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Relation of the *Wenzi* 文子 to the *Huainanzi* 淮南子

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Abstract

The *Wenzi* in its transmitted form is closely related to the *Huainanzi*. Text passages shared between the two works amount to tens of thousands of characters. In the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition, where intertextual connections are common, this is highly unusual. The sheer volume of textual parallels suggests massive borrowing of content from one work in the process of creating the other.

The present chapter shows how scholars throughout history assessed this intriguing intertextual relation; it analyzes which work likely served as the source, and it reflects on the philosophical relevance of the derivative text.

► Table of Contents

1. Relation
 2. Reception
 - 2.1 Team Wenzhi
 - 2.2 Team Huainanzi
 - 2.3 Archeological Discoveries
 - 2.4 Nuanced Views
 3. Solution
 - 3.1 Anecdotal Evidence
 - 3.2 Plausible Scenario
 4. Reflection
 - 4.1 The Huainanzi
 - 4.2 The Wenzhi
 - 4.3 Popularity
 5. Conclusion
 - Bibliography
 - Primary
 - Secondary
 - Acknowledgments
-
-

1. Relation

The *Wenzhi* in its transmitted form presents itself as a work that was created by a disciple of Laozi 老子, the Old Master. Nearly all sections in the text purport to be lessons by the legendary founder of Daoism, supposedly committed to writing by his pupil. Here is a typical passage:

Laozi said: “Do not strive for conduct that can be condemned, yet do not resent it when others condemn you. Cultivate virtue worthy of praise, yet do not strive for others to praise you. You cannot guarantee that misfortune does not appear, yet you can ensure that you do not invite it. You cannot guarantee that good fortune will certainly come, yet you can ensure that you do not refuse it. If misfortune does appear, it is not because you yourself made it

happen. Hence, when things go poorly, you do not worry. If good fortune does come, it is not because you yourself accomplished it. Hence, when things go well, you do not boast. For this reason, you enjoy staying idle, and govern through non-action.”

老子曰：「不求可非之行，不憎人之非己也；修足譽之德，不求人之譽己也。不能使禍無至，信己之不迎也；不能使福必來，信己之不讓也。禍之至也，非己之所生，故窮而不憂；福之來也，非己之所成，故通而不矜。是故閑居而樂，無為而治。」（*Wenzi* 4/20/1–4/20/4）

In the transmitted *Wenzi*, this short passage is preceded and followed by other passages that are prefaced with “Laozi said.” Each constitutes a self-contained unit of text, i.e., a section. This section discusses good fortune and misfortune, and the power we have over them. It proposes a *laissez-faire* attitude to life – neither questing after good luck nor hiding from bad luck – that will keep us well balanced no matter what life throws our way. The influence we exert over our own life is a topic discussed in other early Chinese philosophical texts as well. In fact, a strikingly similar passage can be found in the *Huainanzi* [*The Master of Huainan* 淮南子]. In that text, written under the auspices of the King of Huainan, Liu An 劉安 (c. 179–122 BCE), we read:

Sages do not engage in conduct that can be condemned, yet do not resent it when others condemn them. They cultivate virtue worthy of praise, yet do not strive for others to praise them. They cannot guarantee that misfortune will not appear, yet they can ensure that they do not invite it. They cannot guarantee that good fortune will certainly come, yet they can ensure that they do not repel it. If misfortune does appear, it is not because they strove for it to happen. Hence, when things go poorly, they do not worry. If good fortune appears, it is not because they strove to accomplish it. Hence, when things go well, they do not boast about it. They know that the controls of good fortune and misfortune are not within themselves. Hence, they enjoy staying idle, and govern through non-action.

聖人不為可非之行，不憎人之非己也；脩足譽之德，不求人之譽己也。不能使禍不至，信己之不迎也；不能使福必來，信己之不讓也。禍之至也，非其求所生，故窮而不憂；福之至，非其求所成，故通而弗矜。知禍福之制，不在於己也，故閑居而樂，無為而治。（*Huainanzi* 14/134/30–14/135/3）

In the *Huainanzi*, this passage is part of a lengthy description of “sages” (*shengren* 聖人), who play an important role in the chapter and the book as a whole. The sage in this chapter is “indifferent to worldly success and failure,” as Sarah A. Queen (2010, 531) explains, adding that “by following the natural course of things, the sage is able to keep his life secure and his innate nature intact while avoiding for both himself and his governance such negative outcomes as bad fortune, harm, danger, criticism, and chaos.”

If we compare the two passages translated above, each has its own distinctive feel. When placed in the mouth of Laozi, these phrases read like advice he imparted to his disciple *Wenzi* and, by extension, to readers of the eponymous work. As a depiction of sages, the phrases describe the behavior of the highest among humans, as a model to be emulated by the emperor, for whom the *Huainanzi* was initially written, and by other readers of the text as well. In addition to the distinctive overall impression of each passage, there are a few textual differences, as shown here:

Fig. 1: The “good fortune and misfortune” passage in the *Wenzi* (left) and the *Huainanzi* (right). Red characters indicate variations between the two texts. Blue characters are present in one text, but not in the other (van Els 2025).

