# Rudolf Wagner and Wang Bi

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I first met Rudolf Wagner in the spring of 1985. If I recall correctly, it was at the suggestion of David Keightley that Rudolf and I had coffee together late one afternoon at the Student Union on the Berkeley campus. I know that I recall correctly that I was immediately met with a torrent of conversation topics, bouncing from Hong Xiuquan 洪秀全 and the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace (Taiping tianguo 太平天國), to Chinese science fiction in the 1950s, to the British navy steaming up the Yangzi, to the correspondence between Huiyuan 慧遠 and Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什, before it finally settled on the work of Wang Bi 王弼, especially his commentary on the *Laozi* 老子, something about which I finally knew at least a little bit. But what little bit I knew didn't prepare me for Rudolf's two major arguments about Wang Bi. First, he insisted that the *Laozi* text that has circulated for about 1500 years over the top of Wang Bi's commentary is not the text that was known to Wang Bi himself, but was rather a substitute text—probably in the lineage of Heshang Gong 河上公—put there sometime before the Tang dynasty. Second, he also suggested that Wang Bi read the *Laozi* itself as a commentary on the *Lunyu* 論語, and that whenever Wang Bi referred to the term "sage" (*shengren* 聖人) it can only be understood as a direct reference to Confucius. I am not someone who is easily impressed, but I do not mind confessing that I was totally dazzled by Rudolf. I recognized at once that if these two arguments about Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary could be substantiated, they would have far-reaching consequences for both textual criticism in general and for our understanding of Chinese intellectual history more specifically.

During the next year, I began teaching at the University of Chicago, where I was able to renew my acquaintance with Rudolf—an interesting item missing from his *curriculum vitae* and probably known to very few colleagues. It so happened that in that year we had a position open for traditional Chinese intellectual history. I encouraged Rudolf to apply, which he did—and did so successfully. Indeed, he was appointed to our faculty as a non-tenured Associate Professor beginning in the autumn term of 1986, which he readily accepted. However, he asked to take the first term off to put his affairs in order, and Chicago was happy to grant this leave. Unfortunately for Chicago, but probably fortunately for the world of sinology, and especially for that of German sinology, before that first term ended Rudolf was offered the chair in sinology at Heidelberg. Chicago was history, and Rudolf went on to make history.

Shortly thereafter, I took over as editor of the journal *Early China.* One of the first things I did was to encourage Rudolf to submit his work on the textual

history of the Wang Bi *Laozi,* one of the topics related to Wang Bi that he had told me about that fateful first afternoon in Berkeley. His article—"The Wang Bi Recension of the *Laozi*"—was published in the first issue that I edited.[1] The article is a technical study of textual transmission involving several different early recensions of the *Laozi,* not to mention occasional quotations in other sources. Comparison of these different texts shows beyond any doubt the point that Rudolf had made to me at Berkeley: that the *Laozi* text written over the top of the Wang Bi commentary in all received editions is not the text that Wang Bi himself had used. In an appendix to the article, Rudolf listed seventy-nine differences between the readings of the received text and the Wang Bi commentary, and another thirty-seven differences between the received text and the "Old Manuscript" (*guben* 古本) of Fan Yingyuan 范應元 (*fl.* 1246), which Rudolf argued either was, or was similar to, Wang Bi's original text. True, most of these differences are minor, usually just the addition or omission of a particle here or there, or occasionally a different character, or the transposition of a character or two. However, the significance does not lie in the individual differences, but rather in what this says for the textual history of the *Laozi* and especially of Wang Bi's commentary. For too long, sinologists—and especially Western sinologists—had been content to accept whatever text they found in a modern edition as the text of the author, and did not undertake the hard work of traditional textual criticism to establish the original reading of that text. This was even more true of commentaries, when they bothered to take the commentaries seriously at all.

