

Chapter One

Wang Bi

A Biographical Sketch

Wang Bi's Life

Martin Heidegger is said to have reacted to a request by students to provide some introduction to Aristotle's life by starting his next lecture with the words: "Aristotle was born, worked, and died." He then continued to hold forth on the philosopher's philosophy.

Heidegger's attitude talks back to a fashion of reducing intellectual to social history and philosophical pursuits to high-register articulations of particular economic, political, or personal interests. This fashion corresponds to some commonly held assumptions about the nature of man, but it still has to prove the particular ways in which social interests might translate into particular philosophical or religious constructs; and it also has to account for the fact that often these constructs survive the demise of the social group whose interests they once seemed to advocate, and exert a profound influence on later generations with a completely different "social interest" and agenda. In some of my previously published studies on Wang Bi I was less disturbed by such reductionism. But in the end the link could neither be verified nor falsified, while the fact remained that Wang Bi remained a valid intellectual force for many

centuries to come, and this under substantially changed circumstances. Heidegger's implied argument that in a philosopher only his philosophy counts has a point. It counters an old and widespread tendency to evade the challenge of a philosopher's thought by reducing it to "school" tenets, political affiliation, or legitimation of the socioeconomic interests of the class or segment to which he is thought to belong.

On the other hand it is commonplace that many Chinese philosophers—and not only they—have been involved with their thought in political and factional debate in their time. Still, the survival and fame of their work in later times can hardly be attributed to their political stance in this or that battle, and the question remains what their philosophical contribution might have been that makes it worthwhile for a modern reader to study their works.

Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), then, was born, worked, and died very young.¹ At the time of his death he had barely reached the age of twenty-three, and had written *Commentary to the Laozi*, *Commentary to the Zhouyi*, two tracts analyzing the structure of these two works, a critical supplement to the *Collected Commentaries on the Lunyu* edited by He Yan 何宴 (?–249), and a number of other philosophical tracts. The commentaries and the structural analyses have survived the fierce battles for textual patronage to this day, and are unanimously described as being a watershed in the history of Chinese philosophy. His *Commentary to the Zhouyi* became the standard commentary in Kong Yingda's edition of the *Correct Meaning of the Five Classics*, and his *Commentary to the Laozi* dominated the scene with an interruption during the Tang dynasty.

The historical and social environment in which Wang Bi lived certainly facilitated the development of his philosophy. Born just after the collapse of the Han dynasty and at the beginning of an extended period of "disunion," he grew up in a postwar world with states that were only gradually trying to establish new institutions and orthodoxies, and where both thought and social forces were much in flux. It was a world suddenly without stern and authoritative teachers since the system of state and private academies so prominent in the second century, with official "doctors of the classics" and private teachers such as Ma Rong or Zheng Xuan, had collapsed. While some now complained that education was at its worst, it certainly was a moment when individual talent supported by a good environment had a rare chance to flourish, and the

number of young geniuses in Wang Bi's generation became the envy of centuries to come. They would come out with lasting works at an age when their forebears would have barely had the time to memorize the first commentary to one of the classics. It was a time when original and even outrageous thought, speech, and behavior brought notoriety and fame, a time when young scholars such as Wang Bi not only produced brilliant contributions to Chinese philosophy, but also self-confidently thought they were doing so, and behaved with appropriate pomp. The members of Wang Bi's generation were not ill at ease with their originality, but cherished, fostered, and stylized it.

Wang Bi certainly had both the talent and the environment. Although born in the Capital Luoyang, he hailed from the Wang clan in Gaoping 高平 in the Shanyang District of today's Shandong.² The clan belonged to the magnate families of the Later Han who were to form the core of the "aristocracy" dominating much of the upper echelons of the succeeding centuries.³ Fan Ye calls the Gaoping Wangs "magnates," *haozu* 豪族.⁴ The clan rose to fame with Wang Gong 王龔 (d. 140) who became one of the three highest officials, *sangong* 三公, and established the affiliation with the "Pure Ones," *qing* 清, who were united in their battle against the eunuchs' influence at court. His son, Wang Chang 暢 (d. 169) was in turn promoted by protégés of his father, and continued the latter's affiliations. He was a member of the "Eight Geniuses" 八俊, a group that was in close connection with similar groups such as the Three Gentleman 三君 and the Eight Perspicacious Ones 八顧, which included Guo Tai 郭泰 (128–169), the man renowned to be the founder of *qingtan*, "pure talk," a type of highly allusive and elliptical characterization of a man's character and quality through which the members of these groups were portraying each other, or, in the opinions of some contemporaries, flattering each other.⁵ While five of the eight members of Wang Chang's group were killed during the purges against the "Pure Ones" in 169, he was not touched, perhaps protected by the status of his family.