The differences between these textual passages (shown here in red and blue) are fairly inconsequential, and they pale in comparison to the overwhelming similarities (in black). The high degree of correspondence suggests that the two reflections on good fortune and misfortune are related. This is no coincidence, as these are not the only parallel passages between the two texts.

According to their respective concordances in the Chinese Ancient Texts (CHANT) 漢達文庫 series (Lau 1992a, 387; 1992b, 1345), the *Wenzi* counts just under 40,000 characters, making it a substantial text, and with over 133,000 characters, the *Huainanzi* more than triples that, making it one of the most voluminous ancient Chinese philosophical treatises. It is estimated that the two works share passages worth well over 30,000 characters (Ding Yuanzhi 1999a, 9). This means that more than three-fourths of the textual content of the transmitted *Wenzi* corresponds to the *Huainanzi*.

Fig. 2: The large red square represents the *Huainanzi*, and the smaller yellow square represents the transmitted *Wenzi*. The considerable overlap between the two texts is shown in orange (van Els 2025).

While intertextual borrowing was far from uncommon in early China, the large volume of these literary parallels is highly unusual. Theoretically, one could assert that both texts derive from a common source. However, the hypothesized text has yet to be discovered, and moreover, a “third text” hypothesis fails to account for the motivations and practices behind the creation of the *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi* (as discussed below). Given the sheer sizes of the two texts, and the considerable overlap between them, it would therefore be more reasonable to assume a direct intertextual relation. In all likelihood, numerous passages from one text were borrowed in the process of creating the other text. Did the Liu An and his collaborators draw and expand on the *Wenzi*, or did whoever created the latter text massively appropriate and adapt *Huainanzi* content? Before I address this question, let us first check how scholars throughout Chinese history viewed the issue.

2. Reception

One scholar who mentions both works is the specialist in the occult arts Xiao Ji 蕭吉 (ca. 525–ca. 606). In *Wuxing dayi* [*General Principles of the Five Phases* 五行大義], he offers an extensive discussion of the “five phases” (*wuxing* 五行) as the driving forces behind all existence. To support his views he frequently quotes earlier writings, including the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*. He normally attributes quotations to one text, even if a parallel exists in the other text. There is, however, one telling exception. In section 23.1, “Lun ren pei wuxing” (“On Humans According with the Five Phases” 論人配五行), we read:

The *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi* both have: “The gallbladder corresponds to the clouds, the lungs correspond to the air, the spleen corresponds to the wind, the kidneys correspond to rain, and the liver corresponds to lightning. [Humans and] Heaven have the same categories, and the heart serves as the master. Ears and eyes are like sun and moon. Breath and blood are like wind and rain.”

《淮南子》及《文子》並云：「膽為雲，肺為氣，脾為風，腎為雨，肝為電，與天相類而心為主。耳目者，日月也；氣血者，風雨也。」 (Xiao 2001, 136)

This passage proposes correlations between the human body and atmospheric conditions, i.e. between microcosm and macrocosm. The passage indeed occurs, with minor variations, both in the *Huainanzi* (7/55/13–14) and in the *Wenzi* (3/12/22–24). Even if Xiao Ji normally attributes quotations to only one of the two texts, his lead-in remark here suggests that he was aware of at least some of their shared content.

This also applies to the *Taiping yulan* [*Imperial Digest of the Grand Peace Era* 太平御覽], edited by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) and others. The compendium contains hundreds of excerpts from the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*. Quotations are normally attributed to either text, even if they occur in both. On two occasions, however, a *Wenzi* excerpt is followed by a revealing note:

The *Wenzi* has: “Nothing beats nurturing the spirit; nurturing the body takes a second place. When the spirit is clear, the will is balanced, and all the joints are calm – these are the roots of nurturing life. To oil the skin, fill the stomach, and unleash desires – these are the branches of nurturing life.” The *Huainanzi* has the same. 《文子》曰：「太上養神，其次養形，神清意平，百節皆寧，養生之本也，肥肌膚，充腹腸，開嗜欲，養生之末也。」《淮南子》同。(Li et al. [1960] 1995, 3187)

The *Wenzi* has: “Expertly managed, people resemble the feet of a millipede which, while numerous, never get in each other’s way.” The *Huainanzi* has the same.

《文子》曰：「善用人者，若蚘之足，眾不相害。」《淮南子》同。(Li et al. [1960] 1995, 4208)

These sayings indeed occur both in the *Wenzi* (9/44/12–13, 6/32/8) and in the *Huainanzi* (20/216/5–6, 17/179/4). That the *Taiping yulan* quotes the *Wenzi* and merely mentions the *Huainanzi* possibly hints at a preference for the former. More importantly, the remark that the latter “has the same” is indicative of an awareness of their shared content.

Given the considerable overlap between the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*, it is rather remarkable that the *Wuxing dayi* and the *Taiping yulan* mention only one or two parallels. In fairness, their compilers may not have been aware of the full extent of their closeness, given that parallel passages do not appear in the same order in the *Huainanzi* and the *Wenzi*, and have been edited to best match the overall style of their respective text. Even with modern digital tools, it is a laborious task to map them all.^[1]

When the *Wuxing dayi* and the *Taiping yulan* do note a textual parallel, they merely write “X and Y both have [...]” or “Y has the same.” The matter-of-factness of such remarks suggests that the correspondences were not considered problematic. This is understandable, as both compilations contain numerous quotations from earlier works. Even if their compilers were aware of the considerable overlap between the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*, this might not have bothered them given the comparable setup of their own compilations.