What is more, it is not the case that all of the variants are philosophically uninteresting. Rudolf ended his analysis with one very important variant, which is worth reviewing both for his methodology and for the significance it might have for Wang Bi's philosophy. It comes in chapter fifty-seven of the *Laozi*, and involves comparison between the received text and ten other textual exemplars. His presentation deserves to be quoted in full.

> One doxographically important passage may be discussed last to show some of the problems in reconstructing the Wang Bi *Laozi Urtext.*
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> | | |
> |---|---|
> | Wang Bi *Laozi Receptus*: | 人多伎巧奇物滋起法令滋彰 |
> | Heshang Gong: | ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” 物 ” ” |
> | *Huainanzi*: | ” 令 ” ” |
> | *Shiji*: | ” ” ” ” |
> | *Wenzi*: | ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” |

1 Rudolf G. Wagner, "The Wang Bi Recension of the *Laozi,*" *Early China* 14 (1989): 27–54.

| | |
|---|---|
| Yan Zun: | ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” ” |
| Old Mss. (Fu and Fan): | 民 ” 智慧而衷事 ” ” ” ” 章 |
| Mawangdui A: | 人 ” ”　” 何物 ” ” 物 ” ” |
| Mawangdui B: | 民 ” ” ” ” 邪事 ” ” ” ” ” |
| Wang Bi comm. *ad loc*: | ” ” ” ” 則巧偽生巧偽生則邪事起 |
| Wang Bi in *Laozi zhilüe*: | 息淫在乎去華不在滋章 |

> The reading *fa ling* 法令, shared by the versions given in the *Huainanzi, Shiji,* and *Wenzi,* directly attacks the Legalists. The Mawangdui manuscripts come from a Legalist milieu and thus do not transmit this version. Wang Bi, however, attacked the Legalism of the Wei court. Thus, even though we have no explicit statement by Wang Bi himself, the reading of the two “Old Manuscripts” must be that of his *Urtext,* which would have read 民多智慧而邪事滋起法令滋章.[2]

This is an argument the significance of which should be readily apparent, and would serve as powerful testimony to another argument concerning textual transmission. However, it is less compelling than Rudolf’s other cases since it is based only on indirect evidence, or even on no evidence at all, since the reading that he proposes is not that of the “Old Manuscripts,” despite what he claims about it. Besides, I do not see any difference—certainly no doxographic difference—between the Wang Bi *Laozi Receptus* and the reading that he suggests for the *Urtext.*

More important, I think the major claim that Wang Bi “attacked the Legalism of the Wei court” is open to question. This claim goes hand in hand with the second argument that Rudolf made to me that first day we met: that when Wang Bi referred to the “sage” (*shengren* 聖人), he intended specifically Confucius. I suspect that most readers will find this claim to be of more interest than the replacement of the *Laozi* text transmitted over the top of Wang Bi’s commentary, and so I will consider it in rather greater detail. The discussion will involve close readings of a few texts that Rudolf claimed were central to Wang Bi’s political philosophy, and will almost unavoidably turn on matters of translation. I beg the reader’s forbearance in this, but I hope it will be the

2 Wagner, “The Wang Bi Recension of the *Laozi*,” 47. The exemplars illustrated in this chart are the *Laozi* text transmitted over the top of the Wang Bi commentary (*Laozi Receptus*); the *Laozi* text transmitted over the top of the Heshang gong 河上公 commentary; a quotation in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子; a quotation in the *Shiji* 史記; a quotation in the *Wenzi* 文子; a quotation of the *Laozi zhu* 老子注 by Yan Zun 嚴遵; the “Old Manuscripts” cited in Fu Yi 傅奕, *Daodejing guben* 道德經古本 and Fan Yingyuan 范應元, *Laozi Daodejing jizhu* 老子道德經集注; the two manuscripts discovered at Mawangdui 馬王堆, Changsha 長沙, Hunan in 1974; Wang Bi’s own commentary in chapter fifty-seven; and a reading given in *Laozi weizhi lüeli* 老子微指略例 (*Laozi zhilüe*), which is attributed to Wang Bi.

type of discussion that Rudolf himself cherished, even if my argument will be critical at places.

