

Persuasion through Definition: Argumentative Features of the Ancient *Wenzzi*

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0 Introduction

This paper aims to reconstruct the politico-philosophical content of the Ancient *Wenzzi*, according to three interrelated questions: How does the text communicate its views to the reader? What are its main ideas? When and where were these ideas first put to writing? Accordingly, after a discussion of preliminaria in section 1, section 2 focuses on the rhetorical devices in the text, section 3 on its key terms, and section 4 on its possible historical context. The goal of this paper is not only to describe the content of the Ancient *Wenzzi*, but also to contextualize it. That is, to explore the debate to which the Ancient *Wenzzi* may have responded.

1 Preliminaria

In our times, the *Wenzzi* 文子 is not a well-known text. In other historical periods, however, it enjoyed considerable prestige. The earliest extant mention of the text is in the catalogue of the imperial library of the Han dynasty, which lists a *Wenzzi* in 9 “chapters” (*pian* 篇) in the category of “Daoist writings” (*daojia* 道家) and additionally notes that the text was authored by a disciple of Laozi 老子.¹ In subsequent centuries, the *Wenzzi* was mentioned, quoted and praised as an important Daoist treatise, reaching its zenith of popularity in 742 CE, the year when Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty (唐玄宗) granted it the title *True Scripture of Communion with the Mysteries* (*Tongxuan zhenjing* 通玄真經) and made it part of the standard curriculum for the official exams.² Soon afterwards, however, questions arose regarding its authenticity. Noting elements in the text that cannot date back to the 6th c. BCE, the time when Laozi’s disciple Wenzzi was supposed to have lived, scholars variously branded the *Wenzzi* a “composite work” (*boshu* 駁書) or even a “forgery” (*weishu* 偽書). Criticism intensified in the Qing dynasty, when scholars noted the strong intertextual relationship between the *Wenzzi* and the *Huainanzzi* (淮南子), a voluminous treatise written under the auspices of Liu An 劉安 (d. 122 BCE), the King of Huainan. The overwhelming amount of corresponding passages between both texts inevitably led to the question of directionality, that is, which text was “plagiarized” from which? New textual evidence, as well as the suspicion that already enshrouded the *Wenzzi*, led scholars to conclude that most of its content was copied from the *Huainanzzi*, and suggest that the *Wenzzi* in its received form was probably crafted between the Han and Tang dynasties, a period when numerous “forgeries”, such as the *Liezi* 列子, were created. Although the *Wenzzi*’s status of a derivative text was now firmly set, most scholars still believed that amidst its “forged” parts, there may be some “authentic” content, that is, passages from an earlier version of the *Wenzzi*. Yet, the craftsmanship of the forger, who skilfully blended passages from different sources into one new text, prevented schol-

1 *Hanshu* 漢書, by Ban Gu 班固, 32–92 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 30.1729.

2 *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, by Liu Xu 劉煦, 887–946 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1975), 9.215; 24.926.

ars from separating these “authentic” and “forged” parts. Instead, they simply rejected the *Wenzǐ* altogether as a secondary work of little importance.³

The *Wenzǐ*'s fate changed in 1973, when archaeologists excavated a Han dynasty tomb near Dingzhou 定州 in Hebei 河北 province. The tomb, said to belong to Liu Xiu 劉脩, King Huai of Zhongshan 中山懷王 (d. 55 BCE), stored over a thousand inscribed bamboo strips.⁴ Unfortunately, the tomb had long ago been visited by robbers, whose torches caused a fire. As a result, an unknown number of bamboo strips were reduced to ashes, while surviving strips were charred, broken and thrown into disarray. After the surviving strips had been taken to Beijing 北京, a team of specialists started the painstaking work of numbering, analyzing and arranging them and transcribing all legible graphs. In 1976, a harsh fate befell the bamboo fragments again, when the devastating Tangshan 唐山 earthquake overturned the wooden storage chest, causing further damage to the fragments and additionally delaying work. In 1981, finally, the research team was able to publish a brief report of the excavation.⁵ This is when the scholarly world first learned that the Dingzhou tomb yielded, among others, the remnants of a bamboo *Wenzǐ* manuscript. The news sent scholars into euphoria and refuelled academic interest in the text. Meanwhile, for reasons that remain unspecified, the Dingzhou project was halted soon after the 1981 publication, and enthused scholars had to wait until 1995 for the publication of the unearthed *Wenzǐ* bamboo strips in transcription.⁶

The transcription shows the poor state of the disinterred *Wenzǐ* bamboo strips. Of the manuscript that was buried in the Former Han dynasty, only 277 charred bamboo fragments with 2,799 legible graphs survive. On some fragments, only two or three graphs can be read. Since many bamboo strips perished in the fire and surviving fragments often contain only segments of sentences, it is unclear how much of the original manuscript is lost. Moreover, as the fragments were found in disarray, the research team had no choice but to reconstruct the bamboo manuscript according to parallels in the transmitted text of the *Wenzǐ*, which may influence current understanding of the manuscript. Nonetheless, the unearthed bamboo strips deservedly caused great excitement in academe, for they have led to important insights regarding the textual history of the *Wenzǐ*.

The first important insight offered by the Dingzhou discovery is that a text called *Wenzǐ* existed as early as the Former Han dynasty. The bamboo manuscript mentions only two protagonists: King Ping 平王, probably the first ruler of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, who poses over forty questions, and Wenzǐ, who duly proffers advice.⁷ This setting, a discussion between a ruler

3 For a detailed account of the reception history of the *Wenzǐ*, see Paul van Els, “The *Wenzǐ*: Creation and Manipulation of a Chinese Philosophical Text” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2006), chapter 9.

4 See *Wemwu* 7 (1976) for a preliminary description of the tomb and its discovery.

5 See *Wemwu* 8 (1981) for the brief report of the excavation.

6 See *Wemwu* 12 (1995) for the transcription of the *Wenzǐ* bamboo strips.

7 The surviving bamboo fragments do not specify the identity of King Ping or Wenzǐ. In the centuries leading up to the Han dynasty, there were only two kings named Ping: King Ping of Zhou 周平王 (r. 770–720 BCE) and King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (r. 528–516 BCE). Which of these two kings is meant in the bamboo manuscript? At a symposium devoted to the *Wenzǐ* in 1996, Wang Bo and Wei Qipeng independently called attention to one of the bamboo strips, on which the Wenzǐ character in the text addresses a “King of Heaven” 天王. As Wang and Wei point out, “King of Heaven” in pre-imperial literature strictly refers to monarchs of the Zhou house. Hence, King Ping probably refers to the first king of the Eastern Zhou and

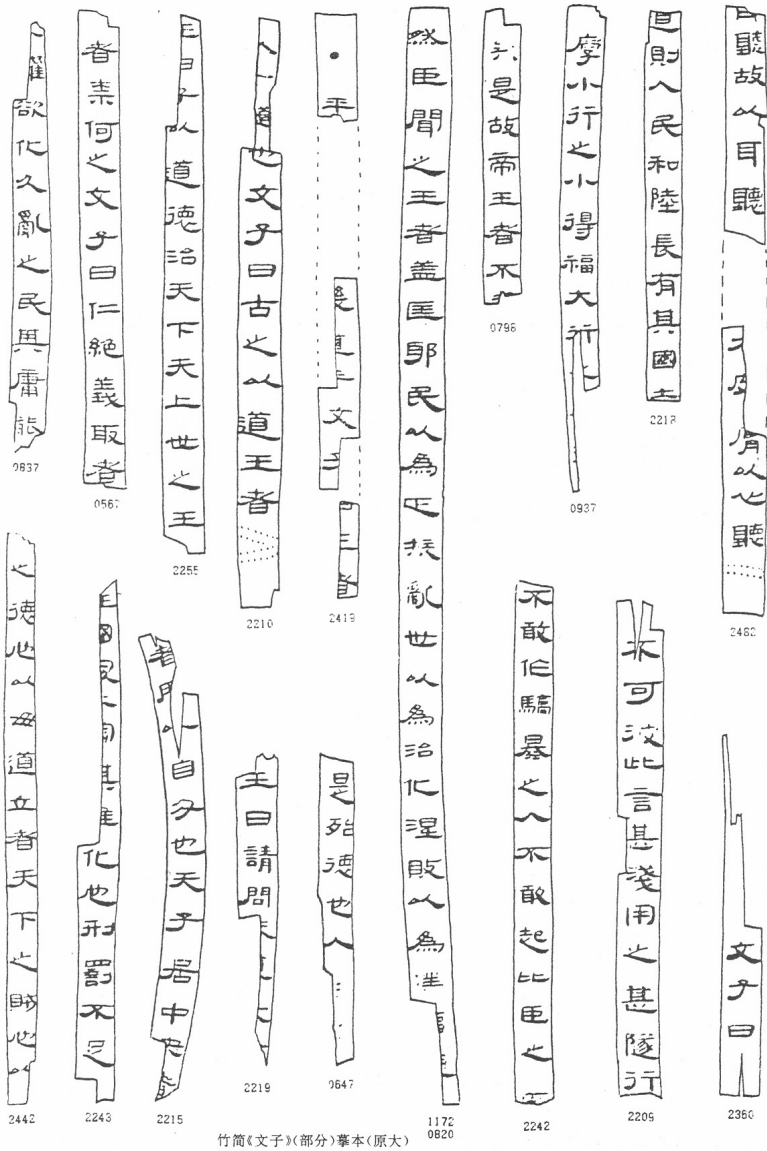


Figure 1: Select tracings of *Wenzi* bamboo strips (*Wenwu* 1995.12, p. 28)