Another scholar who noted the textual parallels was the eminent statesman and erudite writer Wang Yinglin 王應麟 (1223–1296). His monumental work *Kunxue jiwen* [*Record of Observances from Arduous Studies* 困學紀聞] has a section on “various masters” (*zhuzi* 諸子), including *Wenzi*. It contains over a dozen excerpts from the *Wenzi*, which Wang believes to have been written by the titular disciple of Laozi. Whenever he is aware that an excerpt has a counterpart in another text, he notes who “took it” (*qu zhi* 取之). In his view, then, *Wenzi* nuggets were quoted by Xunzi 荀子, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, Ji An 汲黯, Ban Gu 班固, and many others. In addition to specific quotations, he more broadly observes that passages “that also occur in the *Liezi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Huainanzi*, are too numerous to be counted” 其見於《列》、《莊》、《淮南子》者，不可縷數 (Wang 2008, 1225). Wang clearly considers the *Wenzi* a foundational Daoist work that was cherry-picked by many others, including the King of Huainan. It is a veritable mark of his erudition that, without the help of modern technology, he observed textual parallels in a variety of other works. This makes it all the more remarkable that the *Huainanzi* barely stands out, as it is mentioned in the same breath as the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi*. It is not even clear if Wang found the parallels problematic. If anything, they may have confirmed to him the *Wenzi*'s high status as a quote-worthy work.

Several centuries later, scholars started noting and problematizing the special relation between the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*, usually favoring one text as the source while viewing the other as a mere derivative.

2.1 Team *Wenzi*

One of the earliest scholars known to have spoken out on the topic is the historian Ma Su 馬驥 (1621–1673). After providing several *Wenzi* excerpts in *juan* 83 “Laozi Daojiao” (“Laozi’s Daoism” 老子道教) of his *Yishi* [*Unraveling History* 繹史], he notes that “the entire *Wenzi* is copied almost completely into the *Huainanzi*” 文子一書為淮南鴻烈解擷取殆盡, adding “that text is vast, this text is profound” 彼浩淼, 此精微 (Ma 2002, 1874). While adamant about the direction of copying, Ma Su offers no proof. His opinion seems motivated by his belief that the *Wenzi* was written by a student of the founder of Daoism, who prefaces sections with “Laozi said” out of respect for what he had learned from his teacher.

Another member of “Team *Wenzi*” was Bi Yuan 畢沅 (1730–1797), who wrote a commentary to the *Lüshi chunqiu* [*Spring and Autumn Annals of Mr. Lü* 呂氏春秋]. That text was commissioned by the wealthy merchant-turned-statesman Lü Buwei 呂不韋 (d. 235 BCE), who hired a team of scholars to create the encyclopedic compendium for him. In the preface to his *Lüshi chunqiu* commentary, Bi Yuan suggests that Liu An commissioned the *Huainanzi* in a similar manner, but to no good result:

The book of the King of Huainan altogether appropriates almost the entire *Wenzi*. The text was created by occasionally adding or deleting a few characters, and moving or changing a few words. Even if this was all the doing of his retainers, surely the King of Huainan could have taken some time off to give it a good going-over?

淮南王書前後採之殆盡，間有增省一二字、移易一二語以成文者，類皆當時賓客所為，而淮南王又不暇深考與？ (Bi 1996, 1)

Similar to Ma Su, Bi Yuan takes a firm yet evidence-free stance about the direction of borrowing. He suggests that the *Wenzi* was pillaged by the ghostwriters at the royal court in Huainan, while the king as their patron bears the ultimate responsibility for the work that carries his fief’s name.

Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753–1818) likewise maintains that the *Huainanzi* “often quotes the *Wenzi*, creating piles of errors by adding or taking away some of its words” 多引文子，增損其詞，謬誤疊出 (Sun 1935, 88). After pointing out several instances where a *Wenzi* phrase trumps the *Huainanzi* variant, he suggests that Liu An’s retainers were either pressed for time or not smart enough to understand the *Wenzi* and to recognize the mistakes that they made.

2.2 Team *Huainanzi*

At the other end of the spectrum, we find scholars such as Qian Xizuo 錢熙祚 (1801–1844). In the preface to his *Wenzi jiaokan ji* [*Record of Collating the Wenzi* 文子校勘記], he suggests that “ninety percent of the text comes from the *Huainanzi*, while up to ten percent was taken from other texts” 其出自淮南者十之九，取他書者不過十之一也 (Qian 1936, 1b). He also points out that, as the *Huainanzi* was written long ago, mistakes may have slipped into the text in the course of its transmission, and just because the *Wenzi* lacks some of those mistakes, does not necessarily mean that it predates Liu An’s work.

Another member of “Team *Huainanzi*” was Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), a leading intellectual in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His *Zhuzi kaoshi* [*Examination of the Various Masters* 諸子考釋] contains a brief note on the *Wenzi*, which states that “the majority of its content is plagiarized from the *Huainanzi*” 其中大半勦自淮南子 (Liang 1976, 85). Referencing a long-held belief that the *Wenzi* is a forgery apparently absolves him from the responsibility of providing proof for the direction of said plagiarism.