The claim that when Wang Bi referred to the *shengren* he intended specifically Confucius, and that Wang Bi regarded Confucius to be the highest sage, one grade higher than Laozi, is found, at least implicitly, in the first volume of Rudolf's trilogy on Wang Bi's commentary on the *Laozi: The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi,[3] and Rudolf made a reasonable philosophical argument there in support of it. This is consistent with the story about Wang Bi in the *Shi shuo xin yu* 世說新語 and in the biography of Wang Bi by He Shao 何劭.[4] However, in Rudolf's most mature statement concerning Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary, the 2003 book *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), he seems to have changed his understanding at least of the referent for Wang Bi's *shengren,* from Confucius to the ruler,[5] though this seems not to have entailed any radical change in his understanding of Wang Bi's philosophy. The final chapter of this book is entitled "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy." It is a lengthy and very dense argument, which I am not at all confident that I understand in its entirety. It is only in the last three pages of the chapter that Rudolf considers the actual political situation at the time Wang Bi was writing, but then he dismisses this, saying, "Little is explained by the reference to the particular historic circumstances of Wang Bi's philosophy."[6] Unfortunately, if my understanding—both of Rudolf's presentation and also Wang Bi's commentaries not only on the *Laozi* but also on the *Zhou Yi* 周易—is right, I have to think those "particular historic circumstances" ought not to be so lightly dismissed, and that Rudolf did not get Wang's political philosophy entirely right. A full consideration of this question would require more space than the editors of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* could possibly give to me, so I will move directly to Rudolf's conclusion.

Toward the end of his chapter, Rudolf wrote:

> Eventually, Wang Bi claimed that the *Laozi*'s entire teaching could be "summed up in one phrase" in the manner that Kongzi had claimed for the *Shijing*. But as opposed to Kongzi's summary, which most commentators

3 Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 120–139.

4 See Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫, *Shi shuo xin yu jianshu* 世說新語箋疏 [New account of tales of the world, with commentary and notes] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1993), vol. 4, 199; Chen Shou 陳壽, *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 [Records of the Three Kingdoms], quoted in the commentary by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372–451) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 795.

5 Rudolf G. Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue) (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).

6 Wagner, "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," 215.

> read as straight moral advice ("do not have any heterodox thoughts"), Wang Bi's summary of the *Laozi* comes as the highly condensed paradox of the law of the negative opposite:
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> > 崇本息末而已矣.
> >
> > Emulating the root [by way] of bringing to rest the stem and branches [growing from it]—that is all!
>
> This tersest of possible summaries makes quite clear the ultimate political purpose of the *Laozi*'s philosophy in Wang Bi's reading, namely, *xi mo* 息末, "to bring to rest the root's outgrowth." The term *mo* 末 describes all that grows out of the root, such as the stem and branches of a tree. They receive their origin and continuous support from this root but are in fact the visible world whose regulation is the purpose of government. The entire analytic and philosophic enterprise of Wang Bi, and his reading of *Laozi*, remains tied to the ultimate purpose of bringing rest and order to the world, and his main discovery in this respect is the law of the negative opposite, which encapsulates and theorizes observations on the dynamics of the body politic that can be found to this day in sources ranging from proverbial lore about cunning political strategies, such as the Chinese 36 stratagems, to structuralist analyses of political power.[7]

This is a big claim, and I am not at all sure that Rudolf's translation of the key phrase gets the nuance right.[8] The discussion turns on points of etymology and

7 Wagner, "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," 211–212.

8 In a review of Wagner's book, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), Willard J. Peterson quotes the main sentence of this passage, and then adds (enigmatically, I might add): "As Wagner acknowledges, that statement by Wang Bi is enigmatic, and so may be Wagner's framing of it," Willard J. Peterson, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), by Rudolf G. Wagner, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 66, no. 1 (2006): 279–289; 281, 282. Peterson goes on to note that Richard John Lynn has also translated this sentence, giving "It does nothing more than encourage growth at the branch tips by enhancing the roots," and then adds:

