

Chapter 1

Discerning the That-by-Which: The Language of the *Laozi* and the *Lunyu*

A PLEA FOR A HISTORY OF UNDERSTANDING

Many decades ago, Feng Youlan suggested dividing the history of Chinese philosophy into two great ages—the age of the philosophers, *zixue shidai* 子學時代, which lasted until Liu An (d. 122 B.C.E.), the Prince of Huainan, and the age of the study of the classics, *jingxue shidai* 經學時代, which he saw beginning with Dong Zhongshu (176–104 B.C.E.) and ending with Kang Youwei (1858–1927). Few would doubt the importance of the early Han shift in Chinese philosophy, even while disagreeing with Feng Youlan’s lumping the entire remainder of Chinese philosophy into a single category because, as he said, “there was no other basic change with regard to politics, the economy, and society.”¹ He set these two stages up on a then-current model of European history of philosophy in which the short age of the philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle is said to be followed by the long centuries of scholasticism. He then transferred a common disdain for European scholastic thinking, that it mostly “poured new wine into the old bottles,” to the Chinese tradition of commentaries to the classics, which thus came under the general heading of secondhand thinking. China, however, failed to move early on to the third and very innovative phase of Western philosophy that began with Descartes, and did so only when confronted with Western post-Cartesian thinking.

Feng thus imported a very particular view of the history of European philosophy developed mostly in the Protestant countries, which stressed

urtext and originality to the detriment of orthodox (“Catholic”) tradition and commentary. In a direct transfer of these orientalist presumptions, Feng Youlan’s age of the study of the classics thus only “poured new wine into old bottles,” and therefore it deserved less attention. Feng Youlan thus devotes one volume to the 300-plus years of the age of philosophers, and one to the 2,000-odd years of the latter age. In this view, Chinese thinking during the latter age was second hand and ephemeral in nature. Evidence is the subordination of philosophy under the classics of old that is manifest in the preferred form of this age, the commentary.

Seeing the beginning of this second age mostly in terms of a politically enforced orthodoxy, neither Feng Youlan nor later prominent historians of Chinese philosophy have pondered the historical pessimism written into the shift between the two ages or the change in mentalité that this involved. Perhaps because of this imported devaluation of the second age, comparatively few serious studies on philosophers of this second period have appeared that have focused on their relationship to the classics. And while we have, since the beginning of the twentieth century, been flooded with Chinese “histories” of just about everything from literature to eclipses of the sun, even a simple history of Chinese commentary literature has not been written, not to mention such pressing studies as a history of understanding, of hermeneutics, or of the change in the mentalité of the class of scholars who would spend their lives understanding and making understood not the world, Being, or their own thoughts but the obscure messages left behind by others, whom they elevated to the unattainable rank of Sages.

Such studies would move beyond the anecdotal evidence collected by scholars such as Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞² (1850–1908) on the history of the study of the classics, beyond the constructs of linear development of the commentary form, as presented by Ishida Kōdō 石田公道,³ and beyond the few abstract quotations about the hidden meaning of the classics and the way to handle them assembled by Feng Youlan himself, and more recently by Yu Dunkang 余敦康.⁴ They would join in the large project once begun, and not continued, by Kaga Eiji 加賀榮治,⁵ actually studying the commentaries and related writings, their craft, their implied assumptions, and their explicit philosophy.

Focusing, as I do in this book, on a commentator of the *Laozi* who is not only already part of a long history of commentaries but also engages in some lively trade and polemics with his predecessors, I am thus forced to provide a sketch of this historical background in the full awareness and ardent hope that some scholar better equipped for this task will quickly make this portrayal obsolete with a full and reasoned study.

Instead of a dilettante outline of a history of understanding, which also would involve solving problems of textual dating, I shall present the tradi-

tion through the perspective of Wang Bi himself. He was not a historian of philosophy but a philosopher. The options presented by various earlier texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, the *Laozi*, the *Lunyu*, or the *Zhouyi* did not enter his intellectual universe in a sequential, or possibly even a logical, historical order but simultaneously as options of thinking, and possible solutions to philosophic problems. I shall therefore try a systematic exposition of those options definitely known and pondered by him or likely to have been at his disposal. Into the first category I would put texts such as the *Lunyu*, *Laozi*, *Zhouyi*, *Zhuangzi*, *Chunqiu*, and *Zuozhuan*, to which he refers explicitly and which were part of the curriculum of educated youths at the time; into the second, I would put texts such as the *Wenzi*, *Huainanzi*, or *Yinwenzi*, which in great likelihood were present in his own library and read by him, but where it can only be inferred that he knew them from allusions and an occasional unmarked quotation.