His contemporary Zhang Binglin 章炳麟 (1869–1936), better known as Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, was equally brief and blunt in his assessment of the text:

The current *Wenzi* is partly plagiarized from the *Huainanzi*. Moreover, attributions to Laozi are often strange and unconventional. That this work is merely ascribed [to Laozi’s disciple *Wenzi*] is perfectly clear.

今之文子半襲淮南，所引老子亦多怪異，其為依託甚明。(Zhang 1958, 951)

With such savage assessments by influential scholars, the *Wenzi* was held in disfavor for most of the 20th century. Two events in 1973 tipped the scale in its favor again.

2.3 Archeological Discoveries

One event was the discovery of four hitherto unknown silk manuscripts in the famous Mawangdui 馬王堆 tomb. The manuscripts were heralded as long-lost ancient texts, and identified as the *Huangdi sijing* [*Four Classics of the Yellow Emperor* 黃帝四經], also referred to as *Huang-Lao boshu* [*Huang-Lao Silk Books* 黃老帛書]. The fourth of these texts is a mystic verse titled “Daoyuan” [“Dao the Origin” 道原], which says of the Way (*dao* 道) that “the void was its dwelling, nonaction was its original constitution” 虛其舍也，无為其素也 (Yates 1997, 174–75.) A similar portrayal occurs in the opening chapter of the *Wenzi*, which has the exact same title as the verse, and in a *Huainanzi* chapter with a different title. Tang Lan 唐蘭 (1976, 188–89) sees these chapter titles as evidence that the *Wenzi* predates the *Huainanzi*. In a brief yet oft-quoted note appended to his study of the Mawangdui manuscripts, he presents the *Wenzi* as “an ancient pre-Qin text” 先秦古籍 that “already existed at the beginning of the Han dynasty” 漢初已有, that is, prior to the creation of the *Huainanzi*.

The other event was the discovery of a bamboo *Wenzi* manuscript in a tomb near Dingzhou 定州 in Hebei 河北 province. While the tomb dates circa 55 BCE, the academic community welcomed the archaeological unearthing as evidence that the *Wenzi* was indeed an important pre-Qin and hence pre-*Huainanzi* text. The discovery gave fresh impetus to *Wenzi* studies, leading to numerous publications, including the first modern annotated edition of the text. In their preface, Li Dingsheng 李定生 and Xu Huijun 徐慧君 (1988, 4) suggest that the King of Huainan may have seen the *Wenzi*, and that “it is entirely possible that the *Huainanzi* plagiarized the *Wenzi*” 《淮南子》抄襲《文子》是完全可能的。

2.4 Nuanced Views

The renewed appreciation of the *Wenzi* was fueled mostly by the excitement of the archeological discoveries, not by new evidence. The work on the Dingzhou manuscripts was severely delayed due to unforeseen circumstances, including a devastating earthquake (van Els 2018, 17). As a result, for more than two decades the academic community knew very little about what was actually written on the unearthed *Wenzi* bamboo fragments. When their transcription was finally published in 1995, it opened the door for more nuanced views on the *Wenzi* and its relation to the *Huainanzi*. Most importantly, the publication revealed fundamental differences between the unearthed manuscript and the transmitted text, which imply that what is true for the one, does not necessarily apply to the other. For example, even if the manuscript is a handwritten copy of a pre-Qin text, which remains to be proven, that does not make the *textus receptus* equally ancient. Each *Wenzi* should be studied in its own right. For the relation to the *Huainanzi*, this means that we should focus on the transmitted text, the only *Wenzi* for which we have clear and convincing evidence of shared content on a massive scale.

3. Solution

Ever since scholars started problematizing the special relation between the transmitted *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*, several centuries ago, the pendulum swung back and forth a few times between these texts. The passion in this heated debate was generally backed by scanty evidence. A pro *Wenzi* view could be based on the belief that it was written by a student of Laozi, while the preconception that it was a forgery could make someone join the pro *Huainanzi* camp. If proof was provided, it was mostly just dribs and drabs of ammunition. As we have seen, one scholar judges the entire *Wenzi-Huainanzi* relation based on the chapter titles under which one phrase appears in either text. Other scholars opined on the direction of borrowing based on a handful of words or phrases that were considered “correct” in one work and “wrong” in the other. This practice disregards the centuries-long transmission

of both works, which may have introduced incidental or intentional changes at the lexical level. This failure to see the forest for the trees was criticized most pointedly by Tao Fangqi 陶方琦 (1845–1884):

Moderns who are not good at reading the works of the ancients, seldom take their time to examine these texts from beginning to end. By focusing only on insignificant details to point to the respective dates of the texts, they are fated to fall for the tricks of later text-forgers.

後人不善讀古人書，未暇細考其本末，徒以成書之先後稀見為依据，豈有不墮後人剽竊之術。(Tao 1989, 108a)

Rather than focusing on a few details, Tao proposes to look at the bigger picture. In his essay, unambiguously titled “*Wenzi* fei gushu shuo” (“The *Wenzi* is Not an Ancient Text” 文子非古書說), he discusses five types of evidence to show that whoever created the transmitted *Wenzi* “stole from the ancient text” 盜竊陳編 (Tao 1989, 109b), by which he means the *Huainanzi*.