> > I cite Lynn's translation not because they (*sic*) make more sense than Wagner's—they do not—but to remind us that the meanings of Wang Bi's sentences are not transparent. Neither translators' renderings, particularly when taken out of context, provide readers as much help as they deserve, but here I am leaving aside translation issues. My point is that we must bear in mind in evaluating Rudolf Wagner's *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy* that we are dealing with three co-existing layers: selections of Chinese text, with variants, ascribed to Wang Bi; disputable English translations of those selected pieces; and Wagner's inferences based on and applied to his reading and translating those pieces.

While Peterson left aside translation issues, I will not.

grammar, as much as on philosophical consistency. Rudolf cited the sentence as found in the text *Laozi weizhi lilüe* 老子微旨例略 (The Structure of the Laozi's Pointers), an otherwise unattributed text which he accepts—reasonably enough—as being by Wang Bi, though, as we will see below, more or less the same wording is found in Wang Bi's commentaries to *Laozi* chapters 38 and 57.[9] Earlier he had offered at least two other translations of the same sentence or at least its main clause:

> To venerate the root in order to soothe the branches;[10]
>
> Ah, exalting the root to soothe the branches, that is all![11]

In his comments on the sentence in the quotation above, he explained only the term "branches" (*mo* 末). The metaphor of the "root" (*ben* 本) and "branches" is probably unproblematic for most readers, though it is worth pointing out in the context of Wang Bi's political philosophy that the "root" corresponds to the "One" (*yi* 一), which is to say the "king" or "emperor," and the "branches" to the "many" (*duo* 多), which is either his ministers or the people in general. I would have welcomed comment on the two main verbs: *chong* 崇, which he translated variously as "to venerate," "to exalt," and finally as "to emulate," and *xi* 息, for which he offered either "to soothe" or "to bring to rest," or even, earlier in the same chapter of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy,* "to calm down."[12] I can certainly understand how in the course of a long engagement with a text, differences such as this could creep into one's translations. However, I have no idea how he settled on "to emulate" for *chong* 崇, which basically means "high" or "to raise on high." Rudolf would have been far better served with either of his earlier choices: "to venerate" or especially "to exalt," the latter of which would be my choice. "To emulate" is simply wrong, both etymologically and philosophically; after all, the ruler is literally unique, not someone that the many can emulate. Rudolf's choices for *xi* 息 are also problematic. *Xi* 息 is often a problem in Chinese philosophical texts because it has two almost contradictory senses:

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9 Fragments of this work are included in the *Daozang* 道藏, assigned number #1255 in Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, ed., *The Daoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the* Daozang (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 78–79. The attribution to Wang Bi was first demonstrated by Wang Weicheng 王維誠, "Wei Wang Bi zhuan *Laozi zhi lüe* yiwen zhi faxian" 魏王弼撰《老子指略》佚文之發現 [The discovery that Wang Bi of the Wei wrote the unattributed text *Laozi's Pointers*], *Guoxue jikan* 國學季刊 7, no. 3 (1951): 367–376. Wagner first wrote about it as "Wang Bi: 'The Structure of the Laozi's Pointers' ('*Laozi weizhi lilüe*'): A Philological Translation and Study," *T'oung Pao* 72, no. 1/3 (1986): 92–129.

