

Rudolf G. WAGNER, *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*. Albany: State University of New York Press 2003. 261 S. ISBN 0791453324. US-\$ 27,95.

Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) is probably the most famous commentator of the *Laozi* 老子. He is also arguably the best-known exponent of the Xuanxue 玄學 intellectual movement that had its heyday during the Zhengshi 正始 period (240–249). During his short life, Wang wrote commentaries on important philosophical texts, along with a number of what can be considered treatises that explain his philosophies. In *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*, Professor Rudolf G. Wagner draws from across Wang Bi's works—especially his commentaries—to analyze Wang's thought as systematic philosophy. The eponymous foci of the discussion are language, ontology, and political thought; each is the subject of one of the three chapters. By leading the reader on a winding path through Wang Bi's various writings, Wagner gives us an interesting picture of this consummate commentator: a scholar and thinker whose works describe an independent and unique philosophical project, even while ostensibly explaining the meaning of others' works.

Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China is one volume of Wagner's trilogy focusing on Wang Bi and the *Laozi*. The first was *Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2000). The other is an English translation and analysis, *A Chinese Reading of the Daode jing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi with Critical Text and Translation* (Albany: State University of New York Press 2003). This review treats *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China* exclusively.

Wagner's first chapter deals with what are—on the surface, anyway—problems of language. Wagner's first step is to select a limited group of texts that antedate Wang Bi. From these, Wagner extracts some core ideas about language, particularly the incapacity of language to describe sages and the Way. These ideas are those that Wagner believes available to Wang Bi. Since notions about the inexpressible nature of sages and the Way are commonplace in early Chinese philosophical works, there is not much unique to Wang Bi here. Wagner divides such thinking into two broad groups: the first found in texts like the *Analects (Lunyu 論語)*: „There is a consensus across these texts that the Dao of the Sages cannot be simply expressed in language“ (10). The second group takes the „Radical Position,“ exemplified in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* 莊子, that „there is no way at all to 'transmit' the content of this (sagely) thinking through words and writing“ (14). Wagner discusses at length the intellectual methodologies developed to deal with these problematics, and includes numerous examples from a variety of pre-Wang Bi sources.

All of this leads up to the real meat of the book: Wang Bi's thought. In Wagner's presentation, the question for Wang Bi concerning language comes down to „the inability of cognition and language to 'name,' that is, define, the Way of the Sage“ (56). The reader learns that, for Wang Bi, this inexpressibility results not from a shortcoming of language per se, but rather from „the ontological difference between the 'That-by-which' of the ten thousand kinds of entities and these ten thousand kinds of entities themselves“ (60).

This disability would seem to present a problem to a commentator, whose stock in trade is the written word. Through explanation and example, Wagner shows the methods Wang Bi developed for analysis of what Wagner calls the „Confucius texts,“ the *Lunyu*,

Zhou yi 周易, and *Laozi* (56). In particular, Wagner shows that Wang developed a language, mindset, and methodology that he deployed in his discussion and exegesis of the „Confucius texts.“ Through his methodology and the reasoning that underpins it, Wang „saves the bequests of the Sages as all-important philosophic sources“ (79). In other words, Wang develops a line of philosophical inquiry and reasoning that maintains the ability of a person to read the „Confucius texts“ as meaningful texts, and to glean from them indicators of the Way, notwithstanding the shortcomings of language.

Wagner's second chapter addresses questions of ontology. For Wang Bi, there is one „relevant question, namely, the necessary features of the ‘That-by-which,’ *suoyi* 所以, the ten thousand kinds of entities are“ (88). Wagner holds that Wang uses logical reasoning to analyze this ontological question and its attendant problems, using reason instead of argument to authority. The focus on logical reasoning is a shift away from the classics—and the exegeses of the various schools—as authorities in and of themselves. Wang's sole a priori assumption concerns the myriad things of the world, which says, „Their common ‘That-by-which,’ ... must by necessity lack all their specific features, that is, forms and names“ (93).

In Wagner's presentation, the structure that Wang Bi develops for his ontology is primarily binary: one / many, „material entities“ (*wu* 物) / „processual entities“ (*shi* 事), shapes (*xing* 形) / names (*ming* 名), being / not-being, and so on (100). Of course, Wang Bi did not invent these binary divisions, but Wagner tells us that he was „the first to integrate them into a coherent system“ (101). His focus is on the „That-by-which“ of these binary groups, especially between one and many—i.e., how they relate to and affect each other. Wagner discusses in some detail and with numerous examples the specific ways that Wang Bi describes and systematizes these relationships. Of particular interest and importance is the binary opposition of being and not-being, the way in which „negativity“ enables „usefulness“ (135). It is in this context that we see the significance of *xuan* 玄, translated by Wagner as „the Dark,“ for Wang Bi. Although mysterious, *xuan* is not to be seen as an unfortunate property of the universe. Instead, like the shortcomings of language, it is a „necessary and constitutive feature of the That-by-which“ (144).