3.1 Anecdotal Evidence

The most persuasive evidence proposed by Tao involves passages that appear as anecdotes in the *Huainanzi*, and as lessons by Laozi in the *Wenzi*. While Tao focuses on the protagonists of the anecdotes, in my view the evidence may be even stronger than he seems to have realized. Let us explore a textual parallel that was not mentioned by Tao. Here is the *Wenzi* version:

Kongzi asked about the Way. Laozi answered: “Straighten your body, bring your vision into focus, and a natural harmony will arrive. Concentrate your perception, straighten your bearing, and the spirits will come to lodge. Virtue will be your appearance; the Way will be your abode. Innocent like a newborn calf, you will not seek out the reason why. Body like a dried-up tree, mind like dead ashes. Substantiate your true knowledge, and do not rely on clever tricks to support yourself. Dark, dark, you no longer have a mind to consult. Can you understand everything within the four reaches without using your mind?”

孔子問道。老子曰：「正汝形，一汝視，天和將至。攝汝知，正汝度，神將來舍。德將為汝容，道將為汝居。瞳兮，若新生之犢，而無求其故。形若枯木，心若死灰。真其實知，而不以曲故自持。恢恢，無心可謀。明白四達，能無知乎？」(*Wenzi* 1/2/20–22)

The section starts with a query by Kongzi 孔子 (Confucius), who occurs in the *Wenzi* only this once. His query reminds readers of the famous (if fictional) story of Kongzi visiting Laozi in search for advice. Here he wishes to learn about the Way. The remainder of the section is a typical lesson by Laozi, who suggests that by dissolving our self, the Way will spontaneously present itself to us. This passage has a parallel in the *Huainanzi*:

Nieque asked Beiyi about the Way. Beiyi answered: “Straighten your body, bring your vision to a focus, and a natural harmony will arrive. Concentrate your perception, straighten your bearing, and the spirits will come to lodge. Virtue will be your beauty, and the Way will be your abode. Naive as a newborn calf, you will not seek out the reason why.” He had not even finished speaking, when Nieque already stared at him in silence. Beiyi walked away, singing this song: “Body like a withered corpse, mind same as dead ashes. He substantiates his true knowledge, yet does not rely on tricks to support himself. Dim, dim, dark, dark, he no longer has a mind that one can consult. What kind of man is he?!” Hence Laozi said: “Can you understand everything within the four reaches without using your mind?”

齧缺問道於被衣。被衣曰：「正女形，壹女視，天和將至。攝女知，正女度，神將來舍。德將為若美，而道將為女居。蠢乎，若新生之犢，而無求其故。」言未卒，齧缺睡寐，繼以讎夷。被衣行歌而去，曰：「形若槁骸，心如死灰。真其實知，不以故自持。墨墨恢恢，無心可與謀。彼何人哉！」故老子曰：「明白四達，能無以知乎！」
(*Huainanzi* 12/106/28–12/107/4)

Much of this *Huainanzi* passage is identical to the *Wenzi* section. Most differences are fairly inconsequential. For example, 汝 and 女, both pronounced *ru*, are simply two ways of writing the second-person pronoun, perhaps somewhat similar to “you” and “u” in English. Certain differences, however, are highly revealing.

In the *Huainanzi* anecdote, the *dramatis personae* are not Kongzi and Laozi, but Nieque and Beiyi. The anecdote consists of two main parts: an exposition of dissolving the self, and a hymn praising the person who achieved it. The anecdote is followed by a quotation from the *Laozi*, or *Daodejing* [*Classic of the Way and Virtue* 道德經], that is marked as such.

Fig. 3: The “asking about the Way” passage in the *Wenzi* (left) and the *Huainanzi* (right). Red characters indicate variations between the two texts. Blue characters are present in one text, but not in the other (van Els 2025).

The two passages are undeniably related. Given the very many parallels between the two texts, we may reasonably assume that one passage was inspired by the other. Which one came first? Let us imagine, just for the sake of the argument, that the *Wenzi* served as the source of the *Huainanzi*. What steps would Liu An and his team have had to take in order to create their version?

Firstly, they must have operated under the principle that only *Laozi* quotations count as *Laozi* statements. In the *Wenzi*, the section consists almost entirely of words purportedly uttered by Laozi. In the *Huainanzi*, the sage is duly credited with the last line (“Can you understand [...]”), which corresponds to *Laozi* chapter 10, while all the other lines (“Straighten your body [...]”) are placed in the mouth of someone else. Why would Liu An and collaborators, whose work shows distinct Daoist

leanings, deny the supposed founder of this trend of thought large parts of his speech? Moreover, if they took a Laozi lesson in the *Wenzi*, and neatly distinguished between *Laozi* and non-*Laozi* parts, their textual criticism would make them well ahead of their time.