10 Wagner, "The Structure of the Laozi's Pointers," 111.

11 Wagner, "The Structure of the Laozi's Pointers," 124.

12 Wagner, "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," 163.

first, "to stop" or "to extirpate," as seen in the *Laozi weizhi lilüe* quotation of *Laozi* chapter 57 analyzed in the first part of this essay: 息淫在乎去華不在滋章 "stopping licentiousness lies in getting rid of ornamentation; it does not lie in multiplying versions"; and second, "to grow" or "to increase" (as, for instance, the opposite of "to decrease, to erase": *xiao* 消). Rudolf's various offerings—"to bring to rest," "to soothe," "to calm down"—all strike me as ambiguous at best; both "to soothe" and "to calm down" can certainly mean to bring about peace (which he said was the "ultimate purpose" of Wang Bi's philosophical enterprise), but they might also suggest suppression. The standard meaning "to stop" is often extended to mean "to rest," but I do not know that it can be used transitively in the sense "to bring others to rest." Finally, Rudolf's understanding of the relationship between the two verb-object constructions was also inconsistent and perhaps ambiguous. Although the sentence quoted above simply lists these constructions consecutively, *chong ben xi mo* 崇本息末, Wang Bi elsewhere inserted an *yi* 以, sometimes "by way of," sometimes "in order to," between them, and Rudolf relied on that in all of his translations of the sentence. In 2003, he settled on translating it as "[by way] of," whereas in 1986 he had given "in order to" or just "to." I suppose either one of these readings is possible (though my own preference would be for either of the 1986 readings), but they completely reverse the ultimate purpose: is the purpose to "exalt the root" (*chong ben* 崇本) or to *xi mo* 息末, whatever that may mean?

The difficulty in understanding *xi mo* 息末 may well be that, despite what Rudolf always argued, Wang Bi was not the most consistent writer that we might wish for. Elsewhere in the *Laozi weizhi lilüe,* the same clause is paralleled by another that seems to show at least that the sense of "stop" is not pertinent. The line reads, together with Rudolf's 2003 translation:

> 崇本以息末，守母以存子。
>
> To emulate the root by way of bringing to rest its [the root's] outgrowth; to keep to the mother by way of maintaining [her] offspring.[13]

"Maintaining [her] offspring" (*cun zi* 存子) is certainly something positive, and so it stands to reason that *xi mo* 息末 should also be positive, whence Rudolf's "bringing to rest its outgrowth" would seem to be entirely appropriate. On the other hand, in his commentary to chapter thirty-eight of the *Laozi,* Wang Bi employed the same parallel, though in a negative sense. This seems to show an antagonistic relationship between the *ben* 本 and *mo* 末.[14]

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13 Rudolf G. Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing: *Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 90.

14 In his review of Wagner's *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China*, Jean Lévi notes a deliberate intention (*volonté délibérée*) in Wagner's work to close his eyes to the contradictions

I again cite Rudolf's translation (employing also his spacing and italics, but adding the original Chinese).[15]

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|---|---|
| 本在無為, | 母在無名。 |
| *The root lies in non-interference.* | *The mother lies in the Nameless* |
| *By* | |
| 棄本而適其末， | 舍母而用其子， |
| *discarding the root but going* | *rejecting the mother but* |
| *along with the branches* | *making use of the offspring of* |
| *[growing out of the root]–* | *[the mother]–* |
| 功雖大焉，必有不濟。 | 名雖美焉，偽亦必生。 |
| *there will by necessity, even if* | *there will by necessity, beautiful* |
| *the achievements be great, some* | *though the name may be,* |
| *[things] remain unachieved.* | *falsehood be also born.*[16] |

Here it is clear that exalting the root, the opposite of "discarding the root" (*qi ben* 棄本), is the ultimate purpose, and that "going along with the branches" (*shi mo* 適末, which might also be rendered as "adapting to the branches") is a less desirable strategy.

I apologize again for this extended consideration of etymology and grammar. However, the reason it matters is because if Rudolf was right that "Wang Bi claimed that the *Laozi*'s entire teaching could be 'summed up in [this] one phrase,'" then its interpretation is crucial. Rudolf has argued that Wang Bi was a critic of the Wei court's Legalism, proposing in its stead what might best be described as a Confucian humanism, which took "bringing to rest" the branches, i.e., "bringing rest and order to the world," as its purpose. I suspect that at least nominally most political philosophies would maintain that "bringing rest and order to the world" is their purpose. I have argued, on the other hand, that Wang Bi positively advocated for the Cao court's Huang-Lao 黃老 (i.e., Legalist) policies, such that the focus of his philosophy was

within Wang Bi's writings; Jean Lévi, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political philosophy in China*: *Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), by Rudolf G. Wagner, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 90/91 (2003–2004): 560–567; 566.