The third chapter of Wagner's book concerns Wang Bi's political thought, and is the strongest and most concrete of the three. In many ways, this is the climax of the book, and it is in the third chapter Wagner shows how Wang Bi brings together his ideas in order to apply them to actual problems. It is not surprising that the most interesting and important aspects of Wagner's discussion fall in this chapter; as Wagner writes, „The political application of his philosophic inquiry was not extraneous to Wang Bi's project but was its driving force“ (210). Furthermore, Wagner argues, „The development of a political theory out of the *Laozi* that can be applied to and translated into practical policies must be considered one of Wang Bi's main intellectual contributions“ (202).

Wang Bi's political thought primarily concerns problems of rulership, the relationship of the single ruler to the many members of his populace. In Wagner's presentation, the essential question for Wang Bi is how to bring order to the disordered state. The source of this disorder is a lord that does not comprehend the situation of rule. The solution is a lord that comprehends and acts accordingly, modeling the Way and its „negativity“ in his acts as ruler.

As one might expect from a thinker so closely associated with the *Laozi*, the acts in question are actually „non-acts.“ „The Sage Ruler operates with the pointed non-use of those very instruments he is authorized, and expected, to use“ (193). There might appear

to be a contradiction in this conceptualization, for non-action seems non-productive, and not necessarily especially noticeable. „Wang Bi finds the solution to this paradox by separating the ruler's institutional position from his public performance“ (202). Thus, the „Sage Ruler“ should publicly perform these non-actions, unceasingly modeling the Way and thus bringing the whole of the realm into a self-sustaining order. Wang Bi demonstrates the application of negativity in politics, and offers both specific examples and general principles for rulers.

There is much of interest in Wagner's book. Wang Bi is often original, insightful, and illuminating in his discussions, and Wagner brings much of that to this work. One of the most compelling assertions of this book is that commentary, properly read, can convey complex philosophical ideas. Indeed, it is somewhat disappointing that so little has been done before now to extract the philosophical interpretations embedded within the commentaries by scholars in early and medieval China. I applaud Wagner for his appreciation of this point. His extended treatment of one commentator's work proves that consideration of the philosophical ideas contained within commentary can be significant enough to warrant extended discussion, and also available for reconstitution from their fragmented state by an intelligent reader. While Wagner is not the first reader to treat Wang Bi (even in western language), his nuanced consideration of Wang's philosophy in conjunction with the *Laozi* and other texts is a contribution toward due appreciation for the true intellectual depths of commentary generally, and for Wang Bi specifically.¹

In the summary above, I focused on the main points of Wang Bi's thought as presented by Wagner. However, there is something of a sub-plot running throughout the book: that of Wang Bi's commentarial and philosophical techniques, especially how he drew from other texts and other chapters in his commentary on the *Laozi*. Wagner spends a lot of space discussing not only what Wang Bi thought, but also how he developed and expressed his ideas. Since method is an important part of Wang Bi's project, this sub-plot is both relevant and interesting for those interested dealing with his work. It is also fascinating as a work of intellectual history. Only through intellectual archaeology like Wagner's we can begin to understand how people in ancient China developed ideas. This book is a step toward understanding one person's way (or Way) of thinking, and for that is extremely valuable.

Wagner is at his best when writing a sort of meta-commentary on Wang Bi's writings, teasing out the important threads of argument and tracing them through both Wang Bi's works and those classics from which Wang drew to develop his ideas. Since much of Wang's writing is commentary, it is fragmentary; Wagner ably brings together these pieces to reveal Wang's ideas. In the cases where Wang uses a citation as part of his commentary, Wagner's identification of those citations is helpful in developing an understanding of Wang Bi's thought. The threads of Wang Bi's argument are not always easy to follow, even when set next to each other. Wagner is helpful when he tells the reader not only that two passages are related, but also what exactly the relationship is, and how it functions.

1 Some other examples include: Alan Kam-leung CHAN: *Two Visions of the Way: a Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-Shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-Tzu*. Albany: State University of New York Press 1991; Ariane RUMP, in collaboration in Wing-tsit CHAN (transl.): *Commentary on the Lao Tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1979; and Paul J. LIN, (transl.): *Tao te ching: A Translation of Lao Tzu's Tao te ching and Wang Pi's Commentary*. Ann Arbor : Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan 1977.

However, a great weakness of Wagner's presentation is the lack of clear definition and contextualization. The reader learns that Wang Bi was an adherent of Xuanxue, which Wagner renders, „Scholarly Exploration of the Dark.“ Wagner gives no cohesive definition of Xuanxue, nor a clear picture of what this school of thought was, believed, or did. Though Wagner states that his work „does not attempt to give a summary treatment of Xuanxue,“ surely some degree of clear definition is called for, even if a full summary is avoided (4). Wang Bi was not the only adherent of Xuanxue, and a discussion of other adherents and their views would flesh out the picture of this difficult-to-understand philosophical movement and Wang Bi's relationship to it.