It was Wang Chang who established the intellectual renown of the clan. His most prominent student was Liu Biao 劉表 (d. 208), also from Gaoping, a member of the imperial clan who later became governor of Jingzhou. During the collapse of the Han dynasty, Liu Biao attracted many of the leading lights to Jingzhou and set up an academy there. The political clout and intellectual renown of the

Wang clan was by now so well established that Wang Chang's son Qian 謙 refused to marry the daughter of his superior He Qin, the commander-in-chief of the army and brother of the empress dowager. He Qin owed his rise to his sister, a concubine of the emperor who had borne him a son; but originally the family had been butchers. A Wang from Gaoping would not go for such a *mesalliance*. Qian's son Can 粲 (177–217) could bank on this ancestry. When in 190 Dong Zhuo transferred the capital to Chang'an, Wang Can, still a small boy, followed the train. Before he was fifteen, he had a memorable and fateful meeting with the famous poet Cai Rong 蔡邕 (132–192) who was so excited to meet a scion of the Gaoping Wangs that in his rush to greet the young visitor he put his shoes on the wrong way.

When [Emperor] Xiandi was abducted westward, [Wang] Can followed [the Court] to Chang'an. The Leader of Court Gentlemen on the Left Cai Rong met and admired him. At the time the talent and scholarship of [Cai] Rong were famous, he was held in high esteem by the Court, and the street [in front of his] house was constantly clogged by carriages [of visitors] and guests filled the seats [in his house]. When he heard that Wang Can was at the door, he rushed towards him with his sandals on the wrong feet. When Can came in, still young and weak, small and frail of stature, the guests were all quite stunned [by the flattering reception he had been given]. [Cai] Rong said: "This is Mr. Wang [Chang's] grandson, his talents are exceptional, and mine are no match to his. The books and documents, letters and essays [held by] my family shall be eventually [after my death] given to him."⁶

This library must have contained a very broad spectrum of Han classical learning, and must have reflected the interest of one of Cai's forebears, Cai Xun 蔡勳 (fl. during the first decades CE) in "Huang-Lao" thought as well as the musical and poetic interests of Cai Rong himself.⁷ When Cai was eventually killed as an accomplice of Dong Zhuo in 192, this priceless collection in about 10,000 scrolls was carried off in "several carriageloads" to Jingzhou by young Wang Can. It is the only library that we positively know survived unscathed the burning of Luoyang in 190 and the civil war marking the end of the Han. It must have been an important asset for Liu

Biao's Jingzhou Academy in Xiangyang. When Wang Can arrived, his family stature nearly resulted in him being chosen as Liu Biao's son-in-law, but in view of his unattractive physique and lax behavior, his cousin Wang Kai was honored in this way. When Cao Cao's military superiority became evident, Wang Can advised Liu Biao to capitulate. In return Cao Cao gave him an honorary title. He became a court poet, and a friend of Cao Cao's son Cao Pi. The very personal relationship prevailing among members of the new Wei court established in 220 is highlighted by a fine anecdote:

Wang Zhongxuan [= Can] loved the braying of donkeys. When he was buried, Emperor Wen [= Cao Pi] went to the tomb and said to his entourage: "Wang Can loved the braying of donkeys. Each of us should bray once as a farewell for him." Thereupon each one of the guests brayed once like a donkey.⁸

During his stay in Jingzhou, Wang Can seems to have married. Two of his sons, the inheritors of the library, were involved in an early rebellion against Cao Cao led by a certain Wei Feng, and were executed in 219.⁹ Cao Cao refrained, however, from annihilating the entire clan, and installed Wang Kai's son as the heir of this prominent family that Miyazaki classified as belonging to the second highest rank among the aristocracy.¹⁰ Not much is to be said of the heir to the library, Wang Ye 業, apart from a modest career, a friendship with Pei Hui 裴徽 (fl. 230–249), scion of another important *haozu* clan that, like the Gaoping Wangs, became a founding family of the Jin dynasty in 265, and his fathering two sons, Wang Hong and Wang Bi.