15 Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing, 244.

16 Wagner, *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing, 244.

resolutely on "exalting the root"; i.e., supporting the emperor.[17] Elsewhere in his final chapter "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," Rudolf attempted to synthesize this distinction between Confucian and Legalist approaches:

> As Liu Zehua has pointed out in his fine paper on Wang Bi's political philosophy, Wang Bi does not accept the rigid separation, present for example in the *Zhuangzi* as well as in many texts associated with the Ru and "Legalists," between the innate nature of entities and external social regulations and controls. Quite the contrary, he deduces the mechanism of social regulation normally associated with the Han dynasty Mingjiao 名教 school directly from the notion of *ziran,* from the notion of the entities' That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is.[18] The seemingly unavoidable bifurcation between the two realms of "root," *ben* 本, and "outgrowth," *mo* 末, with the ensuing bifurcation between the Daojia 道家, which is focusing on the "root," and the Mingjiao 名教, which is focusing on the "outgrowth," is thus overcome in favor of a system of philosophy that establishes ontology and politology on the very same fundaments.[19]

There is no doubt that Wang Bi was concerned with both "ontology and politology," but how the bifurcation between them can be overcome seems to have been even more the concern of Rudolf.[20]

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17 For a full discussion of this point, see Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Commentary, Philosophy, and Translation: Reading Wang Bi's Commentary to the *Yi Jing* in a New Way," *Early China* 22 (1997): 229–241. This came in a review article concerning Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the* I Ching *as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Although Lynn's translation appears in the bibliographies of both *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing and *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China,* I am sorry to say that my review article does not, even though it was available six years before these two books were published.

18 Original note: "Liu Zehua, 'Wang Bi mingjiao chu yu ziran de zhengzhi zhexue he wenhe de junzhu zhuanzhi sixiang' (Wang Bi's Political Philosophy of Social Regulations Emerging out of That-which-is-of-itself-what-it-is and His Thinking of a Moderate Autocracy), *Nankai xuebao* 4:24 (1993)." I agree that this paper by Liu Zehua 劉澤華 was a fine study of Wang Bi's political philosophy, but here too I have a different interpretation of it than that of Rudolf. Liu explicitly argued that Wang Bi's philosophy should be seen as supportive of the *Mingjiao* 名教 of his time, which he termed a "dictatorship of the ruler" (*junzhu zhuanzhi* 君主專制), which is a very different notion from an "autocracy," benign though it may have been.

19 Wagner, "Wang Bi's Political Philosophy," 198.

20 In this regard, in his review of Wagner's *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China,* Lévi has made the following observation:

> Mais peut-être le véritable intérêt de l'ouvrage est-il ailleurs. Il tient, à mon sens, à la *sympathie*—au sens étymologique du terme—que R. G. Wagner éprouve à l'égard de l'auteur qu'il étudie. Wagner embrasse le mouvement de la pensée de Wang Bi, il suit pas à pas ses développements et comprend

I was asked by the editors of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies* to consider the influence of Rudolf's scholarship on the understanding of Wang Bi in sinology. Rudolf used to joke that his study of Wang Bi had taken twenty-three years, as long as Wang Bi had lived.[21] It is now almost another twenty-three years (give or take a few years) since the last of his books were published. I regret to say that it is my impression that they have not exerted the influence that they should have on the understanding of Wang Bi in sinology. It is perhaps paradoxical that about the time that Rudolf was undertaking his study,[22] there was something of a boom in Wang Bi studies. First, in the late 1970s, there was a pair of translations of Wang Bi's *Laozi* commentary.[23] Then in 1985, Howard Goodman completed his doctoral dissertation "Exegetes and Exegeses of the *Book of Changes* in the Third Century AD: Historical and Scholastic Contexts for Wang Pi."[24] The next year brought Ina-Marie Bergeron's *Wang Bi: Philosophe du Non-Avoir,*[25] and