THE CONSENSUS: THE INEFFABILITY OF THE SAGE'S THINKING

The Master said: "Writing does not fully express what is said. What is said does not fully express what is thought." 書不盡言 言不盡意。⁶

This famous, often-quoted statement from the *Xici* is not a general statement about the inequities of the written and spoken language. It is followed by a question: "Is one accordingly unable to see the thinking of the Sages?" 然則聖人之意 其不可見乎. Thus the "what is thought," *yi* 意, of the Master's phrase refers to the thinking of the Sages. The "Sages" are a very limited number of individuals whose appearance must be counted as a world event. They qualify for this category by virtue of their insight into the ultimate things that make for the order of the universe, hence, of society, often referred to by the general name of "Dao." This insight, the "Master"—that is, Confucius, who himself is seen as the last of these Sages—says, cannot be fully expressed in spoken language, which in turn cannot be fully expressed in written characters.⁷

Wang Baoxuan has justly pointed out that this statement by the Master is not the actual argument but in the context of the *Xici* passage only affirms a commonly accepted truth.⁸ The actual argument comes after this passage and deals with the devices used by the *Zhouyi* to circumvent

the problem of language and writing. It will be dealt with later. In a more explicit translation, the Master's statement thus reads:

The Master said: “[It is true that] writing does not fully express what is said [by the Sages about the Dao], and that what is [thus] said does not fully express what is thought [by the Sages about the Dao].”

Merely reaffirming a commonly held assumption, the *Xici* passage does not have to give a reason for this ineptitude of the spoken and the written word. The same is true for the *Laozi*. The statements again are well known. As to the Way, the *Laozi* says (in Wang Bi's reading), “A way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way” [1.1]. And the *Laozi* 41 ends with the blunt statement: “The Way is hidden and nameless.” The *Laozi* repeats the description of the Way as *wu ming* 無名, “nameless,” in 32.1: “The Eternal of the Way is Namelessness” 道常無名. In these statements, the difference made in the *Xici* between the written and the spoken language is blurred in the general term *ming* 名.

The Sages themselves are enabled by their knowledge of the Dao to perform the same role in society that the Dao performs in the cosmos as a whole. As a consequence, the trouble language has in dealing with the Dao is repeated in its dealing with the Sages. The *Lunyu* (in Wang Bi's reading) is quite explicit about language's inability to “name” and define the Sages. It quotes Confucius as saying:

Great indeed is Yao being the ruler! Immeasurable he is! Only Heaven is great, and only Yao was modelled after him. So boundless he [Yao] is, that none of the people were able to define him! 大哉堯之爲君也! 巍巍乎唯天爲大, 唯堯則之. 蕩乎民無能名焉.⁹

The term *great* here has the meaning of “absolute,” “beyond all measure,” and thus “indefinable.” The same is true for Heaven as for the Dao. Consequently, the Sage Yao, whose only measure is Heaven itself, is undefinable by means of language. So is Confucius in the eyes of his contemporary and later admirers. In Wang Bi's reading, *Lunyu* 9.2 begins:

A villager from Daxiang said: “Great indeed is Confucius. So widely learned is he that there is nothing [specific with which] to complete a definition [of him].” 大哉孔子博學而無所成名.¹⁰

Wang Bi comments: “[His being widely learned, but there being nothing with which to complete a definition of him] is like harmonious music that emerges out of the eight musical instruments, but the eight instruments are not its [the music’s] definition.” In this context, Confucius becomes undiscernible. He himself states as much: “There is no one to discern me 莫我知也夫,” and ends a description of himself with the words “as to discerning me, there is only Heaven!” 知我者其天乎.¹¹ True to the statement imputed to Lao Dan in the *Zhuangzi*, that “he who knows does not speak,” Confucius himself finally claims, “I want to be without words” 予欲無言, and he answers the shocked question of his students about what they were to transmit if he did not leave a verbalized teaching for them:

What words does Heaven make? The four seasons roll on and the hundred [kinds of] animals are born. What words does Heaven make?!¹²

From Wang Bi’s commentary to this passage, we see its pivotal importance for his understanding of the Sage’s communications. Wang Bi comments:

[Confucius’] saying “I want to be without words” means that he wishes to bring the root to light 明本 [that is,] to bring up the root and [thus] to encompass [all] branches [springing from it] 舉本統末 and thus show the Ultimate of the entities 示物之極. Were [he] to establish words and hand down teachings with the purpose of penetrating to the [true] nature [of entities], abuses [of these words and teachings] would end up by proliferating. Were [he] to rely on hints and to transmit instructions, the situations [in which they would be used] would end up by being vexatiously complex. Thus he is searching for the insuperable control that is in the Dao,¹³ and therefore he cultivates the root and discards the words and practices the transformation [of others] by modeling [himself] on Heaven.