Wenzi, therefore, may have been conceived as his advisor. Notably, the *Wenzi* postdates both kings named Ping by several centuries, and the discussion between King Ping and *Wenzi* is therefore no direct account of an actual meeting, but a historical setting created by an author who lived many centuries after the fictional event. Hence, the names of these two protagonists may be meaningful, and not chosen at random, as I will point out in section 4. See also Paul van Els, *The Wenzi*, 45–57; Wang Bo 王博, “Guanyu *Wenzi* de jige wenti” 關於《文子》的幾個問題, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 23.8 (1996), 1908–1913; Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬, “*Wenzi* xueshu tanwei” 《文子》學術探微, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 23.9 (1996), 2018–2024.

and his advisor, is typical for early Chinese philosophical writings. Since a text was customarily named after its main protagonist, that is, the master whose views it enfold, we would expect this manuscript to be called *Wenzi*. One bamboo strip indeed seems to mention *Wenzi* as the title. Strip #2465 reads: 文子上經聖□明王.⁸ Li Xueqin, who first drew attention to this bamboo strip, reads the first two graphs as the overall title of the work (“the *Wenzi*” 文子), the next two graphs as a subsequent textual unit (“Upper Canon” 上經), and the last four graphs, including the indecipherable one, as two chapter titles (“Sageliness and ...” 聖□, “The Enlightened King” 明王).⁹ Since other readings of the bamboo strip in this context are unlikely, Li’s interpretation is now widely accepted. Hence, by mentioning *Wenzi* over forty times as one of only two protagonists and by listing *Wenzi* as the title, the unearthed manuscript shows that a text called *Wenzi* existed as early as 55 BCE, the year when the Dingzhou tomb is said to have been sealed.

The second insight concerns the *Wenzi*’s date of composition. Whereas the closure of the tomb provides a concrete *terminus ante quem* for the bamboo manuscript and the text it represents, the *terminus a quo* of the text is more difficult to ascertain. When the news of the Dingzhou discovery was first heralded in 1981, many scholars, including Li Dingsheng, Wei Qipeng and Wu Xianqing, concluded that the *Wenzi* must be “a pre-Qin text” (先秦古籍), even though the brief report of the excavation contains no evidence to support this claim.¹⁰ The publication of the bamboo manuscript’s transcription, in 1995, facilitates analysis of the text and contains clues, even if few and far between, which suggest a later date. As I will show further on, the manuscript frequently uses binominal compounds, such as “the Way and virtue” (*daode* 道德), which, as Liu Xiaogan shows, first appear in late Warring States texts.¹¹ Also, the manuscript repeatedly quotes or paraphrases the *Laozi* and supposedly appeals to widespread veneration of that text, which, again, started in the late Warring States era and intensified in the Former Han dynasty. Moreover, scholars such as Wang Bo and Zhang Fengqian note that the manuscript speaks of “court invitations” (*chaoqing* 朝請), which, as Ho Che-wah points out, is a Han dynasty custom.¹² Based on this and other textual evidence, these scholars conclude that the *Wenzi* dates to the Former Han dynasty, a view that gradually finds footing in *Wenzi*-scholarship. Hence, the text was probably authored between the beginning of the Former Han dynasty and the closure of the tomb, in 55 BCE, but a more precise date is difficult to establish.

The third insight is that if Qing scholars were right (and we shall soon see that they were) in assuming that the *Wenzi* in its received form is a “forged” text, created after the Latter Han, then the bamboo manuscript, found in a tomb that was sealed in 55 BCE (i.e., several centuries prior to the major revision, or “forgery”, of the *Wenzi*), probably represents an earlier stage of the *Wenzi*, before someone manipulated the text into its received form. We would then have to

8 The four-digit numbers in this paper, such as #2465, refer to the transcription of the *Wenzi* manuscript in *Wemu*. The □ mark in the Chinese transcription represents an illegible graph.

9 Li Xueqin 李學勤, “Shilun Bajiaolang jian *Wenzi*” 試論八角廊簡《文子》, *Wemu* 1 (1996), 38.

10 Wu Xianqing 吳顯慶, “*Wenzi* zhengzhi bianzhengfa sixiang chutan” 《文子》政治辯證法思想初探, *Beijing daxue xuebao* (shehuxue shehui kexue ban) 3 (1992), 69–74; Li Dingsheng 李定生, “Han Fei duguo *Wenzi*” 韓非讀過《文子》, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 23.9 (1996), 1984–1992; Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬, “*Wenzi* xueshu tanwei” 《文子》學術探微, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 23.9 (1996), 2018–2024.

11 Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1994), 4–16.

12 Wang Bo, “Guanyu *Wenzi*”, 1910–1911; Zhang Fengqian 張豐乾, “Shilun zhujian *Wenzi* yu jinben *Wenzi* de guanxi” 試論竹簡《文子》與今本《文子》的關係, *Zhongguo shehui kexue* 2 (1998), 125–126; Ho Che-wah 何志華, “Chutu *Wenzi* xinzheng” 出土《文子》新證, *Renwen zhongguo xuebao* 5 (1998), 156–157.

distinguish, for clarity of discussion, between the various *Wenzi*'s. In keeping with Chinese scholarly practices, I collectively refer to transmitted versions of the *Wenzi* as the “Received *Wenzi*” (今本文子); I use “Dingzhou *Wenzi*” (定州文子) to refer to the unearthed bamboo strips, as rearranged by the Dingzhou research team and published in transcription in 1995; and I refer to the hypothetical Urtext of the *Wenzi*, that is, the *Wenzi* that existed prior to the major revision, as the “Ancient *Wenzi*” (古本文子).¹³ The complexity of these three terms—Ancient *Wenzi*, Dingzhou *Wenzi*, Received *Wenzi*—will be discussed below, but first let us look at some differences between the bamboo manuscript and the received text, to see why Qing scholars were right.

The fourth insight is that the unearthed manuscript differs fundamentally from the received text. In my view, the most striking differences are (1) their different protagonists; (2) their different number of chapters; (3) their different chapter titles; and (4) their mutually exclusive content.

(1) Whereas the bamboo manuscript consists entirely of a dialogue between King Ping and Wenzi, the received text consists of monologues by Laozi, occasionally preceded by a question from Wenzi. Hence, it appears that in the process of revision, passages from an earlier version of the *Wenzi* were not copied verbatim, but changed in terms of their discursive structure, as well as in the names of the protagonists.

(2) We do not know the chapter division in the bamboo *Wenzi* manuscript, but the Han dynasty imperial library catalogue mentions 9 “chapters” (*pian* 篇). By contrast, transmitted versions of the *Wenzi* are generally divided into 12 chapters. If the 9 chapters mentioned in the catalogue represent a standard division of the text in those days, and if “chapter” means the same in the catalogue and the received text, the two *Wenzi*'s (before and after revision) were probably divided into a different number of chapters.

(3) The chapter titles in both *Wenzi*'s also appear to be different. For the bamboo manuscript, two chapter titles survive: “Sageness and ...” and “The Enlightened King” (see bamboo strip #2465, above). These titles are both absent from the received text. Conversely, the twelve chapter titles in the Received *Wenzi*, including “The Origin of the Way” (*Daoyuan* 道原), “Pure Sincerity” (*Jingcheng* 精誠) and “Subtle Insight” (*Weiming* 微明), are not found on the surviving bamboo fragments.

(4) The most striking difference between the bamboo manuscript and the received text, in my opinion, is their mutually exclusive content. If we map the unearthed manuscript onto the received text, we find that their mutually exclusive content considerably outweighs their matching content. Of the 277 surviving bamboo fragments, only 94 correspond to the transmitted text, the remaining 183 do not. If this ratio, based on the fragmentary manuscript, is representative, it would suggest that only one third of the Ancient *Wenzi* was copied into the Received *Wenzi*, and two thirds were not. (Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing what happened to content that was not selected in the process of the major *Wenzi* revision. Did the person, or persons, who revised the *Wenzi* discard this material? Or was the *Wenzi* no longer complete by the time of its revision?) If, conversely, we study the mutually exclusive content

13 Note that neither “Ancient *Wenzi*” nor “Received *Wenzi*” refers to a specific text. These labels are mere umbrella terms that contain different versions and recensions. The Received *Wenzi* is transmitted in several lineages, each based on a different commentary. Of the Ancient *Wenzi* only one copy survives, the Dingzhou *Wenzi*, but if there were more extant copies, these might contain differences as well. I use the two labels to indicate that a text called *Wenzi* existed until the third century CE and that a different text with the same name but different content emerged after the major revision of the text. For details on the differences between the two *Wenzi*'s, see Paul van Els, *The Wenzhi*, chapter 5.

from the viewpoint of the received text, which consists of nearly 40.000 graphs, we find that more than four fifths are demonstrably borrowed from the *Huainanzhi*, and less than one fifth from the Ancient *Wenzi*, for these are passages with corresponding bamboo strips.¹⁴

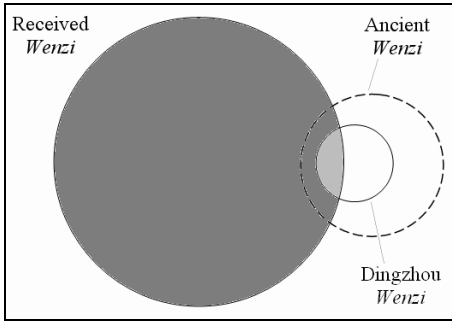


Figure 2: The degree of correspondence between the Ancient *Wenzi*, the Dingzhou *Wenzi* and the Received *Wenzi*

Notably, the unearthed bamboo strips correspond to passages in the received text for which no counterpart exists in the *Huainanzhi*, and vice versa. The 94 bamboo strips that correspond to the received text, correspond near-exclusively to chapter 5 and, more specifically, near-exclusively to the odd-numbered sections in chapter 5. The even-numbered sections in that chapter are demonstrably based on the *Huainanzhi*, as Charles Le Blanc has shown.¹⁵

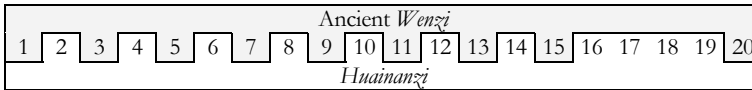


Figure 3: Two different sources for the 20 sections in *Wenzi* 5

The extraordinary structure of *Wenzi* 5 shows that someone skilfully merged passages from two texts, the *Huainanzhi* and the Ancient *Wenzi*, into one new chapter. This allows us, for the first time since its creation, to distinguish between passages from different origins in the received text, that is, between its “authentic” and “forged” parts. It turns out that only the above-mentioned nine sections in *Wenzi* 5 can be verifiably said to derive from the Ancient *Wenzi*; other sections in *Wenzi* 5 as well as sections in other chapters of the received text derive from other texts, mainly the *Huainanzhi*.