Secondly, they would have had to decide that the latter part of Laozi's speech in the *Wenzi* works better as a hymn. It would take lyrical ingenuity to recognize the potential of unrhymed phrases of unequal length, and turn them into a song with phrases of even length, complete with rhyme words at the end (e.g., *[g]rə 骸 "corpse" and *m̩ə 灰 "ashes").

Thirdly, they would have had to take a conversation between Kongzi and Laozi, the "founding fathers" of two belief systems, and replace them with unknown characters whose names are clearly fictional. Nieque 齧缺 (lit. "teeth missing") translates as Gaptooth, and Beiyi 被衣 (lit. "wearing garments") as Ragbag. It takes a playfully creative mind to come up with these names. One early Chinese philosophical work known to have sprung from just such a mind is the *Zhuangzi* [Master Zhuang 莊子]. That text contains an anecdote that is near-identical to the one in the *Huainanzi*, featuring the very same protagonists:

Nieque asked Beiyi about the Way. Beiyi answered: "If you straighten your body and bring your vision into focus, a natural harmony will arrive. Concentrate your perception, unify your bearing, and the spirits will come to lodge. Virtue will be your beauty, and the Way will be your abode. You will be innocent as a newborn calf, and will not seek out the reason why." He had not even finished speaking, when Nieque already stared. Beiyi was greatly pleased and walked away from him, singing this song: "Body like a withered corpse, mind like dead ashes. He substantiates his true knowledge, yet does not rely on tricks to support himself. Confused, confused, obscure, obscure, he cannot be consulted for he no longer has a mind. What kind of man is he?!"

齧缺問道乎被衣。被衣曰：「若正汝形，一汝視，天和將至。攝汝知，一汝度，神將來舍。德將為汝美，道將為汝居。汝瞳焉如新生之犢，而无求其故！」言未卒，齧缺睡寐。被衣大悅，行歌而去之，曰：「形若槁骸，心若死灰。真其實知，不以故自持。媒媒晦晦，无心而不可與謀。彼何人哉！」 (*Zhuangzi* 22/60/31–22/61/2)

The similarities between the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* passages are striking. The differences are mostly minor textual variants. The main difference is that the *Huainanzi* follows the anecdote with a *Laozi* quote, and the *Zhuangzi* does not. This is telling, as we shall see.

Fig. 4: The "asking about the Way" passage in the *Zhuangzi* (left) and the *Huainanzi* (right). Red characters indicate variations between the two texts. Blue characters are present in one text, but not in the other (van Els 2025).

If, in our hypothetical scenario, the *Huainanzi* passage was created on the basis of the *Wenzi* section, it would logically follow that the *Zhuangzi* anecdote was copied from, and therefore postdates, Liu An's work. This is a position that few, if any, specialists of early Chinese thought would be willing to take.^[2]

The hypothetical *Wenzi* → *Huainanzi* → *Zhuangzi* scenario requires tortuous argumentative acrobatics to be persuasive. It asks us to believe that Liu An and his team denied Laozi a large part of his spoken word, turned prose into poetry, replaced prominent masters with obscure comically-named characters, so as to create an anecdote that was later copied into the *Zhuangzi*.

3.2 Plausible Scenario

As the old saying goes, the simplest solutions tend to be best. In this case, a *Zhuangzi* → *Huainanzi* → *Wenzi* scenario makes perfect sense, as it matches the overall editorial patterns of the respective texts.

(1) The *Zhuangzi* is known for its playfulness and humor (D'Ambrosio 2020, 214). It invites us into a wondrous world populated by a dexterous butcher, a humble wheel-maker, a clever monkey trainer, a mutilated ex-con named No Toes, stooping old men, mythical emperors, talking animals, trees, spirits, and skulls, and so on. Gaptooth and his friend fit right in.

(2) The *Huainanzi* is known to have drawn on earlier works, including the *Lüshi chunqiu*, the *Han Feizi*, and, indeed, the *Zhuangzi* (Major et al. 2010, 26). One chapter aims to show the workings of the Way in the world by combining over fifty anecdotes with *Laozi* quotes. Again, the Gaptooth anecdote fits right in. When combined with the quotation from *Laozi* chapter 10, it suggests that the best way of knowing the world is without using the mind.

(3) The *Wenzi* in its transmitted form contains over one-hundred-and-eighty lessons by Laozi. Whoever created the text could have easily taken this passage from the *Huainanzi*, removed elements that do not suit its purpose (such as the exclamation, "What kind of man is he?!"), and place the entire speech in the mouth of the Old Master.

It is easy to imagine a scenario in which (1) the creative minds behind the *Zhuangzi* concocted an entertaining anecdote about a funny-named character losing his mind, (2) Liu An and his team copied the anecdote and added a *Laozi* quote, and (3) the creator(s) of the transmitted *Wenzi* copied both anecdote and *Laozi* quote and edited the combination into a statement by Laozi.