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> de l'intérieur sa démarche. Cette adhésion, ou mieux cette adhérence, nous vaut des analyses d'une grande pertinence où les mécanismes mis en œuvre sont d'autant mieux compris qu'ils ont été repris à leur compte par celui qui les étudie. Rudolf G. Wagner ne nous montre pas des notions sorties tout armées de la tête de Wang Bi, mais s'attache, par une critique linguistique rigoureuse, à découvrir le processus de leur élaboration. Toutefois ce respect du texte, cet amour même pour l'objet d'études a un coût.

I would agree, as Lévi's last line states, that Wagner's love for the object of his study has a cost; Lévi, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China*, 564.

21 For a published statement of this joke, see Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy,* vii. In fact, based on the narrative provided there, Wagner's study of Wang Bi actually extended over the course of more than thirty years; according to the narrative published in *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy,* Rudolf finished his first translation in 1971, and in a 2014 interview reflecting on his life and work, he says the work actually began in 1969; "Comparative Epistemologies for Thinking China," The Research & Educational Center for China Studies and Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations, Department of Political Science, National Taiwan University," Oral History of Chinese Studies Interview with Prof. Rudolf G. Wagner, Interviewed and Transcribed by Marina Rudyak, July 7, 2014; August 25, 2014; December 15, 2014; 23, accessed August 9, 2022, http://www.china-studies.taipei/comm2/Rudolf%20G.%20Wagner.pdf.

22 Rudolf G. Wagner, "Philologie, Philosophie und Politik in der Zhengshi-Ära (240–249): Die *Laozi*-Schriften des Philosophen Wang Bi [Philology, Philosophy and Politics in the Zhengshi Era (240–249): The *Laozi* Writings of the Philosopher Wang Bi]" (Habilitation thesis: Freie Universität Berlin, 1980).

23 Paul J. Lin, *A Translation of Lao Tzu's* Tao Te Ching *and Wang Pi's* Commentary (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977); and Ariane Rump and Wing-tsit Chan, tr., *Commentary on the* Lao Tzu *by Wang Pi* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1979).

24 Howard Lazar Goodman, "Exegetes and Exegeses of the *Book of Changes* in the Third Century AD: Historical and Scholastic Contexts for Wang Pi" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1985).

25 Ina-Marie Bergeron, *Wang Bi: Philosophe du Non-Avoir* (Taipei: Institut Ricci, 1986).

five years later Alan K. L. Chan published a monographic study entitled *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Bi and Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the* Lao-Tzu.[26] Over the next several years, Richard John Lynn published first a translation of Wang Bi's commentary on the *Zhou Yi*,[27] and then one on that of the *Laozi*.[28] Rudolf's three books appeared too late to have influenced most of these studies. The bibliography of Lynn's translation of the *Laozi* did dutifully include the three journal articles Rudolf published in the 1980s,[29] but his text cited only the *Early China* article discussed at the beginning of this essay, and only to dismiss it as either irrelevant or simply wrong.

If JSTOR is a reliable guide (though I am prepared to believe that it is not such a reliable guide), the three books *The Craft of Chinese Commentator: A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing, and *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China* received only five reviews in total, four of them more or less suggesting points of disagreement.[30] A review by Willard Peterson in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* concludes with several telling criticisms, but it also includes an appreciation for what Rudolf did accomplish.