In sum, the discovery of 277 bamboo strips in the Dingzhou tomb confirms the suspicion of Qing scholars, namely, that the *Wenzi* in its received form is a “forgery”, largely based on the *Huainanzhi*, but also that a *Wenzi* existed prior to the revision, parts of which were copied into the received text. In other words, Qing scholars were right that the *Wenzi* has undergone a major

14 Ding Yuanzhi calculates that the Received *Wenzi* contains circa 39.674 graphs and the *Huainanzhi* circa 133.827 graphs, and that no less than 30.671 graphs occur in both texts. See Ding Yuanzhi 丁原植, *Wenzi xinlun* 文子新論, (Taipei: Wanjuanlou, 1999), 9.

15 For a study of chapter 5 in the Received *Wenzi* and a French translation of the alternating sections, see Charles Le Blanc, *Le Wen zi à la lumière de l'histoire et de l'archéologie* (Montréal: l'Université de Montréal, 2000).

revision – probably after the Latter Han dynasty, when the figure of Laozi grew in importance – which led to a related but fundamentally different text. Although the two *Wenzǐ*s, before and after revision, have the same name and some shared content, the structural differences show that they were composed by different people, in different times, and for different purposes and audiences. In my view, this suggests that they should be treated as two distinct texts.

The disinterred bamboo *Wenzǐ* manuscript offers a unique opportunity, unavailable to scholars until 1973, the year of the discovery, or even 1995, the year of the published transcription, to explore the content of the *Wenzǐ* as it existed in the Han dynasty, prior to the drastic revision. Despite the breathtaking potential of the bamboo manuscript, few scholars seized this opportunity. Those who do (e.g., Ding Yuanzhi, Zeng Chunhai, Zhang Fengqian, Zheng Guorui)¹⁶ usually study one or several key terms, while paying little or no attention to rhetorical strategies in the text which, I believe, are fundamental to understanding its content. Moreover, most of them do not contextualize the Ancient *Wenzǐ*, that is, explore its content against the background of contemporary debates.

My aim in this paper is to reconstruct the politico-philosophical content of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*. I make use of two sources: the unearthed bamboo strips (or Dingzhou *Wenzǐ*) and the related sections in the transmitted text (or Received *Wenzǐ*). Both sources are problematic.

The Dingzhou *Wenzǐ* was entombed in the Former Han dynasty, long before the major revision of the *Wenzǐ*, only to surface again in 1973. It is apparently the most direct representation of the *Wenzǐ* as it existed in the Han dynasty, and my analysis is therefore primarily based on the unearthed material. However, there are two problems with this source. First, the relationship between the buried manuscript and its unearthed remnants. The unearthed bamboo strips are incomplete, damaged, and only partly legible. As a result, we do not know the original size of the *Wenzǐ* manuscript or the original order of the bamboo strips. Second, the relationship between the buried manuscript and other possible versions of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*. The manuscript placed in the Dingzhou tomb is only one copy of the *Wenzǐ* that circulated in the Han dynasty. Another copy existed in the imperial library, as evidenced by the *Wenzǐ* entry in the catalogue of imperial holdings, and there may conceivably have been other copies. We do not know how many copies there were and to what extent they differed from one another. Hence, caution is in order when taking the bamboo strips as a source for describing the contents of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*, that is, the *Wenzǐ* as it circulated in the Han dynasty, prior to revision, and any conclusion regarding the Ancient *Wenzǐ* as drawn from the bamboo strips remains tentative.

Because of the fragmentary status of the disinterred manuscript, I also take into account passages in the Received *Wenzǐ* for which corresponding bamboo strips have been found, i.e., passages that are demonstrably based on an earlier version of the *Wenzǐ*. The relevant passages often contain a complete argument, offering additional insight in the content of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*. However, this source is also problematic, for these passages have been modified by an editor who used the Ancient *Wenzǐ* for his own agenda, as the fundamental differences between the bamboo manuscript and the received text show. Hence, caution is in order when

16 Zeng Chuhai 曾春海, “Zhujiān *Wenzǐ* yu Han chu daojiā de ‘wuwēi’ guan” 竹簡《文子》與漢初道家的「無為」觀, *Zhexue yu wenhua* 23.9 (1996), 1954–1961; Zheng Guorui 鄭國瑞, *Wenzi yanjiu* 《文子》研究 (MA thesis, Guoli Zhongshan daxue, Gaoxiong, 1997); Ding Yuanzhi 丁原植, “Zhujiān *Wenzǐ* zhaxue sixiang tanxi” 竹簡《文子》哲學思想探析, *Daojia wenhua yanjiu* 18 (2000), 180–199; Zhang Fengqian 張豐乾, *Zhujiān Wenzǐ tanwei* 竹簡《文子》探微 (PhD diss., Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 2002).

taking the relevant sections in the received text as a source for describing the contents of the Ancient *Wenzi*, and any conclusion regarding the Ancient *Wenzi* as drawn from this source also remains speculative.

Nevertheless, there are nearly one hundred bamboo strips that correspond to the relevant passages in the received text, which signals continuity in a shared ancestral line. They show that the Received *Wenzi* is based, if only for a small part, on a *Wenzi* that resembled the unearthened manuscript, which by the time of the revision peacefully resided in the Dingzhou tomb. Moreover, deviations between the two sources are often inconsequential and explicable, which indicates that both reflect the Ancient *Wenzi*, each in their own way. Hence, while I base my research primarily on the Dingzhou *Wenzi*, I occasionally refer to relevant passages in the Received *Wenzi* for further evidence.

2 Rhetorical Devices

Two distinctive features of the Dingzhou *Wenzi* facilitate examination and contextualization of the Ancient *Wenzi*'s main ideas. In the bamboo manuscript, we find an exceptional discursive structure and a selective range of quotations. Both features are part of a rhetorical strategy to persuade the reader of the text's main ideas.

2.1 Discursive Structure

The first distinctive feature of the Dingzhou *Wenzi* is that it consists entirely of a dialogue between King Ping and Wenzi, no other protagonists are mentioned on the surviving bamboo strips. The unearthened manuscript ascribes a good ninety statements to either protagonist and introduces each statement with the sober formulation “King Ping says” (平王曰) or “Wenzi says” (文子曰). King Ping never “inquires” (問曰), as do interlocutors in other texts; Wenzi never “answers” (答曰) and he “replies” (對曰) only once (on strip #1061).¹⁷ The two protagonists' content of speech is likewise kept to a minimum. Their questions and answers are normally brief, to the point, and without excessive detail. King Ping's role is particularly limited. Occasionally, he makes longer statements, such as “You speak of governing the world by means of the Way and virtue, but the kings of the previous generations ...” (子以道德治天下，夫上世之王，#2255), or a personal confession, such as “It is not yet clear to me” (吾未明也，#2214). Over two thirds of all his questions, however, are in one of these four standard formulations:

May I ask about ?	請問
What is meant by ?	何謂
What is like ? 何如?
What about ? 奈何?

These strips (#2219, #2310, #0885, respectively)¹⁸ may serve as examples of King Ping's formulaic questions:

17 Perhaps more so than in other texts, one would be inclined to treat the graph 曰 simply as a colon introducing direct speech and leave it untranslated. For stylistic considerations, however, I still choose to render it as “asked” and “answered”, respectively.

18 Since the bamboo strips of the Dingzhou cache were found in disarray, the research team assigned a sequential number to each strip before arranging them into texts. This explains why *Wenzi* strips are not

[道。”平]王曰：“請問天道？”文[子曰：“天之]

Way [of Heaven].” King Ping asked: “May I ask about Heaven’s Way?” Wenzi answered: “The [Way of] Heaven

[教]化之。”平王曰：“何謂以教化之？”文子

transform them through education.” King Ping asked: “What is meant by transforming them through education?” Wenzi

平王曰：“為正(政)奈何？”文[子曰：“御之以道□]

King Ping asked: “What about carrying out government?” Wenzi answered: “Steer them by means of the Way [X]

These examples show not only the formulaic nature of King Ping’s questions, but also the high frequency of interaction between the two protagonists. A typical discussion between King Ping and Wenzi consists of the former’s standardized questions followed by the latter’s concise answers. Take, for instance, these three bamboo fragments (#2246, #0607, #2240), which, in my view, should be read in succession, as they form a discussion on the meaning of “all things”:

文子曰：“一者，萬物之始也。”平王曰：“[何]

Wenzi answered: “The One is the beginning of all things.” King Ping asked: “What [is meant by]

萬物”。文子曰：“萬物者天地之謂也。

‘all things?’” Wenzi answered: “‘All things’ refers to heaven and earth.”

