenzi* and *Huainanzi*

The discovery made in 1973 also shed light on the relationship between the transmitted *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*. It proved what many scholars already suspected, that the former was partially copied from the

latter. However, despite a striking mutual correspondence of phrases and even full paragraphs, the *Wenzi* is markedly different from the *Huainanzi*. The *Wenzi* contains original material not found in the *Huainanzi*; what is more, its editors carefully selected those passages from the *Huainanzi* that they deemed suitable for inclusion. Five chapters of *Huainanzi* were thus left untouched. Also, material from *Huainanzi* selected for inclusion was thoroughly revised. Through stylistic and rhetorical changes, such as replacing difficult and dialect words with more common synonyms; deleting, changing, or adding grammatical particles; turning dialogue into monologue; and removing historical anecdotes, the arguments taken from *Huainanzi* were radically transformed, and a new text with its own style and philosophy was created.

Philosophy of the *Wenzi*

The *Wenzi* discusses a wide range of topics, including those now classified as warfare, culture, psychology, ecology, and law. Its overall concern, however, is political. The book's central issue is the one that motivated virtually all pre-Qin masters: how to turn a disorderly society into a well-organized one.

The *Wenzi* resembles other ancient Chinese philosophical texts by displaying a belief in a time when everything was perfect. In Master Wen's eyes, this "golden age" took place in high antiquity, well before the reigns of the (legendary) rulers Fu Xi, Shennong, and Huangdi (*Wenzi*, 12.1). This was the age when the Way (*dao*) reigned supreme: all living creatures dwelled together in peaceful harmony and human beings were still "innocent like children and did not know west from east" (1.10). When culture and intelligence arose, craftiness and desire also cropped up. As a consequence, society gradually deteriorated and ended up in the chaotic situation *Wenzi* found himself in. Although *Wenzi* wishes for his world to be more like his ideal, he does not advocate an actual return to this primordial situation of natural order, for that would require one to abandon society and culture and retreat as a recluse to the wilds. Instead, he promotes the application of the principle that ruled the golden age (i.e., the Way) within the framework of present-day society. The obvious person to implement this is the sage, or the exemplary ruler.

According to *Wenzi*, the ruler is to the state what the heart is to the body. Since a calm body requires a stable heart, an important precondition for good government is to have a healthy ruler. As to the importance of his physical health, the *Wenzi* states that "when his body is not calm, right or wrong have nowhere to be formed" (2.6) and "when his body labors without rest-

ing, it collapses" (3.3). More important yet is the ruler's mental condition. If his spirit is not clear and his mind not calm, he will be led by emotions. As a result, influence and profit will entice him, music and sex seduce him, eloquent speakers easily persuade him, and courageous people overawe him. Instead of directing others, he will then be directed by them. Therefore, the *Wenzi* asserts that "being a sage is not in governing others, it is in organizing oneself" (1.4).

The essence of government lies in the interaction between ruler and subjects. As to the latter, *Wenzi* maintains that "the people are the foundation of the state" (10.8), an idea also upheld by Mengzi and Xunzi, but much less by the early Daoist masters Laozi and Zhuangzi. The importance of the people to the state is stressed throughout the *Wenzi*. Since the people are the source of political authority, the sage, according to *Wenzi*, loves his people as a father loves his child, worries about their poverty, and has an inborn desire to benefit them. Actions by the sage always correspond to the minds of the people; they are never undertaken out of self-interest. For example, annexing a neighboring state for wealth and natural resources is clearly an act of self-interest, and as such unjustifiable; military expeditions are allowed only when a ruler wants to aid suffering people abroad by deposing their tyrannical sovereign. Thus if a ruler does not attune his actions to the demands of the common people, he undermines his own authority.

As befits a true student of Laozi, *Wenzi* regards the Way as the most important concept in his philosophical system. In words reminiscent of the four silk manuscripts discovered at Mawangdui, the Way is described as being "too high to reach and too deep to fathom" (1.1); it is an invisible yet all-embracing entity that bestows life on all things. Since the Way can change what has already been carved and polished (i.e., culturally and politically refined) back to its original, uncarved state, it is this principle that the ruler must rely on when organizing his chaotic (carved and polished) nation. To change society, he "instructs the masses by means of the Way and guides them by its power (*de*)" (11.12). In instructing the common people—unlike other types of teaching—no words are used, for the function of words is limited. Facial expressions (*rongmao*) reach where words cannot go, and imperceptible instructions (*ganhu*) reach even further. Therefore, the sage spiritually transforms the masses.

This "spiritual transformation" (*shenhua*) constitutes a type of ruling in which the subjects are unaware of the fact that they are being ruled. Governing through spiritual transformation, the ruler bases all his actions on the Way and executes them with "pure sincerity"

(*jingcheng*), i.e., without any hidden motives. This impresses the people, who spontaneously follow his exemplary behavior. Should this prove insufficient, the ruler may then turn to “humaneness” (*ren*) and “righteousness” (*yi*), or even to “rites” (*li*) and “music” (*yue*) and, if absolutely necessary, to arms and weapons. By adopting humaneness and righteousness as key terms in his philosophical system, Wenzi again deviates from his mentor Laozi, in whose text these terms play only a marginal role.

Humaneness and righteousness are expressed mainly through reward and punishment. These should be fair and equal and above all, they should correspond to what the people expect them to be. For example, to punish an entire group for the crime of one of its members is generally considered unfair, and the people will resent a ruler who decides to implement this punishment. Since the expectations of the common people differ across times and cultures, it would be wrong for the ruler to stick persistently to measures such as laws, rules, rites, or punishments that fail to match the particularities of his own time and culture. The ruler may be perfectly humane and righteous, but if he does not adapt these qualities to contemporary needs, he has not yet attained the Way. Sages of the past who did attain the Way used different measures to organize society, and still each was called a sage. This is because they realized that such measures are mere tools for the creation of order and are not that which makes order order. Therefore, on the outside they attuned their measures to the needs of the people of their times, whereas inside they remained forever focused on the unchanging Way.

But the *Wenzi* is not an exclusively political treatise. Its relatively simple style and the universal character of many of its sayings make the book accessible to a broad audience: “When affairs are sparse, they are easy to manage; when desires are few, they are easy

to satisfy” (10.6). “When you realize that a fan on a winter day or a fur coat in summer is of no use to you, then all things will turn into dust and dirt” (12.4). “What is charming to the eye or pleasing to the heart, is what the fool considers profitable, but what those who have the Way avoid” (7.14). The scope of sayings such as these easily exceeds theories and practices of politics. In general, the *Wenzi* argues for a lifestyle in accordance with the Way, focusing on important problems rather than insignificant issues, reducing one’s desires, and being sincere in one’s actions—in other words, a lifestyle of potential appeal to many, both then and now.

See also *Huainanzi*.

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