> In *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy* Wagner is more interested in ahistorical ideas than intellectual history. He concentrates on Wang Bi's work with the *Laozi* and marginalizes Wang Bi's equally influential work on the *Zhou yi.* Wagner gives scant attention to other thinkers and the rich, complex textual heritage that was fundamental to the third-century intellectual scene. Wagner stretches our understanding of how language "ordinarily" worked in third-century Chinese and, in some cases, twenty-first century English. All of these complaints are

26 Alan K. L. Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Bi and Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the* Lao-Tzu (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991).

27 Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*.

28 Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the* Tao-te-ching *of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

29 Rudolf G. Wagner, "Interlocking Parallel Style: Laozi and Wang Bi," *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 34, no. 1 (1980): 18–58; "The Structure of the Laozi's Pointers"; and "The Wang Bi Recension of the *Laozi*."

30 These reviews are Lévi, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China*, 560–567; Tze-ki Hon, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), by Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 63, no. 4 (2004): 1114–1116; Peterson, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China*, 279–289; Yuet Keung Lo, review of *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing*: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation,* by Rudolf G. Wagner, *Monumenta Serica* 54 (2006): 524–530; and Jay Goulding, review of *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the* Laozi, and: *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing*: Wang Bi's Commentary on the* Laozi *with Critical Text and Translation*; and *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark* (Xuanxue), by Rudolf G. Wagner, *China Review International* 14, no. 1 (2007): 61–67.

> consequences of choices Wagner made in writing the book that he wanted to present to his readers. Readers can recognize those choices without wholly condoning them. I am wholly sympathetic to Wagner's stance that the meaning in Wang Bi's writings is not simply revealed in what the words appear to say. Wagner seeks to go behind the words. Although I am not persuaded at many stages in the course of Wagner's reading of Wang Bi, I am persuaded that he has significantly raised the level of discussion about Wang Bi's philosophy.[31]

As I have argued above, I too think the criticism is warranted. However, I also think that the appreciation is entirely appropriate. What JSTOR cannot capture is the unpublished influence. I for one have insisted that my students read *A Chinese Reading of the* Daodejing, not so much for what they will learn of Wang Bi's philosophy itself, but more importantly for the seriousness with which Rudolf took Wang Bi's commentary as a medium for expressing philosophy. More recently, in the context of my writing these remarks, Jean Lévi has shared with me the observation that Rudolf's work opened to him perspectives for understanding Wang Bi, but perhaps even more so for understanding the *Laozi,* and that this understanding very much informs his recent *Médaille Stanislas Julien*-winning book *Les Deux arbres de la Voie: Le Livre de Lao-Tseu, Les Entretiens de Confucius*.[32]

The foregoing discussion of Rudolf Wagner's studies of Wang Bi may well strike readers of this volume of *The Journal of Transcultural Studies,* the journal that Rudolf founded, as inappropriately critical. However, in my experience, Rudolf enjoyed spirited debate. He would have wanted nothing less. In a wide-ranging interview done in Taiwan in 2014, Rudolf recalled an occasion when he had been invited to a conference to discuss the achievements of Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978) and gave a talk that was critical of Guo's scholarship. He was pleased that his hosts welcomed his comments. Reflecting on this, he said:

> I think it also comes with the responsibility not to play the opportunistic game of avoiding to say things that might grate the ears of the authorities, but show that intellectuals can take a stand and say what they think clearly and politely, but also without compromises.[33]

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31 Peterson, review of *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China,* 289.

32 Jean Lévi, personal communication, February 29, 2020, referring to Jean Lévi, *Les Deux arbres de la Voie: Le Livre de Lao-Tseu, Les Entretiens de Confucius* [The two trees of the way: the book of *Laozi,* the talks of Confucius] (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2018). I am very grateful to Professor Lévi for a stimulating discussion of Rudolf Wagner's work in this communication.

33 Wagner, Interviewed and Transcribed by Marina Rudyak, 62.

I hope I have been clear and polite. Rudolf's work on Wang Bi is challenging in the very best senses of that word, and does not require any validation from me; it will surely take its place beside Wang Bi's own writings as a topic of scholarship for much more than twenty-three years to come.