曰：“何謂萬物，何謂天地？”文子曰：“王者

[King Ping] asked: “What is meant by ‘all things’ and what is meant by ‘heaven and earth?’” Wenzi answered: “As for the king,

We do not know whether these three fragments were originally part of one argumentative unit, but from the view point of argumentation, their rearrangement as consecutive strips does not seem implausible.

In the repeated interaction between both interlocutors, it almost seems as if King Ping’s succinct and highly formalized questions merely serve to highlight the topic of discussion. Note also the nominalizing particle 者 *zhe* at the beginning of Wenzi’s answers: “as for the One, ...” (一者); “as for all things, ...” (萬物者), “as for the king, ...” (王者), which likewise serves as a topic-marker. Because of this topic-marking, it is tempting to see the Ancient *Wenzi* as a dictionary or an encyclopaedia in which entries are highlighted by a discursive structure. We could re-write the discussion on “all things” according to modern lexicographic standards:

numbered consecutively. In the examples throughout this paper, square brackets enclosing Chinese graphs indicate that these graphs were present on the bamboo strips, but are no longer legible after the Tangshan earthquake caused further damage to the strips. These graphs are now available in transcription only, on note cards made prior to the quake. Graphs between round brackets are readings suggested by the editors of the transcription. For example, 刑(形) means that the graph 刑 *xing* “punishment” on the bamboo strip should be read as 形 *xing* “form”. Illegible graphs on bamboo strips are represented as □ in the Chinese transcription and as [X] in my translation; the number of □ and X equals the number of illegible graphs. Occasionally, when the meaning of illegible graphs, or graphs that do not appear on the bamboo strip, can be inferred from the context or from the parallel in the received text, I have inserted such inferences in my translation, between square brackets. Finally, the symbol // represents traces of silk thread that were used to bundle the text.

- 【一】 一者，萬物之始也。
The One The One is the beginning of all things.
- 【萬物】 萬物者，天地之謂也。
All Things All Things refers to heaven and earth.

The bamboo manuscript, with its distinctive discursive structure of repeatedly alternating concise questions and answers, suggests that the Ancient *Wenzi* bears some resemblance to a repository of pre-Han thought. However, its choice of highlighted entries is selective (see the next section) and its explanations of selected terms are neither objective nor descriptive, but normative attitude-shaping valuations. Hence, the discursive structure is clearly part of a rhetorical strategy. The text intends to impress the reader with a display of encyclopaedic knowledge and to influence the reader through what Charles Stevenson has called “persuasive definitions”, which give new conceptual meanings to familiar words without substantially changing their emotive meaning, and which are used with the conscious or unconscious purpose of changing the direction of people’s interests.¹⁹ In this respect, the Ancient *Wenzi* is perhaps best compared to a catechism, which summarizes the Christian doctrine in the form of questions and answers. Note the coincidental resemblance between the passage on “all things” in the Ancient *Wenzi* and this passage from the Baltimore Catechism:

1. Q. Who made the world?
A. God made the world.
2. Q. Who is God?
A. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

Catechisms are doctrinal manuals that tell the disciple what to believe. The Ancient *Wenzi*, similarly, contains the author’s worldview and its discursive structure forces the reader to accept this view. There is little room for argumentation in the text, as the resoluteness of *Wenzi*’s answers does not allow divergent interpretation. King Ping asks about a term, *Wenzi* presents his view as a universal, objective definition and, hence, as the only possible interpretation of the term under discussion. Like King Ping, the reader is meant to be persuaded by *Wenzi*’s resolute and definite reply.

2.2 Select Quotations

The second distinctive feature of the Dingzhou *Wenzi* is that the preserved bamboo strips do not mention any thinker or text by name. The only explicit quotations are from “a saying” (*ci* 辭), “a tradition” (*chuan* 傳) or “a decree” (*ming* 命), as on strip #0565:

之也。” 文子曰：“臣聞傳曰致功之道
it.” *Wenzi* answered: “I have heard of a tradition which says that the way of bringing about achievements ...”

The sources of these sayings, traditions or decrees are unclear, mainly because the bamboo fragments normally contain only part of the quotation.

In addition to explicit but untraceable quotations, the bamboo manuscript also contains implicit, traceable references to other texts. Two examples:

19 Charles Leslie Stevenson, “Persuasive Definitions,” *Mind* 47 (1938), 331.

(1) The manuscript contains the parallel phrases “to hear something and recognize it, is sagesness” (聞而知之，聖也) and “to see something and recognize it, is wisdom” (見而知之，智也).²⁰ While shorter versions of these phrases occur in the *Mencius*, the exact same phrases occur in another recently discovered text, the *Essay on the Five Conducts* (*Wuxing pian* 五行篇), of which a silk manuscript was found in Mawangdui 馬王堆 in 1973 and a bamboo manuscript in Guodian 郭店 in 1993.²¹ Given that both the *Mencius* and the *Five Conducts* predate the Ancient *Wenzhi*, the latter probably borrowed the two phrases from a discourse that included either or both of these two texts.²² Notably, it uses the phrases in a different context, as I will show in section 3.3.

(2) Bamboo strip #0937 of the Dingzhou *Wenzhi* says of the Way that “when it is practiced a little, there is some prosperity; when it is practiced abundantly, there is great prosperity” (小行之小得福，大行之大得福). This echoes statements in other texts, such as the *Guanzi* 管子, which says of the Way that “when a little of it is grasped, there is some prosperity; when a great deal is grasped, there is great prosperity” (小取焉則小得福，大取焉則大得福).²³ The resemblance between these lines in both texts is too close to be incidental. The Ancient *Wenzhi*, which probably dates from the Former Han, may have borrowed this statement from the *Guanzi* or a related text as an elegant manner of expressing the importance of full adherence to the Way.

Overall, borrowings from other texts in the Dingzhou *Wenzhi* are scarce, but there is one exception: the *Laozi*.²⁴ Many distinct parallels between the two texts can be observed. Take, for instance, strip #0870:

地大器也，不可執，不可為，為者販（敗），執者失

earth is a large vessel that cannot be held on to and cannot be acted on. Whoever acts on it will ruin it; whoever holds on to it will lose [it]²⁵

20 These phrases occur on strips #0896/1193, #0765, #0803 and #0834. Unfortunately, the heads of the latter two strips are broken and the remaining bamboo fragments now start with “is wisdom” 知（智）也. The corresponding passage in the received text shows that this phrase was preceded by “to see something and recognize it” 見而知之, as also expected from the parallelism.

21 The phrases 聞而知之 and 見而知之 occur in *Mencius* 7B38, but not in connection with the concepts of sagesness and wisdom. As they occur in the *Mencius*, these phrases demand a different translation. Lau interprets the phrases as knowing exemplary rulers personally versus knowing them by reputation, respectively. D.C. Lau, *Mencius* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 204.

22 Notably, the Guodian tomb, which stored the earliest known manuscript of the *Five Conducts*, was closed long before the Han dynasty.

23 *Guanzi* 38. Cf. *Guanzi: Political, Economic, and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, trans. W. Allyn Rickett, Volume II (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1998), 88. A similar statement appears in *Guanzi* 42; see Rickett, *Guanzi*, 133 n. 33. Notably, *Guanzi* 38 and 42 belong to the four so-called mystical chapters in the *Guanzi*, which are textually and ideologically related to the *Laozi*, the *Four Canons* and other works. See Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-Yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University, 1999).

24 My translations of *Laozi* passages throughout this paper are based on D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* (London: Penguin Classics, 1963).

25 The head of this bamboo fragment did not survive. The initial graph 地 *di*, “earth”, on the surviving fragment was probably preceded by 天 *tian*, “heaven”, to make the statement “[heaven and] earth are a large vessel”. The graph 地 *di*, “earth”, in 天地 *tiandi*, “heaven and earth”, appears to be a scribal error, because

This is an obvious reference to *Laozi* 29, which, in its received form, reads: “The world is a sacred vessel that cannot be acted on. Whoever acts on it will ruin it; whoever holds on to it will lose it.” (天下神器，不可為也，為者敗之，執者失之). Despite minor variations in their respective wording, the message of both texts is the same: the ruler should not try to actively control the empire, but allow government to follow the natural course of things. The idea of non-purposive action recurs on strip #0916, which also borrows imagery from the *Laozi*:

江海以此道為百谷王，故能久長功。

The rivers and seas are kings of the hundred valleys because of this Way. Therefore they can extend their achievements for a long time

This statement alludes to *Laozi* 66: “The rivers and seas are able to be kings of the hundred valleys because they excel in taking the lower position. Hence they are able to be kings of the hundred valleys.” (江海所以能為百谷王，以其善下之，故能為百谷王). In both texts, the rivers and seas are praised because they non-purposively flow downhill, thereby accumulating ever larger amounts of water from tributaries and eventually ending up as huge masses of water before they discharge into the ocean. The image of rivers and seas serves as a metaphor for the ruler who should strive to go with the flow and thereby non-purposively gain the support of the masses. Another link between the two texts can be found on strip #0595 of the Dingzhou *Wenzi*:

觀之，難事，道[于易也；大事，道于細也。]

Looking at it [from this point of view]: the way to accomplish difficult things is in the easy; the way to accomplish big things in the small.