Wang Bi's education probably followed that of the offspring of similar families such as the Zhongs 鐘 or the Xuns 荀 from Yingzhou who claimed to be descendants of Xunzi; it has been movingly described by Zhong Hui in the biography he wrote of his mother.¹¹ By the time Wang Bi came of age, the approach and style for the intellectuals of Wei had been set by Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄 (209–249), He Yan 何宴 (ca. 190–249), and others. Little of the writing of these latter two thinkers survives but it is enough to understand that they set the new canon for their and the following generations that combined the *Laozi*, *Zhouyi*, and *Lunyu*, and in this very selection rejected the rigid school affiliations that had prevailed during much of the Han dynasty. So they would study these works guided by their

mothers, a firm belief in their own genius, and the privilege of youth to be recklessly brilliant, unburdened by too much knowledge. Wang Bi began to make his mark as a sophisticated interpreter of the new canon when he was barely ten years old. He did not have to be a loner, there were other youngsters in families of similar status with similar interests, but more importantly there were many from the first postwar generation who enjoyed talking to him. He was received by his father's colleague Pei Hui, and discussed philosophy with him;¹² had big debates with Xun Rong 荀融;¹³ and had contact with Wang Chen 王沉;¹⁴ and talks with Fu Jia 傅嘏 (205–255?), another scion of an old family that was eventually to side with the Jin.¹⁵

The Cao court had become increasingly wary of the growing economic and cultural powers of the scions of these *haozu* clans. Following the economic recovery after the civil war, these clans had begun to regroup during the 230s; their young men had again formed loose associations under names that sported their claim to genius, sometimes including upstarts such as He Yan, who had grown up in Cao Cao's household but whose great-grandfather had been a butcher and whose family rose to prominence through the fact that the butcher's daughter became an imperial favourite concubine and that his son, He Qin, became minister of defense as a consequence. These young men were clamoring for a role in government. Emperor Mingdi (r. 227–239) saw them as enough of a threat to commission a special examination code to make sure that people with this intellectual orientation would not pass. A coup by his secretaries at the time of his death installed a child on the throne and made an associate of these groupings and uncle of the emperor, Cao Shuang, the regent together with General Sima Yi, whose son would found the Jin dynasty. With this change and the beginning of the Zhengshi era 正始 (240–249) the members of these former groupings were recruited en masse into the government with He Yan himself as *libu shangshu* in charge of civil personnel.¹⁶ He Yan tried to forge a coalition between the *haozu* clans and upstart families from the environment of the Cao court such as his own by appointing prominent members of the *haozu* clans such as Wang Bi to the *shangshu* under his direct tutelage. The *Shishuo xinyu* preserves the story of the first encounter between He Yan and Wang Bi:

When He Yan was heading the *shangshu* [after 240], he had status and renown, and the debaters 談客 of the time filled his seats. [Commentary: The *Wenzhang xulu* says: [He] Yan was skilled in “pure talk,” and at this time his power extended over the entire empire. The debaters all adored him.] Wang Bi had not yet been capped [to become an adult], but he went to pay [He Yan] a visit. He Yan had heard about Wang Bi’s fame. Accordingly he laid down a series of arguments which he had hitherto considered unassailable, and said to Wang Bi: “These arguments I consider the ultimate. Are you capable of refuting them?” Whereupon [Wang] Bi refuted him, and all guests were of the opinion that He Yan had suffered defeat. Thereupon Wang Bi himself assumed the roles of both master and guest [that is, he himself both proposed arguments, and refuted them], and that for several rounds; not one of the guests was capable of matching him.¹⁷

He Yan was Wang Bi’s elder by some decades and the most influential government official at the time. Worshiping brilliant youths such as Wang Bi was a new feature of the time, and He Yan would immortalize himself not so much through his own work but through his willingness to cede the first place to the genius of youth. Another anecdote shows He Yan going as far as visiting Wang Bi to test the commentary of the *Laozi* he was about to finish.