In sum, if we do not get distracted by details, and focus on the bigger picture instead, and if we prefer a straightforward solution over a convoluted one, the editorial patterns force us to conclude that the *Huainanzi* served as the source of the *Wenzi*, not the other way around.^[3]

4. Reflection

In the heated debate on the *Wenzi-Huainanzi* relation, which started over three centuries ago, emotions ran high. Digging deep into their trenches, scholars often praised one text as authentic, ancient, and original, while denouncing the other as a derivative work of little value. Harsh words were used in the exchange of views between the two sides. Branded “not an ancient text” (*fei gushu* 非古書), the *Wenzi* was accused of being a “forgery” (*weishu* 偽書) that had “stolen” (*daoqie* 盜竊) content from the *Huainanzi*. From a modern perspective such words are understandable. In this day and age, if parts of someone’s writings are demonstrably based on someone else’s work without attribution, the person may be accused of plagiarism and disciplined accordingly. Even in its own time, taking passages amounting to more than thirty thousand characters from one other text, and using them for one’s own purposes without crediting the source, was no standard operating procedure for authors. If three-quarters of the transmitted *Wenzi* were indeed adapted from the *Huainanzi*, as I argue above, how should we assess the text? Should we denounce it as a worthless forgery, as many have done in the past? Or should we appreciate the *Wenzi* for its own unique value?

4.1 The *Huainanzi*

The *Huainanzi* was created at the royal court in Shouchun 壽春, capital city of Huainan 淮南, which was one of the major centers of intellectual activity in the Former Han dynasty. As the largest text of its time, it “was formally presented to the young and presumably impressionable Emperor Wu as the most comprehensive and profound guide to perfect rulership” (Kern 2014, 130). The guide was carefully composed according to a deliberate design by the King of Huainan and his team. In their overview of the work as a whole, they explain that

in order to master the matter of any one chapter, one first needs to comprehend the precepts of the previous one; and that for this reason they had arranged the *Huainanzi* in its particular order, providing the ruler with the means to understand each matter not in isolation but, most importantly, as proceeding from the previous one. In this way, insisting that the ruler must not only follow the many different political precepts of the text but pursue them in the order purposefully arranged by the authors, [with] each chapter as an indispensable part of the overall philosophical endeavor of the *Huainanzi* and the totality of the text as more than the sum of its parts (Kern 2014, 136).

Elements that characterize the *Huainanzi* as a text include its impressive size, meant to fill the emperor as the number-one reader with awe; its comprehensive scope, covering scores of topics; and the sequential order of its constituting parts, meant to

be read from beginning to end. The *Wenzi* differs from the *Huainanzi* in all these regards.

4.2 The *Wenzi*

The *Wenzi* was created through a process of selection and modification. The considered selection of passages, and the edits made to them, suggest that it is more than simply a “*Huainanzi* light.” The editorial actions point to a deliberate attempt to create a fundamentally different work. Several elements characterize the new text, all of which suggest that it was aimed at a broader readership.

(1) Smaller Size

As largest text of its time, totaling over 133,000 characters, the *Huainanzi* presents itself as the be-all and end-all of knowledge that could “serve as the ideological blueprint of the Han Empire” (Major et al. 2010, 21). At less than a third in size, the *Wenzi* lacks such imperial dimensions and aspirations. However, with almost 40,000 characters, it is still a substantial text, and its smaller size possibly make it more attractive and certainly more manageable for average readers.

(2) More Focus

In the process of creating the *Wenzi*, passages were cherry-picked from the *Huainanzi*, leaving the larger part of the text untouched. Several chapters were passed over altogether, including chapter 3, “Tianwen” [“Celestial Patterns”, 天文]; chapter 4, “Dixing” [“Terrestrial Forms”, 墜形]; and chapter 5, “Shize [“Seasonal Rules”, 時則]. This trilogy contains fairly technical discussions of subjects related to the sky, the earth, and the calendar. The omitted chapters presumably contained no information that excited whoever created the *Wenzi*. Moreover, certain elements were removed from borrowed passages. In the anecdote quoted above, we saw how the description of Nieque staring at Beiyi in silence and the exclamation, “What kind of man is he?!” , were not included in the *Wenzi*. Such elements were presumably deemed unsuitable for its purposes. These and many other deliberate omissions made the *Wenzi* a frills-free text with a tight focus on the Way and its application in our world.

(3) Standalone Sections

Whereas the *Huainanzi* was deliberately designed to be read in a linear fashion, the *Wenzi* was created by taking passages here and there, and placing them in seemingly random order. If a logical sequence of sections exists in the *Wenzi*, where one section is intended to be read before the next, it is not yet fully comprehended. While the text does not appear to be as rigidly organized as its main source, this may be precisely the point. If passages are standalone sections, with no strict sequence between them, the text can be leisurely opened at any point, and each lessons can be enjoyed in its own right.

(4) Distinctly Daoist

Through the centuries, the *Wenzi* was generally classified as “Daoist” (*daojia* 道家) and the *Huainanzi* as “Miscellaneous” (*zajia* 雜家).^[4] Since the epithet “Daoist” carries more prestige than the less sexy “Miscellaneous” label, by extensively borrowing from the *Huainanzi* and attributing borrowed passages to the founder of Daoism, the *Wenzi* garnered a broader readership for these passages, and enhanced its overall size and appeal.

4.3 Popularity

The simple act of adding “Laozi said” to the lion’s share of section was a stroke of genius. The prospect of reading the teachings of the white-bearded sage – which previously had only been transmitted in the *Daodejing*, an anthology of merely five thousand words – attracted scores of readers, including members of the highest echelons of society.