This is reminiscent of *Laozi* 63: “Difficult things in the world must have their beginnings in the easy; big things must have their beginnings in the small.” (天下難事，必作於易；天下大事，必作於細). Again, while their wording differs slightly, the underlying message of both texts is the same: to accomplish large and complex things, one must start with small and easy things. The idea of achieving one thing while focusing on the exact opposite is a central theme in the Ancient *Wenzi*. For example, strips #0926 and #0813 deal with the related issue of becoming grand and exalted, a major concern for every ruler, hence King Ping’s inquiry:

大者，損有損之；持高者，下有下之。

those who [hold on to] grandeur, reduce themselves and reduce even more; those who hold on to exaltation, lower themselves and lower even more

□曰：“何謂損有損之，下有下之？”文

[Ping] asked: “What is meant by ‘reducing and reducing even more, lowering and lowering even more?’” Wen[zi answered]

The idea of continuous reduction derives from *Laozi* 48: “In the pursuit of the Way, one reduces [one’s deeds] and reduces them even more, until one reaches the state of non-purposive action.” (為道日損，損之又損之，以至於無為). While this *Laozi* passage places the pursuit of the Way in opposition to the pursuit of learning, an opposition that is not present on the Dingzhou *Wenzi* bamboo fragments, the idea of continuous reduction to reach something grand is shared by both texts.

the corresponding passage in the received text writes 天下 *tianxia*, “all under heaven”, or “the world” instead, as it claims that “the world is a large vessel”, which is close to the *Laozi* version.

Obviously, implicit but apparent references to the *Laozi* in the Dingzhou *Wenzhi* are plentiful. In fact, Ding Sixin lists no fewer than fifty bamboo strips which, in his view, quote the *Laozi*.²⁶ Although not all of the fifty strips can be plausibly or exclusively associated to the *Laozi*, the profusion of unmistakable links between the two texts is revealing. In my view, these textual references indicate that the Ancient *Wenzhi* is profoundly inspired by the *Laozi*, and appears to borrow authority from that text.

In the Former Han dynasty, the text now known as the *Laozi* rapidly grew in importance. The two *Laozi* manuscripts discovered in the Mawangdui tomb, sealed in 168 BCE, may bear witness to the fact. Authors of the early Former Han readily seized on its popularity for their own purposes. Quoting the *Laozi* rendered an air of authority to their writings. Accordingly, the bamboo *Wenzhi*'s many references to the *Laozi* can be seen as a rhetorical device to facilitate acceptance of its ideas. Readers who revere the *Laozi* will be more inclined to accept the views of the *Wenzhi*.

In Former Han times, texts quoted not only the *Laozi*, but also other authoritative sources, such as the *Odes* (*Shi* 詩) or *Documents* (*Shu* 書). In some cases, the nature of these quotations differs. For example, Charles Le Blanc argues that quotations from the *Odes* or *Documents* in the *Huainanzi* are mainly ornamental, that is, they play no role as directive ideas or argumentative principles and could even be dropped from the text at no loss of understanding, but quotations from the *Laozi*, on the other hand, are functional, that is, they are fully integrated in the arguments of the *Huainanzi*.²⁷ In a similar vein, whereas no references to the *Odes*, the *Documents* or other canonical texts have been found on the surviving Dingzhou *Wenzhi* bamboo strips, its frequent allusions to the *Laozi* form an integral part of the discussion, as King Ping's query on "reducing and reducing even more" shows.

Judging by the abundance of references to the *Laozi* and the near-absence of intertextual links with other texts, the *Laozi* served as the primary source of inspiration for the Ancient *Wenzhi*. But differences between the two texts are also notable. The Ancient *Wenzhi*'s treatment of the *Laozi* is neither exhaustive nor systematic. Typical *Laozi* terms, such as "simplicity" (*pu* 朴), "spontaneity" (*ziran* 自然) and "knowing contentment" (*zhi zu* 知足), are not mentioned on the surviving bamboo strips. Moreover, the Ancient *Wenzhi* embraces terms that the *Laozi* rejects, such as humaneness, righteousness and wisdom. Hence, it seems that indebtedness to the *Laozi* did not stop the author of the Ancient *Wenzhi* from promoting ideas that run counter to its main source, as I will show in the next sections. As Aristotle would have put it, I love my teacher, Plato, but I love the truth even more.

3 Key Terms

The Ancient *Wenzhi*'s exceptional discursive structure of succinct and frequently alternating questions and answers facilitates discussion of a multiplicity of terms. In the previous examples, King Ping asked about "the One" (*yizhe* 一者), "all things" (*wanwu* 萬物), "the Way of Heaven" (*tian dao* 天道), "heaven and earth" (*tian di* 天地), "transformation through education" (*jiaohua* 教化), and "conducting government" (*wei zheng* 為政). On other bamboo strips, he

26 Ding Sixin 丁四新, *Guodian Chumu zhujian sixiang yanjiu* 郭店楚墓竹簡思想研究 (Beijing: Dongfang, 2000), 31–37, 70–72.

27 Charles Le Blanc, *Huai-Nan Tzu: Philosophical Synthesis in Early Han Thought* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University, 1985), 84.

inquires about “fortune and misfortune” (*huofu* 禍福), “sageness and wisdom” (*shengzhi* 聖知), “seeing the small” (*jian xiao* 見小), “preserving quietude” (*shou jing* 守靜), “employing humane-ness” (*yong ren* 用仁), and “employing righteousness” (*yong yi* 用義). Several key terms occur throughout the unearthed manuscript:

key terms	frequency
道 the Way	68 times ²⁸
德 virtue	36 times
義 righteousness	20 times
仁 humaneness	12 times
智 wisdom	9 times ²⁹
聖 sageness	8 times ³⁰
萬物 all things	7 times
禍福 fortune and misfortune	4 times ³¹
禮 propriety	3 times
無爲 non-purposive action	3 times
見小 seeing the small	3 times
守靜 preserving quietude	2 times
執一 holding on to the One	2 times
教化 educative transformation	2 times ³²

Distribution of key terms in the Dingzhou *Wenzhi*

This table is by no means representative; an unscathed manuscript may have yielded a different distribution. Yet, it does demonstrate the range and recurrence of terms in the small and fragmentary manuscript, and leads to these four observations:

(1) Judging by its high frequency, “the Way” is by far the most important term. With 68 occurrences it appears almost twice as often as the second most frequent term, “virtue”, and this does not even include occurrences of important combinations such as “the Way of Heaven” (*tiandao* 天道).

28 The graph 道 (*dao*, “the Way”) occurs 88 times in the Dingzhou *Wenzhi*. This includes the subordinate combinations 天之道 (*tian zhi dao*, “the Way of Heaven”, 3 occurrences) or 天道 (*tiandao*, “Heaven’s Way”, 8x), 王道 (*wangdao*, “the way of the king”, 2x), 帝王之道 (*diwang zhi dao*, “the way of emperors and kings”, 1x), 致功之道 (*zhi gong zhi dao*, “the way of bringing about achievements”, 1x), 聖知之道 (*shengzhi zhi dao*, “the way of sageness and wisdom”, 1x), 師徒之道 (*shitu zhi dao*, “the way of troops and soldiers”, 1x), (□國之道 (? *guo zhi dao*, “the way of [governing?] the realm”, 1x), and the ways of dealing with 難事 (*nanshi*, “difficult tasks”, 1x) and 大事 (*dashi*, “big tasks”, 1x). This leaves 68 occurrences of the Way as a distinct term in its own right, including 7 coordinate combinations with 德 (*de*, “virtue”).

29 The graph 知, 18 occurrences, represents both the verb *zhi* 知, “to know” (9x), and the noun *zhi* 智, “wisdom” (9x). The latter includes three occurrences of “those who possess wisdom” (*zhi zhe* 智者).

30 The graph 聖 (*sheng*, “sage”) occurs 18 times in the Dingzhou *Wenzhi*. This includes the combinations 聖人 (*shengren*, “sagely man”, 6x), 聖王 (*shengwang*, “sagely king”, 3x) and 古聖 (*gusheng*, “ancient sages”, 1x) and leaves 8 occurrences of sageness as a distinct term in its own right, including 3 combinations with 智 (*zhi*, “wisdom”).

31 In addition, the Dingzhou *Wenzhi* mentions the graph 福 (*fu*, “fortune”) three times on its own and the graph 禍 (*huo*, “misfortune”) twice in the combination 禍亂 (*huoluan*, “misfortune and rebellion”).

32 The Dingzhou *Wenzhi* also mentions the graphs 教 (*jiao*, “to educate”, 5x) and 化 (*hua*, “to transform”, 3x) on their own.

(2) Occurrences of terms such as “non-purposive action” and “preserving quietude”, which are all discussed in a favourable light, suggest that Ancient *Wenzǐ* subscribes to a quietist, non-interventionist outlook; again, not unlike the *Laozǐ*.

(3) Some terms typical for early Chinese philosophical writings are absent. These include “law” (*fǎ* 法), “vital energy” (*qì* 氣), “vital essence” (*jīng* 精), “inner feelings” (*qíng* 情) and “inner nature” (*xìng* 性).³³ No firm conclusions can be drawn from their absence, though, because the unearthed manuscript is incomplete and these terms may have been present on bamboo strips that were consumed by the fire.

(4) Throughout the bamboo manuscript we find binominal compounds, such as “the Way and virtue” (*daode* 道德), which occurs seven times or “humaneness and righteousness” (*renyi* 仁義), which occurs four times. We also find larger combinations of terms. For example, the text jointly refers to four distinct terms – virtue, humaneness, righteousness, propriety – as “the four guidelines” (*sijīng* 四經). Such combinations of two or four terms are signs of a well-structured text with a distinct hierarchy of terms.

At the highest level of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*'s hierarchy, judging by the bamboo manuscript, seven terms stand out in terms of frequency and significance: the Way, virtue, humaneness, righteousness, propriety, sageness and wisdom. In the following sections, I analyze these terms in three clusters, a categorization suggested by the text itself.