When He Yan had not yet finished his commentary of the *Laozi* he visited Wang Bi. [During the visit, Wang] himself explained the purport of the *Laozi*. He Yan’s interpretation still had so many deficiencies that he did not even dare to make his own [opinion] heard, but only repeated “Yes! Yes!” As a consequence, he did not continue with his commentary but made the *Essays on Tao and De* 道德論 out of it.¹⁸

He Shao 何劭 tells us in his biography of Wang Bi:

Already as a child [Wang Bi] was sharp witted and intelligent; barely beyond his tenth year he loved Mr. Lao [Laozi]; he was proficient in argumentation, and was a skilled speaker. . . . At the time He Yan was *libu shangshu* [minister in charge of government affairs and personnel] and truly found [Wang] Bi

extraordinary. He sighed in admiration about him: “Confucius [already] said that ‘young people should be treated with respect [because they might end up very learned].’¹⁹ But with this fellow [Wang Bi] it is possible to talk [already now when he still is so very young] about [problems as deep as] the connections between [the order of] Heaven and [that of] men.”²⁰

In this cult of youthful genius that suddenly replaced the previous respect for the old scholar who had spent most of his life memorizing the classics before starting to venture opinions of his own, He Yan was more than a man of fashion. With his social prestige as someone who had grown up in Cao Cao’s household, and had stunned his foster father with his precocious intelligence; with his powerful position in the office controlling all civil appointments in the center; with his fame as one of the leading lights of the Scholarly Exploration of the Dark, Xuanxue, that became the dominant trend with this generation; with his stylized elegance and otherworldly pale-ness; with his use of the mind-expanding drug *hanshi san* 寒石散, and finally with these highly publicized gestures of bowing to the superior intelligence and originality of the youthful genius, He Yan was the man to set this fashion for the Zhengshi era rather than being a mere follower.²¹ The constant borrowings from statements referring to Confucius and his students signal not only the historical envy with which the Xuanxue intellectuals saw this group, but also the attempts to claim for themselves a status akin to Confucius or his preferred students, especially Yan Hui, who was the most brilliant and died so young.

At the same time, the Zhengshi era marks an era of fundamental reforms in government philosophy and practice. Very little material survives that lets us understand these changes, but it seems that when the Sima took effective control through a *coup d’état* in 249, they killed most of the prominent leaders, above all He Yan himself, but by and large continued their policies.²²

While philosophers such as He Yan, Xiahou Xuan, and young Wang Bi were engaged in crafting a new lifestyle for aristocratic youth that was to be followed and emulated for centuries, they at the same time brought their political philosophy to bear on political problems of the day. He Yan, apart from being the editor of the new *Lunyu* commentary for the *zhengshi* era, would write poems to criticize the extravagance of the court under the child-ruler;²³ and

Wang Bi would go “several times” to Cao Shuang himself to “talk about the Dao,” in other words, to give advice on matters of principle in government (to the utter consternation and hilarity of Cao Shuang).²⁴ He Yan saw a triumvirate supervising the new politics. A third-century source reports about his assessing some of the most prominent figures of his time in the manner much practised by *qingtan* amateurs:

In his youth when Xiahou Xuan, He Yan, and the like were the most famous in their time, Sima Jingwang [= Sima Shi] was also on the rise. [He] Yan once said: “[What the *Xici* refers to as] ‘[reaching] deep he is able to penetrate the [hidden] impulses of the world’—this is true for Xiahou Taichu [= Xiahou Xuan]. [What the *Xici* refers to as] ‘[getting to the] subtle [convergences of developments], [he] is able to manage all the affairs of the world’—this is true for Sima Ziyuan [Sima Shi 司馬師]. [What the *Xici* refers to as] ‘being spirit, [he] is able to be fast without hurrying, to arrive without going’—I know this phrase, but I have not met such a person.”²⁵

He Yan modeled himself with the last phrase on a statement by Confucius in the *Lunyu*. There was much speculation among Confucius’ entourage as to whether Confucius was a Sage. In an indirect reaction to these discussions, Confucius answered that one might meet a *junzi*, but that he never managed to meet a person qualifying as a Sage.²⁶ This has been read by commentators as a modest admission/denial that he himself might be one of the rare beings qualifying for a Sage. He Yan put himself into the same speaker’s position as Confucius himself, and by repeating the last phrase at a time where there was universal consensus that Confucius indeed was the last of the Sages, the claim by Sima Guang (1019–1086) that He Yan wanted to indicate that this highest role of the “spirit” was indeed his, He Yan’s, does not seem entirely unfounded.²⁷ The *Xici* passage referred to here outlines how the *Zhouyi* enables the Sage to penetrate the mysteries of the world. The *Xici* quotes the “Master,” who is read as being Confucius himself, as saying that the three qualities named here—reaching deep, getting to the subtle, and being like a spirit—are the “Way of the Sage.” In this triumvirate, Sima Shi is to run the world, Xiahou Xuan is to understand the hidden mechanisms of the world, and He Yan might