Similarly, Wagner does not always provide a clear definition of the complex and multi-faceted concepts and terminology he uses. The term „ontology“ is a good example. Wagner notes in his discussion of the work of Tang Yongtong 湯用彤 that Tang does not clearly explain what he means by ontology (87). Wagner also acknowledges that ontology is not completely apposite as a description of Wang Bi's project. Nevertheless, Wagner neither provides detailed analysis of the strong points or shortcomings of this terminology nor offers any alternative (147).

Wagner also gives little by way of contextualization. He repeatedly refers to those scholars with whom Wang Bi disagreed, but does not give any details of the disagreements. He mentions alternate interpretations of the *Laozi* only in the most cursory fashion (212). Providing such contrast would help the reader understand the significance of Wang Bi's exegeses.² If we are to accept that Wang Bi was philosophically innovative to a high degree, we should know precisely how Wang Bi's project and methods differ from those of his forerunners and contemporaries.

Similarly, Wagner does not give significant attention to the ways in which Wang's ideas echoed those of earlier thinkers, except insofar as such thought is contained within the *Lunyu*, „Xi ci“ 池繫 of the *Zhouyi*, or *Laozi* itself. For example, Wagner writes (211):

Wang Bi's summary of the *Laozi* comes as the highly condensed paradox of the law of the negative opposite:

Emulating the root (by way) of bringing to rest the stem and branches (growing from it)—that is all! 崇本息末而已矣.

This statement is doubtless interesting and important in the context of Wang's reading of the *Laozi*. However, the focus on „root“ matters and corresponding denigration of „branch“ matters is a much-discussed theme of political thought before Wang Bi.³ Surely it is significant that Wang Bi phrased his „summary“ in terms often used by earlier thinkers; any differences between Wang Bi's deployment and that of his predecessors should be grist for discussion, not cause for disregard. Acknowledging relevant antecedents might run the risk of showing Wang Bi to be less than a totally revolutionary thinker. But such acknowledgement could only improve a reader's understanding and appreciation for Wang's philosophical and commentarial project and its real import.

2 This should be separate and different from „Wang Bi's polemics against what he considers systematic misconstructions of the *Laozi*...“; WAGNER, 79. WAGNER, 227, note 126, gives the reader one reference to „various strategies used by commentators in reading *Laozi* 11,“ in another of his books, but the lack is felt throughout the book under discussion.

3 One example among the many might be Jia Yi 賈誼 (200–168 BC), who advocates just this shift, from „branch“ to „root,“ in many of his writings; see, e.g., the „Gui wei“ 瑰瑋 chapter of the *Xin shu* 新書, *Sbby*, 3.3b–5a.

There are a number of places in his book where Wagner makes passing mention of ideas that seem to merit fuller consideration. One example is the label given to the group of texts that Wang Bi commented on, which Wagner calls „Confucius texts“; these are the *Lunyu*, *Zhou yi*, and *Laozi*. This assessment of the *Lunyu* is obvious; for the *Zhou yi*, it is understandable; but, for the *Laozi*, it is a bit surprising—after all, Confucius is not mentioned in the quintessential „Daoist“ text. In pre-emptive response to this question, Wagner writes, „Each one of the Confucius texts—and all three were read by Wang Bi as such...“ (56). Wagner's aside seems to acknowledge the surprise a reader might feel upon learning that the *Laozi* is a „Confucius text.“ But despite this acknowledgement, Wagner never explains how or why Wang Bi reads *Laozi* like this—and it seems a most relevant question indeed. I can imagine some reasons why Wang Bi might read the *Laozi* as a „Confucius text,“ but the lack of explanation on the part of Wagner leaves me unsatisfied.

For another example, Wagner brings Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) into his discussion in a very few places, e.g.: „Wang Bi develops this thought in his fresh commentary to *Laozi* 5.1 into a structure recalling Leibniz' *praestabilirte Harmonie*“ (109). Wagner's discussion of Leibniz lacks even a first name, to say nothing of citation and even less of a cogent discussion of Leibniz' subtle metaphysical concepts.⁴ The differences and similarities of thought between this Christian metaphysician and Wang Bi are by no means simple and straightforward. If an author wishes to mention complex ideas like these, it seems that a fuller consideration is in order. If mention is merely a point of interest, surely it can be elided in favor of straightforward statements about Wang Bi, or relegated to a footnote.

The book is well-produced overall, with a minimum of typos; most of the typos present are in the Chinese texts. This book joins in the unfortunate general trend away from thorough copy-editing, and sketchy punctuation and convoluted syntax creep in. Some of the Chinese texts are included with the translations, but only in unpunctuated fragments. One praiseworthy aspect of the production is the volume's reasonable cost. The State University of New York Press is to be commended for their ongoing attention to publishing affordable scholarly works on sinological topics. This allows students and scholars to purchase books for personal use, and to not be forced to rely only on library collections and photocopies. Theirs is a positive example for all academic publishers.

Charles Sanft, Münster

4 It seems possible, though unlikely, that „Leibniz' monadology“ on page 10 is an error for „Leibniz' *Monadology*.“ Even if this is the case, citation information, etc., is still missing.