3.1 The Way

The Way constitutes the foundation of the Ancient *Wenzǐ*'s worldview. Two aspects of the Way feature prominently in the text: (1) its cosmogonical dimensions, and (2) its political applications.

(1) The Ancient *Wenzǐ* sees the Way as the source of all things, as evidenced by strips #2466 and #0722 of the bamboo manuscript:

生者道也，養□

That which engenders, is the Way. [That which] nourishes

[子曰：“道產之，德畜之，道有博]

[Wen]zi answered: “The Way produces them; virtue rears them. In the Way, there is profundity

Here, again, are references to the *Laozǐ*. The two bamboo fragments seem to allude to the beginning of *Laozǐ* 51: “The Way engenders them; virtue rears them; things shape them; circumstances complete them” (道生之，德畜之，物形之，勢成之). While the Ancient *Wenzǐ* does not mention “things” (*wu* 物) and “circumstances” (*shi* 勢) in this context, it agrees with the *Laozǐ* that the Way and virtue engender and nurture all things, respectively. In the same vein, the two texts also agree that all things depend on the Way for birth and growth. The *Wenzǐ* expresses this view on strips #1181, #0792 and #2469:

元也，百事之根

the origin [...], the root of all tasks

生，待之而成，待

life, they depend on it for completion, and they depend

33 The graph 法 (*fǎ*) appears four times as the verb “to emulate” (once on strips #0871 and #0912 and twice on #0689) and once as the noun “model” in the combination 義法 (“models of righteousness”, #2208). It does not occur as a distinct term in its own right.

而生，待之而成，
and life, they depend on it for completion,

We know that these bamboo fragments speak of the Way, for they correspond to a passage in the Received *Wenzī* that focuses on the Way. Here is the passage, from *Wenzī* 5.1, with graphs also occurring on the corresponding bamboo strips underlined:

夫道者，德之元，天之根[#1181]，福之門，萬物待之而生，待之而成，待[#0792/#2469]之而寧。

Now, the Way is the origin of virtue, the root of heaven and the gate to good fortune. All things depend on it for their birth, they depend on it for their completion and they depend on it for their well-being.

There are differences between the two representations of the Ancient *Wenzī*, such as “the root of all tasks” (百事之根) on the bamboo strip versus “the root of heaven” (天之根) in the received text. Yet, the underlying idea that all things are dependent on the Way, is the same. This idea also occurs in the *Laozī*. Speaking of the Great Way, *Laozī* 34 purports that “all things depend on it for life” (萬物恃之以生). It also occurs in related texts, such as the *Guanzī*, the *Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經), and the *Huainanzī*.³⁴ While there are variations in the actual wording of the formula, the idea in these texts is the same: since the Way creates all things, all things are dependent on it for their existence. Hence, the Ancient *Wenzī* appears to subscribe to a tradition of earlier texts that agree on this cosmogonical principle and it uses similar wording to describe this idea.

(2) The Ancient *Wenzī*, unlike the *Laozī*, explicitly addresses a head of state, whose interest in the Way is mostly pragmatic. As a consequence, the political application of the Way receives much attention in this text. We see on the surviving bamboo strips that King Ping is deeply worried about “the mistake of lacking the Way” (無道之過, #0780). Wenzī duly warns him that “those who occupy the throne while lacking the Way are thieves of the world” (毋道立者天下之賊也, #2442) and that if the ruler “does not steer the people by means of the Way, they will abandon him and disperse” (不御以道則民離散, #0876). In even stronger wording, he forecasts that those who lose the Way will stand “at the head of rebellions” (為亂首, #2437). Conversely, if the ruler is careful not to lose the Way, he will lead the realm away from social disorder, so that “the whole world will submit itself to him” (天下皆服, #0590) and “will not engage in battle” (不戰, #0619). Even more positively, Wenzī purports that “rulers who possess the Way are raised by heaven, supported by the earth and assisted by the spirits” (有道之

34 The mystical tract titled “Inward Training” (*Nejje* 內業), transmitted as part of the *Guanzī*, says of the Way that “all things are engendered by it, all things are completed by it” (萬物以生，萬物以成). See: Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao*, 56–57. The last canon in the *Four Canons* is a verse that explicates the origin of all things from the Way. Speaking of the Way in terms of “Eternal Nothingness” (*bengwu* 恆无) and “Great Void” (*daxu* 大虛), it asserts that “all things live by acquiring it, all tasks are successfully completed by acquiring it” (萬物得之以生，百事得之以成). See: Robin D.S. Yates, *Five Lost Classics: Tao, Huang-Lao, and Yin-yang in Han China* (New York: Ballantine, 1997), 173. The opening chapter of the *Huainanzī* contains a double-negative variant, saying that “all things are not born if they do not acquire it” (萬物弗得不生). The “it” here refers to water, the softest and most pliable thing on earth, and a metaphor for the Way. In a related, more elaborate passage, the *Huainanzī* speaks of “the Way of high antiquity” (太上之道) and maintains that all creatures wait for it and “only then they are born” (待而後生) and “only then they die” (待之後死). See: D.C. Lau and Roger T. Ames, *Yuan Dao: Tracing Dao to its Source* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 66–67.

君，天舉之，地勉之，鬼神輔，#0569). Statements such as these, however fragmentary, demonstrate the text's concern for the Way as the guiding principle in the political realm.

How can the ruler obtain and maintain the Way? The answer is that he should emulate “the Way of Heaven” (天之道). This appears to be an important term in the Ancient *Wenzi*, because the unearthed bamboo fragments mention it no less than 11 times. The Ancient *Wenzi* sees the Way of Heaven as a process of natural growth and, by extension, as a model for moral conduct. A discussion on this topic survives in two forms: a fragmentary version on five bamboo strips, and a modified but more elaborate version in the received text. I first offer the passage in *Wenzi* 5.1 and then the related bamboo strips:

夫道者，原產有始，始於柔弱，成於剛強[#0581]，始於短寡，成於眾長[#2331]，十圍之木始於把，百仞之臺始於下[#1178]，此天之道也。聖人法之，卑者所以自下[#0871]，退者所以自後，儉者所以自小，損之所以自少，卑則尊，退則先，儉則廣，損[#0912]則大，此天道所成也。

Now, the Way in its original production has a beginning. It begins as soft and weak and reaches completion as hard and strong. It begins as short and few and reaches completion as many and long. *A tree of ten arm's lengths in circumference begins as the size of a fist, a tower of one hundred feet in height begins at the base.*³⁵ This is the Way of Heaven. Sages emulate this: through humility they lower themselves, through retreat they position themselves behind, through restraint they make themselves small and through reduction they make themselves few. By being humble they are honored, by retreating they advance, by restraining themselves they expand and by reducing they grow large. This is brought about by Heaven's Way.

Below are the corresponding bamboo strips (#0581, #2331, #1178, #0871, #0912):³⁶

產于有，始于弱而成于強，始于柔而

was produced in “being”. It began as weak and reached completion as strong. It began as soft and

于短而成于長，始寡而成于眾，始

as short and reached completion as long. It began as few and reached completion as many. It began

之高始于足下，千[方之群始于寓強]，

a height of [...] begins from under the feet, a crowd of a thousand sides begins with sheltering the strong

聖人法于天道，[民者以自下]，

Sages emulate Heaven's Way, those who belong to the common people take this to lower themselves

卑、退、斂、損，所以法天也。”平王曰：

humility, retreat, restraint and reduction is what they use to emulate Heaven.” King Ping asked:

In the Ancient *Wenzi*, as the bamboo strips and the corresponding passage in the received text both suggest, the Way of Heaven refers to the workings of nature and represents the universal Way in the natural world around us. It is described as a process of growth, a natural tendency

35 The italicized phrase is a paraphrase of *Laozi* 64, and the related bamboo strip, #1178, yet another proof of the Ancient *Wenzi*'s dependency on the *Laozi*.

36 Note that these strips are placed together by the research team in their reconstruction of the Dingzhou *Wenzi* because of the correspondence between the strips and the above passage in the received text. While the strips were probably part of one discussion in the Ancient *Wenzi*, we cannot rule out the possibility that they were part of different discussions, only to be joined together by the editor who revised the *Wenzi* after the Latter Han.

to grow from small to large, in number, size, length, strength, and so on. Because of this natural tendency, the Way of Heaven serves as a model for good conduct. In the natural world, things spontaneously grow from short to long, from weak to strong, and so on. Rulers who emulate this pattern do not strive to become famous, powerful or wealthy, but lower themselves, position themselves behind and make themselves small. In so doing, they advance, expand, grow large and strong; and therefore they are honoured by others. They do not demand respect, but receive this spontaneously once they successfully follow the patterns of the Way of Heaven.

In sum, the Ancient *Wenzhi* sees the Way as the source of all things and, as the Way of Heaven, as a guide for morally good conduct. These two aspects, both heavily influenced by the *Laozi*, combine to form a central theme in the Ancient *Wenzhi*, which we have already encountered in various manifestations, namely that to obtain the Way and become mighty and exalted, the ruler first has to become insignificant and small.

3.2 The Four Guidelines

In the Ancient *Wenzhi*'s hierarchy of terms, the Way is followed by virtue, humaneness, righteousness and propriety, in that order. Virtue is second to the Way in terms of frequency (judging by my statistic analysis of the bamboo fragments, above) and importance. Its importance is nicely encapsulated on strip #0737 of the bamboo manuscript, which rhymes that “accumulating resentment leads to one’s perishing, while accumulating virtue makes one a king” (積怨成亡, 積德成王). Other strips warn against “lacking virtue” (*wu de* 無德), or encourage the practices of “cultivating virtue” (*xin de* 脩德) or “employing virtue” (*yong de* 用德). Notably, the same encouragements apply to “the Way and virtue”, which confirms the special relationship between these two terms and makes it difficult to distinguish between their respective functions.