have flattered himself to match the role of the supreme spirit of the new politics. Thus it seems that He Yan rather than appropriating the role of the new Sage for himself, assumed that neither of the three men alone qualified, but the three together might. Sima Shi for one certainly proved He Yan to be correct in his assessment of him. Prodded by his father, Sima Shi secretly amassed troops for the coup in 249 during which He Yan in all his “spirituality” was executed and which set the stage for the coming of the Jin dynasty under the Sima family.

It was a part of this great store being set on youth, originality, style, and brilliance that relations between the individuals involved took a new turn. In this heated intellectual and political climate, the traditional expectations of deference to a sponsor, respect for status and age, and other forms of self-control were not part of the interior decoration of the leading spirits of the Zhengshi era. This was true intellectually as well as politically. Wang Bi was appointed by He Yan to an official position, but had no qualms about coming out with his own corrections to He Yan’s *Lunyu* commentary, and to give it the rather brazen title *Lunyu shiyi* 論語釋疑, *Explaining the Doubtful Points in the Lunyu*. Contemporary sources are full of reports of philosophical disagreements and polemics, a sign of a relatively untrammelled freedom of expression during these few years from 240 to 249. Wang Bi had been promoted by He Yan, but when he died in Luoyang in the same year in which He Yan was executed by the Sima, none other than Sima Shi wept for him, donning on the occasion the big coat of Confucius and making Wang Bi into his gifted youthful disciple who died so early.

When Wang Bi died the [later] Emperor Jing of the Jin [that is, Sima Shi] sighed for days on end, and said [as Confucius had said when his most gifted student Yan Hui died, *Lunyu* 11.9] “Heaven destroys me!”²⁸

One might expect that with this environment, Wang Bi would have opted for a literary form of expressing himself that would reflect the new leeway given to youth and genius. Instead, he chose the form of philosophical reflection imposing the most stringent constraints on the author, the commentary, and the analytical essay outlining the literary and argumentative structure of the two main texts he dealt with, the *Laozi* and the *Zhouyi*. The use of these forms

forces the author to spend most of his mental energies in understanding another text and making a unified sense out of it instead of allowing him to explore his own ideas. At the same time, 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, and the authority coming with a successful unified explanation of those texts that were unanimously regarded at the time as the philosophical foundation pieces, quite apart from the renown of having succeeded to find satisfying and convincing explanations where all others had failed. On this count, Wang Bi was conservative and followed Han traditions. He 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.

Still, by challenging tradition on the very ground where it had established its stronghold, the commentary to the classics, Wang Bi lived up to the iconoclasm to be expected from a man like him at that historical moment. His commentaries were a most devastating critique of the Han tradition, and he attacked Zheng Xuan, whose commentaries had reigned supreme during the last decades of the Eastern Han, in a thinly veiled passage of his *Zhuoyi lüeli*.²⁹ A fine anecdote about the ultimate encounter with the ghost of Zheng Xuan that has escaped the attention of the many scholars who have tried to write a biography of this young man, highlights this challenge. It also shows the dangers coming with writing commentaries that challenge the spiritual authorities that be. It is contained in the *Youming lu* 幽明錄, a compilation by Liu Yiqing (403–444), the same author to whom we owe the *Shishuo xinyu*.

When Wang Bi wrote his *Commentary on the Zhouyi* he made fun without qualms of [a scholar as important as] Zheng Xuan because of his Ru-theories, saying: "This old fuddyduddy is completely without brains." Thereupon he heard, in the middle of the night, suddenly steps outside the door, and a moment later something stepped forth and introduced itself: Zheng

Xuan. [The ghost of Zheng] accused him: “You are so young how dare you poke holes into my writings and pick at my phrases, going so far as make fun of this old man [me, ironically Zheng Xuan calls himself *laozi* 老子]?” He looked very angry and left straight away. Fear and worry rose in Wang Bi’s heart. After a short while he fell sick and died.³⁰

Zheng Xuan’s ghost was to hound him to his death.