It is no coincidence that the *Wenzi* was widely read in times when Daoism was en vogue. The peak of its popularity came in the 740s, when the emperor made the *Wenzi* part of an imperial examination, canonized it as *Tongxuan zhenjing* (*Genuine Classic of Communion with the Mystery* 通玄真經), and had statues for *Wenzi* and other supposed followers of Laozi erected in the capital city (Benn 1977, 266–67, 280). Liu An and his work did not receive these honors.

While interest in the *Wenzi* fluctuated in the course of its transmission to the present, overall it appears to have been more prevalent than the *Huainanzi*. It was translated into English in the early 1990s by Thomas Cleary. Cleverly marketed as the “further teachings of Lao-tzu,” which promises to help readers in “understanding the mysteries,” Cleary’s work was re-translated into several languages, including Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Most of these languages have yet to see a full translation of the *Huainanzi*.

A cursory search suggests that the *Wenzi* enjoys greater online presence than the *Huainanzi*. To give one recent example, Friedrich Zettl, the Austrian painter who was the first European to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts 中央美術學院 in Beijing, recently wrote a post on his blog to wish his readers a Happy New Year. In that post he quotes *Wenzi*, “a student of Laozi, who more than 2000 years ago wrote a few sentences that remind me very much of here and now.” The quote goes:

A ruler who plunges his country into chaos and focuses his attention on expanding his territory rather than on teaching his people humanity and justice strives for power only and does not care about his own moral perfection. Such behavior abandons the prerequisites for the survival of a state and causes the downfall of the ruling family (Zettl 2023, par. 2 “Daoist Quotes”).

This is a fairly literary translation of a passage that indeed can be found in the *Wenzi*, but also in the *Huainanzi*. Here is my intentionally literal translation of both passages:

Thus the ruler of a chaotic state is focused on the expanse of his territory and not on humaneness and righteousness; he is focused on a high position and not on the Way and Virtue. This equals abandoning what would save him, while setting up what will ruin him.

故亂國之主，務於地廣而不務於仁義，務在高位而不務於道德，是捨其所以存，而造其所以亡也。(*Wenzi* 10/52/27–10/53/1)

Thus the lord of a chaotic state focuses on expanding his territory, not on humaneness and righteousness; he focuses on heightening his position, not on the Way and Virtue. This equals giving up what would save him, while setting up what will ruin him.

故亂國之君，務廣其地而不務仁義，務高其位而不務道德，是釋其所以存，而造其所以亡也。(*Huainanzi* 13/124/27–28)

As before, the few textual differences do not affect the overall meaning in any significant way, and they pale in comparison to the overwhelming similarities between the passages.

Fig. 5: The “chaotic state” passage in the *Wenzi* (left) and the *Huainanzi* (right). Red characters indicate variations between the two texts. Blue characters are present in one text, but not in the other (van Els 2025).

As the passages are by and large the same, it is noteworthy that the Austrian painter quotes the student of Laozi, not the king of Huainan. It is also remarkable that he considers the student’s work relevant today, as he draw a connection with a certain “ruler who plunges his country into chaos” in our time. The *Wenzi* apparently is a book for the ages.

5. Conclusion

The examples in this chapter show the close relation between the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi*. The many textual parallels were first seen as problematic several hundred years ago, sparking a heated debate that lasted centuries. The evidence presented in this chapter strongly suggests that the *Wenzi* in its transmitted form draws massively on the *Huainanzi*, not the other way around. This notion is not novel, as esteemed scholars such as Liang Qichao and Zhang Binglin arrived at comparable conclusions. In the past, the sheer scale of the borrowed content led some scholars to call the *Wenzi* a “forgery” that was created by massively “stealing”

from the *Huainanzi*. Such words are harsh, but not without reason, and academics nowadays would do well to acknowledge the controversial creation of the text. Still, even the harshest critics have to agree that the simple act of taking *Huainanzi*-passages and re-wrapping them as statements by Laozi was nothing short of brilliant. It ensured that the text is still relevant, and arguably more popular than the *Huainanzi*, today.

Footnotes

- 1 Barbara Kandel (1974, 323–32) presents a lengthy list of references to *Huainanzi* passages paired with references to matching *Wenzhi* passages. Ding Yuanzhi (1999b) offers a complete modern edition of the *Wenzhi*, with detailed analyses of available *Huainanzi* parallels for each section.
- 2 See Klein (2011, 355–60) for more on the *Zhuangzi* -*Huainanzi* relation.
- 3 To be clear, whoever created the received *Wenzhi* may have utilized an edition of the *Huainanzi* that differs from the current circulating versions.
- 4 This distinction is still in effect today, as the two texts are listed under these respective labels in the Chinese Ancient Texts (CHANT) 漢達文庫 and Chinese Text Project (CTEXT) 中國哲學書電子化計劃 databases, frequently referenced by scholars, students, and others.

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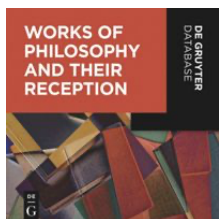
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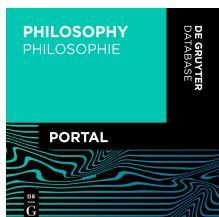
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