In the Ancient *Wenzhi*, virtue is related to the Way, on the one hand, and to humaneness, righteousness and propriety, on the other. The text often mentions the Way and virtue together, sometimes even as a compound, and it collectively refers to virtue, humaneness, righteousness and propriety as the “four guidelines”. The Ancient *Wenzhi*'s view on the respective functions of the four guidelines as well as their relationship to each other and to the Way now survives on six bamboo fragments and in a related passage in section 5.3 of the received text:

故脩其德則下從令，脩其仁則下不爭，脩其義則下平正，脩其禮則下尊敬，四者既，國家安寧。故物生者道也[#2466]，長者德也，愛者仁也，正者義也，敬者禮也。不畜不養，不能遂長，不慈不愛，不能成遂，不正[#0600]不匡，不能久長，不敬不寵，不能貴重。故德者民之所貴也，仁者民之所懷也，義者民之所畏也，禮者民之所敬也，此四[#2259]者，文之順也，聖人之所以御萬物也。君子無德則下怨，無[#0591]仁則下爭，無義則下暴，無禮則下亂，四[#0895/0960]經不立，謂之無道[#0811]，無道不亡者，未之有也。

Therefore, if you cultivate virtue, those below will follow orders. If you cultivate humaneness, those below will not contend. If you cultivate righteousness, those below will be fair and upright. If you cultivate propriety, those below will be honourable and respectful. Once all four are cultivated, the realm will be secure and calm.

Therefore, what engenders the things is the Way, what makes them grow is virtue, what makes them caring is humaneness, what makes them upright is righteousness, and what makes them respectful is propriety. If you do not rear or nurture them, they cannot be brought up. If you do not show kind-

ness and care, they cannot be successful. If you do not make them upright and irreproachable, they cannot live long. If you do not make them respectful and honourable, they cannot be valued highly.

Therefore, virtue is what the people value, humaneness is what the people cherish, righteousness is what the people hold in awe, and propriety is what the people respect. These four are the sequence of cultivation and the means whereby the sage steers all things. If the ruler lacks virtue, those below will feel resentment. If he lacks humaneness, those below will contend. If he lacks righteousness, those below will be violent. If he lacks propriety, those below will be rebel. If these four guidelines are not established, this is called lacking the Way. It has never occurred that someone who lacked the Way did not perish.

These are the corresponding strips (#2466, #0600, #2259, #0591, #0895/0960, #0811):

生者道也，養□

That which engenders, is the Way. [That which] nourishes

[不慈不愛]，不能成遂，不正

If you do not show kindness and care, they cannot be successful. If you do not make them upright

之所畏也，禮者民之所□也。此四

is what they hold in awe, and propriety is what the people [X]. These four

踰節謂之無禮。毋德者則下怨，無

exceeding the regular intervals is called “lacking propriety”. Without virtue, those below will feel resentment. Without

則下諍，無義則下暴，無禮則下亂。四

those below will forward criticism. If he lacks righteousness, those below will be violent. If he lacks propriety, those below will rebel. If these four

□立，謂之無道，而國不

[X] are not established, this is called “lacking the Way” and when the realm does not

Each of the four guidelines has its own function: *virtue* is what “those below” value because it makes them grow; if virtue is properly applied, they will follow orders; otherwise, they will feel resentment; *humaneness* is what those below cherish because it makes them care for others; if humaneness is properly applied, they will not contend; otherwise, they will engage in dispute; *righteousness* is what those below hold in awe because it makes them upright; if righteousness is properly applied, they will be fair and honest; otherwise, they will be violent; *propriety* is what those below revere because it makes them respectful; if propriety is properly applied, they will be honourable and reverent; otherwise, they will rebel.

In the Ancient *Wenzi*'s view, each quality is indispensable in the process of bringing order to the realm. Only when all four are cultivated will the realm be calm and secure. This is in sharp contrast with the *Laozi*. According to *Laozi* 38, the ruler should turn to virtue only when he has lost the Way, to humaneness only when he no longer has virtue, and so on. The *Wenzi* sets the same hierarchy for the four qualities, but it only agrees with the *Laozi* on the succession of terms, not on their regression. In the *Wenzi*, one quality is not worth more or less than another. The ruler needs all four guidelines to steer the people. Indeed, when taken together, they are of equal importance to the Way. Failing to establish the four guidelines equals lacking the Way, which ultimately leads to one's downfall.

In sum, the four guidelines complement the Way as the cornerstones of the Ancient *Wenzi*. The Ancient *Wenzi*'s evaluation of the four terms, especially humaneness, righteousness

and propriety, differs markedly from the *Laozi*. In its oldest known form, the *Laozi* does not condemn humaneness, righteousness and propriety. In fact, the three *Laozi* bamboo manuscripts discovered in the Guodian tomb, which was sealed before 278 BCE, hardly mention humaneness, righteousness and propriety at all.³⁷ Criticism of these notions appears to have been introduced into the text after the Guodian tomb was closed, most likely in response to growing importance attached to these notions by other thinkers, especially those in the Confucian line of thought. In the early Former Han dynasty, when the Ancient *Wenzi* was likely created, the *Laozi* already included this anti-Confucian polemic. Indeed, the two *Laozi* silk manuscripts discovered in the Mawangdui tomb, closed in 168 BCE, open with the passage that is now *Laozi* 38, on the regression of humaneness, righteousness and propriety. The Ancient *Wenzi* adopts the conceptual framework offered by this new polemical *Laozi*, that is, it mentions the four guidelines in the same succession, but distances itself from the *Laozi*'s harsh rhetoric. Instead, it subscribes to the contemporaneous positive appraisals of humaneness, righteousness and propriety, so as not to affront fellow-thinkers who advocate these notions, while adapting their conceptual meaning according to its own persuasion. In so doing, the Ancient *Wenzi* promotes ideas that run counter to the *Laozi*, its primary source. The most striking example in this respect is propriety. The *Laozi* rejects propriety as the lowest of all qualities, claiming that it “stands at the head rebellions” (亂之首), but the Ancient *Wenzi* asserts the very opposite: if the ruler “lacks propriety, those below him will rebel” (無禮則下亂).

3.3 Sageness and Wisdom

In addition to the Way and the four guidelines, another pair of terms is required for a successful rule: “sageness” (*sheng* 聖) and “wisdom” (*zhi* 智). The Ancient *Wenzi* discusses sageness and wisdom in parallel arguments, a discussion that now survives on six bamboo fragments and, in modified form, in section 5.5 of the received text:

文子問聖智。老子曰：聞而知之，聖也[#0896/1193]，見而知之，智也。聖人嘗聞[#0803]禍福所生而擇其道，智者嘗見禍福[#1200]成形而擇其行[#0765]，聖人知天道吉凶，故知禍福所生，智者先見成形[#0834]，故知禍福之門。聞未生聖也，先見成[#0711]形智也，無聞見者，愚迷。

Wenzi asked about sageness and wisdom. Laozi answered: “To hear something and recognize it is sageness. To see something and recognize it is wisdom. The sagely man constantly hears where fortune and misfortune appear and adjusts his way accordingly. The wise man constantly sees fortune and misfortune taking shape and adjusts his conduct accordingly. The sagely man recognizes the good and ill portents of Heaven’s Way and therefore knows where fortune and misfortune appear.

37 The status of the three Guodian bamboo manuscripts remains the subject of debate (see: Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams, *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China, 2000), 142–146.). For present purposes, I jointly refer to the three manuscripts as “Guodian *Laozi*”, to distinguish them from later versions (Mawangdui, Heshanggong, Wang Bi and others). Notably, humaneness and righteousness occur in *Laozi* 5, 8, 18, 19 and 38; propriety in *Laozi* 31 and 38. The Guodian *Laozi* lacks 8 and 38. Guodian *Laozi* A contains what is now *Laozi* 5, but without the famous statement against humaneness. Guodian *Laozi* A also contains *Laozi* 19, but instead of humaneness and righteousness, it fulminates against other notions. (See Allan and Williams, *The Guodian Laozi*, 160–161.) In the Guodian *Laozi*, humaneness and righteousness are only mentioned in the equivalent of *Laozi* 18, which claims that they appear after the Way has been rejected. Propriety occurs once, in the Guodian *Laozi* C equivalent of *Laozi* 31, which mentions it in a combination, not as a distinct term in its own right.

The wise man foresees their taking shape and therefore knows the gate to fortune or misfortune. To hear what has not yet appeared is sageness. To foresee something taking shape is wisdom. Those who lack both hearing and sight are stupid and confused.”

These are the corresponding strips (#0896/1193, #0803, #1200, #0765, #0834, #0711):

知。”平王曰：“何謂聖知？”文子曰：“聞而知之聖也

wisdom.” King Ping asked: “What is meant by sageness and wisdom?” Wenzi answered: “To hear something and recognize it is sageness.

知也。故聖者聞//

is wisdom. Therefore, the sagely man hears

而知擇道。知者見禍福

and knows how to adjust the way. The wise man sees fortune and misfortune

[刑]，而知擇行，故聞而知之，聖也。

shape and knows how to adjust conduct. Therefore, to hear something and recognize it is sageness.