The excerpt from a “Biography of Wang Bi” by He Shao quoted in the Commentary to the *Sanguo zhi* drily remarks that because of the political events surrounding the regent Cao Shuang and He Yan in 249, Wang Bi withdrew from office. In the fall of this year, he died from an epidemic. He “had no son.” His tomb outside of Luoyang was a haunted spot for centuries to come.³¹

Wang Bi’s Afterlife

The above short sketch of a biography of a philosopher who died very young suggests some conditions that may have had their impact on Wang Bi’s thinking. His family background put him into a group of wealthy and very exclusive elite clans with a long tradition of intellectual and literary pursuits, close connections with each other and the highest political echelons, and opposition to an overly invasive central government, a feature that might have had an impact on his political theory.³² While this family background opened for him the doors to the most fashionable philosophical salons at the time, his library allowed him uniquely easy access to a very broad spectrum of philosophical texts, among them a rarity at the time, a *Zhuangzi*, and the manuscript on which some decades later Zhang Zhan based his famous *Liezi* edition.³³ The collapse of the Han had done away with the institutional structures that had kept the old learning in place, his link with Jingzhou put him into contact with the early challenges to Han orthodoxy, and the infatuation of his time with the brilliance of a youth unpolluted by stuffy rote-learning created a preciously short historical moment that allowed him a very early exploration of his analytical skills in an extremely open and competitive environment. Together with other Xuanxue philosophers, he engaged in an envious replay of the situation of the Sage Confucius and his followers as revealed in the *Lunyu*’s emphasis on oral and situational communication of “subtle words,” *weiyán* 微言. The

different roles in the model set-up of Confucius and his disciples were much contested, especially that of Yan Hui, but some, such as He Yan in the quotation given above, would even stake a claim at matching Confucius himself. While Wang Bi gained much of his fame in oral philosophy, he continued to use the complex communication structure of a written text with a written commentary as a flawed but unavoidable tool of philosophy. His strong emphasis on philosophy of language signals the stress coming from critics who argued that language was intrinsically unable to handle the problem of the Dao, and therefore treated the classics as mere “debris” and useless fallout from the wisdom of the sages of old.³⁴

Wang Bi's life might have been short, his afterlife was not. Although he was not executed together with He Yan but died while withdrawing from the political turmoil of 249, the two together came to symbolize the Xuanxue philosophy of the *zhengshi* era. The leading intellectuals of the Jin emulated their philosophy and style, and tried to live up to the high standards of this era in the same manner as He Yan and his friends tried to live up to the circle of Confucius and his disciples.³⁵ Wang Bi's philosophical tenets were much discussed with some such as Zhong Hui 鐘會 (225–264) siding with him, and others such as Xun Rong 荀融 attacking his *Zhouyi* reading, or Ji Zhan 紀瞻 holding forth on his philosophical system.³⁶ In the battle for the interpretive control of the *Zhouyi*, Wang Bi won out against Zheng Xuan's commentary with which it had been taught side-by-side during the Southern dynasties.³⁷ In the four academic subjects newly established in Song in 439 and again during the Jianyuan era (479–483) in Qi, namely Xuanxue, Ru, Literature, and Histories, Wang Bi's *Commentary to the Laozi* must have belonged to the official core curriculum of the first discipline, Xuanxue, as Wang Baoxuan has convincingly argued.³⁸ Eventually, Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648) chose Wang Bi's *Commentary to the Zhouyi* for his edition of the *Wujing zhengyi*. In his introduction, he bluntly stated that Wang Bi's commentary “alone stood out among [all available commentaries] of former and recent times” 獨冠古今.³⁹ In view of these merits, Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 in the last full year of her rule in 704 enshrined Wang Bi among the worthies whose name tablets were hung up in the Confucius temple; there he would join Zuo Qiuming, Mengzi, and his old adversary Zheng Xuan.⁴⁰ While his *Laozi* commentary was eclipsed by the Tang emphasis on the Heshang Gong and eventually Emperor Ming's own

commentary, he continued to dominate the *Zhouyi* reading, and it was through his eyes that the Neo-Confucian scholars of the Song dynasty had first read this foundational text of their own endeavor.

It will be noticed that Wang Bi became enshrined, after some controversy, in the Confucian tradition for his *Zhouyi* commentary. As the persona of this text, he would be part of the Confucian canon, and make it into the Confucius temple as a worthy, *xian* 賢; it helped that he had regarded Confucius as being superior to Laozi even if his reasons would hardly have pleased Confucian scholars. The person to be enshrined here was emulated for the overpowering analytical quality of his commentaries, which set the new standard for a “commentary of meaning” as opposed to a learned commentary supplementing a text with data about such things as terms and implements mentioned in the text. Although most of the early praise for Wang Bi’s commenting was bestowed on his *Zhouyi* commentary, this had much to do with the prominent role of the *Zhouyi* in Confucian education. We are justified to argue that the praise was bestowed on Wang as a commentator, and held true as well for his *Commentary on the Laozi* as well as his *Solving Doubtful Points in the Lunyu*.

All his youth notwithstanding, Wang Bi still was given a second afterlife and persona, and this one mostly connected with the politics of the Zhengshi era. In this second afterlife, Wang Bi joins He Yan to form a villain called He Wang 何王. There is a certain division of labor among the two. He Yan is here said to have used his powerful political position to push through the great reform project of the Zhengshi era of which, apart from a few shallow polemics, the Jin historians seem to have obliterated nearly every trace that would allow us to understand its particulars; He Yan furthermore gave the model for a style of living reputedly characterized by effete decadence, drug-taking, and boastful emptiness. Wang Bi for his part is said to have managed through his commentaries to spread the concepts of Negativity 無 and the Dark 玄 as the only relevant topics of philosophic discourse, and thus to have turned away the minds of the country’s elite from the pragmatic problems of keeping the country together and the people in order. This image began to emerge very early.

A few decades after the North had been lost to various non-Chinese-speaking groups and confederations and a part of the Chi-

nese elite had fled south, Fan Ning 范甯 (339–401), an otherwise marginal Confucian devotee from a Buddhist family whose tireless efforts to restore the old rituals made him such a nuisance that he was eventually forced to withdraw from office, made his claim for immortality through a treatise in which he argued that the spiritual causes of China's recent demise were to be found in He Yan and Wang Bi. The treatise was written in the then popular form of a dialogue; the glorification of He Yan and Wang Bi by Fan's dialogue partner reflects to what degree Fan Ning's opinion was marginal at the time. His biography claims: "Because at the time the frivolous 浮 and empty 虛 were heaping praise on each other, the Confucians and the learned 儒雅 were daily more superseded. [Fan] Ning was of the opinion that this all had begun with Wang Bi and He Yan, the crimes of whom were greater than even those of Jie and Zhou [the notoriously vicious last emperors of the Xia and Shang dynasties]. As a consequence, he published a treatise." Given the importance of this little treatise in later times, it is appropriate to translate in full what survives of it.

Someone said: Once the Yellow Emperor and Emperor Yao receded into the distance, and the highest Way fell into decay; once [Zhuangzi and his friends at the two rivers] Hao and Pu stopped singing, and style had no prop to support it anymore, contention for mastery manifested itself with regard to "humaneness" and "righteousness," and what was right and wrong was fixed between the Confucians and the Mohists. [Compared to these latter] [He] Pingshu's [= Yan's] spiritual grasp was beyond comparison, [Wang] Fusi's [= Bi's] sophisticated thinking penetrated the most subtle [words] [with the effect that] they resuscitated the decayed structures [of Zhuangzi] from a thousand years ago and set into place the structures from the Duke of Zhou and Confucius that had crumbled. They are thus the highest achievers among court officials [by restoring the traditions of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius], the master craftsmen of the bridge over the Hao River [where Zhuangzi and his friends conversed]. I have heard, however, that you argue that [their] crimes are worse than those of Jie and Zhou. How [can] that be?

Answer: Do you believe indeed, sir, that [theirs] are words of Sages? Generally speaking it is true that the Sages' capacity

德 matches that of Yin and Yang, and that they are on top of the Three Powers [of Heaven, Earth, and Man] in their Way 道; even though the [Sage] emperors of old have different appellations, and even though their inner character and outer form had different organization, in [their] unified control over the world and the completion of governmental duties they kept to the same orientation for endless generations.