知也成刑（形）者，可見而

is knowledge. That which takes shape can be seen and

未生，知者見成

has not yet appeared. The wise man sees [things] taking

The terms sageness and wisdom gained currency at an early stage in the development of Chinese thought. The *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) mentions them, but never in conjunction. They occur together in texts such as the *Mencius* 孟子, the *Xunzi* 荀子 and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). The most exhaustive elaboration on sageness and wisdom, however, occurs in the *Essay on the Five Conducts*. This text advocates the development of human character through the cultivation of five forms of proper conduct, and it regards sageness and wisdom as the highest forms of conduct.³⁸

The *Five Conducts* is in many ways analogous to the *Wenzi*. Both juxtapose sageness and wisdom, relate them to hearing and sight, and regard them as extra sensitive forms of sensory perception. Sageness is no ordinary form of hearing, but full awareness of what one hears; wisdom, no ordinary seeing, but full awareness of what one sees. Both texts express this idea with the phrases: “to hear something and recognize it is sageness” (聞而知之，聖也) and “to see something and recognize it is wisdom” (見而知之，智也). But there are also differences.

In the *Five Conducts*, sageness and wisdom refer to the worthy man and to the way of the gentleman. To see a worthy man is called “clarity of sight” (*ming* 明), but to actually recognize him as such is called wisdom. To hear the way of the gentleman is called “sharpness of hearing” (*cong* 聰), but to actually recognize it as such is called sageness. Hence, those who have internalized and harmonized sageness and wisdom develop the means to recognize worthies and gentlemen, which eventually results in proper moral conduct.

In the Ancient *Wenzi*, on the other hand, sageness and wisdom refer to fortune and misfortune, two terms that are crucial to the Ancient *Wenzi* but absent from the *Five Conducts*. Fortunate and unfortunate events can be perceived through ordinary hearing or sight, but

38 For more on the *Essay of the Five Conducts*, see Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

those who perceive them through sageness and wisdom reach a deeper awareness. Ordinary people, using plain hearing and sight, perceive instances of fortune and misfortune only after they have appeared, when it is too late. They notice a horse gone missing only after it has bolted. Sageness and wisdom perceive fortune and misfortune earlier than that. Wisdom is to foresee fortune and misfortune, that is: to see event y that leads to result z . Sageness is to forehear fortune and misfortune, that is: to hear portent x that leads to event y that leads to result z . To continue the analogy, wisdom allows one to perceive a horse that is about to bolt, just in time to prevent it from doing so, whereas sageness makes one recognize the stable's open doors as a stimulus for the horse to run off.

In the Ancient *Wenzī* (that is, in the original version of the bamboo manuscript, not in the modified version of the received text, where Laozi answers a question of his disciple Wenzī), this exposition on sageness and wisdom is offered as advice to a ruler, King Ping, emphasizing their function in the political domain. The primary concern of the text is how to avert misfortune and ensure fortune. Ordinary rulers notice fortune and misfortune only after the event. They perceive foreign invasions or internal uprisings only once they are well under way. The ruler who masters wisdom sees increasing numbers of enemy troops at his borders or skirmishes and conflicts taking place in his realm, and thus perceives an impending invasion or revolution as it is building up. The ruler who masters sageness hears the invasion or revolution before enemy soldiers or local conflicts have started to appear, and is thus able to prevent even the very precursors of the crisis.

In sum, the Ancient *Wenzī*, a Former Han text, may have borrowed the notions of sageness and wisdom and the two parallel phrases (“to hear something ...”) from the *Five Conducts* or a related text, but it changed their conceptual content. It ignores the original moral connotations of sageness and wisdom (as the highest forms of conduct) and, instead, it promotes them as extra sensitive forms of sensory perception of great importance in the socio-political realm. In so doing, the Ancient *Wenzī* challenges the *Laozī*'s evaluation of these notions. Similar to humaneness, righteousness and propriety, the *Laozī* in its earliest form does not denounce sageness and wisdom. In fact, the three Guodian manuscripts hardly mention sageness and wisdom at all.³⁹ In the early Han dynasty, as evidenced by the two silk manuscripts of Mawangdui, the *Laozī* already rejects the two terms. *Laozī* 19, the same chapter that condemns humaneness and righteousness, urges the reader to “exterminate sageness and discard wisdom” (絕聖棄智); and *Laozī* 65 criticizes those who “use wisdom to govern the realm” (以智治國) for being “thieves of the realm” (國之賊). Notably, the Ancient *Wenzī* not only reserves the term “thieves of the world” (天下之賊) for “those who occupy the throne while lacking the Way” (毋道立者), as I have shown earlier, but it also suggests that those who lack sageness and wisdom are ignorant. In other words, by the time when the *Laozī* had reached a standardized form, full of anti-Confucian polemic, the Ancient *Wenzī* reverts the *Laozī*'s harsh rhetoric and ascribes positive functions to sageness and wisdom.

39 The content of what is now *Laozī* 65, with its pronounced anti-wisdom sentiments, is absent from the Guodian manuscripts; and while Guodian *Laozī* A contains the content of what is now *Laozī* 19, it fulminates against what modern scholars interpret as “scholarly rhetoric”, not against sageness and wisdom. See Allan and Williams, *The Guodian Laozi*, 61, 66–67, 151.

4 Historical Context

As I have shown in section 2, recent analyses of the transcribed bamboo strips, by Wang Bo and Zhang Fengqian, among others, suggest that the Ancient *Wenzi* was probably authored in the early stages of the Former Han dynasty. A more precise date is difficult to establish, because the fragmentary status of the source material does not allow full view of the original text. Hence, to make further statements about the date or context of the Ancient *Wenzi* is to enter the realm of speculation. But with no other options left, even speculation can be useful.

According to historiographical treatises such as *Shiji* 史記 and *Hanshu* 漢書, the first decades of the Former Han witnessed major debates on the course the new dynasty had to take. In particular the period that spans the reigns of Emperor Wen 漢文帝 (r. 179–157 BCE), Emperor Jing 漢景帝 (r. 156–141 BCE) and the beginning of Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (r. 140–87 BCE), was marked by fierce conflict between court officials who advocated a quietist, non-interventionist style of government and those who were in favour of launching campaigns against the Xiongnu 匈奴, demanding the loyalty of Han-enseffed feudal kings and reducing the power of rich merchant families and landowners.⁴⁰ If the Ancient *Wenzi* were composed against the background of these debates—which, I believe, is not unlikely in view of its content—it appears to subscribe to the first stance, that of the non-interventionists.

As my analysis of key terms in the Ancient *Wenzi* shows, the Way is seen as the guiding principle in government. The good ruler emulates the Way of Heaven, which means he should not strive to be grand, powerful, and so on, but humbly and respectfully aim to be weak and small. If he succeeds, strength and growth will come by themselves, just like a river grows through the voluntary contribution of water from tributaries. The people will submit to the ruler if he governs them on the basis of moral. If he implements virtue, humaneness, righteousness and propriety, his inferiors will follow orders and care for one another, they will be fair and honest, honourable and reverent, and will not contend, or so the Ancient *Wenzi* says. Hence, even without the ruler's coercion, they will follow him of their own accord. The non-interventionist policies of the Ancient *Wenzi* are also displayed by terms such as non-purposive action and preserving quietude, which play important roles in the text. In fact, if the ruler possesses sagemess and wisdom, the Ancient *Wenzi* suggests, he does not need to intervene, for he can foresee and forehear the portents of misfortunate events, and thus prevent even the very precursors of any crisis.

The Ancient *Wenzi* promotes this quietist message in the form of a dialogue between King Ping and Wenzi. I believe that in its supposed historical context, neither the discursive structure nor the names of the interlocutors are a coincidence.

Given that *ping* 平 carries the literal meaning of “peace” and that *wen* 文 in its meaning of “civility” is often placed in opposition to *wu* 武, “martiality”, even the names of the two protagonists possibly reflect the non-interventionist stance of the text. Although King Ping probably refers to the first ruler of the Eastern Zhou dynasty, the appearance of his otherwise unknown advisor called Wenzi may add an extra dimension, for their names possibly represent important values of the text.

40 In *Shiji* and *Hanshu*, members of these factions are referred to as “Huang-Lao 黃老” and “Ru 儒”, respectively. For a discussion of their debates, see Hans van Ess, “The Meaning of Huang-Lao in *Shiji* and *Hanshu*,” *Études chinoises* 12.2 (1993): 161–177.

The dialogue between King Ping and Wenzi is no real discussion. The former hardly enters into debate, but merely offers new topics for which the latter provides a definition. This format, which resembles a catechism, enables the author of the text to promote large numbers of known terms, take them out of their original contexts and give them a new meaning. He borrows terms from earlier texts, but does not simply subscribe to their meaning. Instead, while subscribing to their emotive value, he changes their conceptual meanings, so that they suit his own agenda. Notably, the text always offers positive definitions: it says what a term is, not what it is not. This possibly indicates a sense of carefulness on behalf of its author. He does not confront possible opponents, saying that their interpretation of a term is wrong, but positively and authoritatively presents his interpretations of terms as universal and objective truths.

While the text is mainly influenced by the *Laozi*, its rhetorical strategy is entirely different. The *Laozi*, as it was known in the Former Han dynasty, rejects terms that were praised by others, such as humaneness, righteousness and wisdom. The Ancient *Wenzi* incorporates these terms into its quietist worldview, but without confronting others offers its own definitions.

In the Former Han, especially during the fierce political debates outlined earlier, being out of favour could cost one one's life. The author's choice of this peculiar discursive structure to express his politico-philosophical views might suggest that he had to operate cautiously, perhaps out of fear for ending up on the wrong side of imperial favour. The fact that the author of the Ancient *Wenzi* hides behind the pseudonym of Wenzi and chooses the historical setting of a Zhou king and his advisor to present his views, possibly bespeaks the same watchfulness.