Wang [Bi] and He [Yan] [on the other hand], discarding the classical texts and without respect for the system of ritual, strung words together playfully and argued frivolously, and threw the later born into confusion; they embellished and adorned [their] words so as to obscure reality, and recklessly dressed up [their] writings so as to bewitch their contemporaries. [As a consequence] people in official positions were swept off their feet and changed course, and the intellectual style of [Confucius' tradition who was teaching in Shandong near] the Shu and Xiu rivers has long since fallen into oblivion. As a consequence they brought about that humaneness and righteousness went into decline, Confucian learning sank into dust, ritual collapsed, and [court] music went under. [In short, it is due to them] that the Central Plain [= China] was overturned [= conquered]. These [two] are the kind of fellows people of antiquity referred to when they spoke of those whose words are false but sophisticated, and whose deeds are vicious, but pursued with obstinacy!

When in former times the Master [Confucius] had Shaozheng [Mao] beheaded in Lu and Taigong had Huashi executed in Qi, was this not a punishment for the same crime in distant times? The brutal repression by Jie and Zhou was truly sufficient to bring disaster upon [their] persons and topple [their] dynasty; it was a warning example for later generations and certainly could not avoid being perceived by the Hundred Families [the people]! Wang [Bi] and He [Yan] enjoyed the frivolous acclaim from all in the empire; they banked on the loud boastings from the wealthy; painting man-eating hobgoblins they considered smart, and getting agitated about reckless behaviour they considered vulgar. Truly, [theirs] is a case of the tunes of Zheng bringing chaos to [correct] music, of sharp-witted tongues toppling a state! I am most decidedly of the opinion that it is a lighter offense to bring misfortune to a

single generation [as Jie and Zhou had done], and a heavier offense to commit crimes against an entire series of generations [such as He Yan and Wang Bi had done]; that the grievance of bringing about one's own demise is small while the transgression of leading the multitude into error is great.⁴¹

Fan Ning's own admissions about the overpowering intellectual quality of the writings of these two thinkers highlight the helplessness of his criticism, a quandary shared by other Jin writers such as Sun Sheng 孫盛 (302–373).⁴² Fan Ning's outcry against the wealthy and powerful elite of his time could not be more desperate and passionate. He Yan's and Wang Bi's frivolous and cliquish lifestyle, their disregard for the transmission of reading the classics handed down among the Ru, the Confucians, and their development of sophisticated and alluring readings had besotted this elite, had led to a dissolution of social standards, the disempowerment of the natural leaders of the state, the Confucians, and eventually brought about the national disaster of the occupation of the Central Plain by northern nomadic warriors since 316. While Jie and Zhou might have lost their lives and dynasties, He Yan and Wang Bi had lost China proper altogether for generations to come. Thus their crime was worse than that of these two vicious last emperors. In this way, Wang Bi and He Yan became guilty for bringing about the perceived tragedy of the "period of disunity," and Fan Ning's statement became a stock-in-trade in later Confucian polemics against people from other currents of thought trying to assume responsibility for the preservation of the state and the maintenance and transmission of orthodoxy.

It took many generations until scholars would venture a bolder view that tried to do justice to the intellectual and scholarly achievements of Wang Bi, and to merge his two personae back into one. Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82) might have had the situation of his own lifetime, which saw the demise of the Ming, in mind when he stuck to the old view, and roundly blamed the scholars of the Zhengshi era for "the demise of the state, the downfall of [proper] teaching, and the occupation of China by barbarians"; they had not only caused the demise of the dynasty but that of the empire.⁴³ Zhu Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709) a few years later already was bold enough to challenge such views and their implied assumption that any slackening of Confucian control over state ideology meant national disaster. In his

“On Wang Bi” he asserted “criticism and praise are the common [prerogative] of everybody,” and should not be decided by the partial view of a single person. Fan Ning’s claim was “exaggerated,” but “scholars had put too much faith in it.” Song scholars of highest renown such as the Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao (1032–85) and Cheng Yi (1033–1107) had admitted their indebtedness to Wang Bi, and no one could deny his intellectual contribution. While Han-dynasty Confucian commentators of the *Zhouyi* “had by and large been lost in speculations about Yin and Yang, natural disasters and odd appearances, [Wang] Bi was the first to highlight its [the *Zhouyi*’s] meaning” 始暢其義理.⁴⁴ Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1727–1804) followed in Zhu’s tracks and bluntly disclaimed the traditional charge that He Yan and Wang Bi had put Confucianism down and elevated Laozi and Zhuangzi.⁴⁵ These scholars explicitly rejected Fan Ning’s facile link between Xuanxue and national disaster, and restored Wang Bi as the major philosophical and commentarial event following the end of the Han dynasty. The remaining chapters of this book will focus on this Wang Bi, Wang Bi the commentator.