Seen in the strictest terms, the “heart of Heaven and Earth” [mentioned in the *Zhouyi* hexagram Return, *fu* 復] becomes visible in [their] not speaking. As cold and warm [seasons] follow each other in due order the unspoken orders [of Heaven] are acted out in the four seasons. How would Heaven [as *Mengzi* 5A5 says,] “repeatedly [give orders]?”¹⁴

Wang Bi makes it clear that this statement by Confucius is a sigh of resignation. He might wish to make do without words, but in fact he talked

all day, and he knew he would have to. With the advantage of hindsight, Wang Bi can well argue that what has been made into “the teachings” of Confucius has suffered from the double jeopardy of whimsical interpretation and changing circumstances of application. Confucius continues talking and acting, well aware that language might be an unreliable medium of philosophic communication but accepting that it is irreplaceable. The statement is thus a warning by Confucius himself that his utterances should not be reified into some textbook teaching, and it is a guide showing the insightful how to read the Master’s words and acts. “Seen in the strictest terms” 以淳而觀, however, the real control 御 over the entities is achieved through not meddling, that is, not speaking.

For Wang Bi’s *Laozi*, the Sage who embodies the Dao also defies language. “If the Great [the Sage] is at the top, those below know [only] that he exists [but cannot define him]”¹⁵ 大上, 下知有之 [17.1]. “Those in antiquity who were well-versed in the Way were recondite and abstruse, so deep that they could not be discerned” 古之善爲道者微妙玄通深不可識 [15.1].

There is thus a consensus across these texts that the Dao of the Sages cannot be simply expressed in language. The classics are supposed to be aware of this problem and to be efforts of the Sages to circumvent the limits of language while continuing to make use of it.

THE RADICAL POSITION

The above-mentioned statements are defensive. They concede the impossibility of expressing the Sages’ thinking while proposing alternative strategies or being inserted into texts whose structure has to be viewed as such an alternative strategy. While the surviving sources do not seem to permit the reconstruction of the horizon of discussion within which these statements became defensive, some surviving passages in the *Zhuangzi*, possibly from a later age, maintain what might have been the original proposition about the ineffability of the Dao in a counterattack against well-established alternative strategies.

The first passage comes from a section in the “Tianyun” chapter 天運 in the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which Graham has grouped together into the “Dialogues of Lao Tan and Confucius”:

Confucius said to Old Dan: “I have studied the six classics, the Songs, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes, and Annals in my opinion for quite a while, and I am quite familiar with all their

details; with this knowledge, I introduced myself to seventy-two princes; discoursing about the Dao of the former kings, I threw light on the traces [left behind] by [the Dukes of] Zhou and Shao [in these classics], but not one prince saw anything he could snap up for his use. Really! Isn't it [because] the Dao is difficult to explain that people are hard to convince?¹⁶

The argument is “late” primarily in that it presupposes a previous discussion of the issue.¹⁷ The difficulties of getting access to the Way of the former Sages have already been experienced. The classics have already been described as a way to attain this access. The *Zhuangzi* passage takes issue with this form of access, which possibility is claimed primarily by the Ru, and it does so ironically by having the highest authority for the Ru, Confucius himself, declare his frustration with the effort. In this remark, Confucius defines the classics as the “traces” of the dukes of Zhou and Shao. What caused these traces is the “Dao of the former kings,” which the two dukes followed and thus encoded into the classics left behind. In his discourses for the princes, Confucius does not extrapolate this Dao of the former kings from the configurations of these traces but throws light on these available traces by making use of the Dao of the former kings. This presupposes that he knows the Dao of the former kings, and that this knowledge enables him to make these traces meaningful. It is not made clear whether he knows their Dao by being a Sage himself or as a result of his studying the classics, but evidently he intends eventually to make the classics the guidebooks from which the princes might “snap up things for use.” Although Confucius is thoroughly familiar with the classics, he somehow does not manage to convince the princes. Owing to the fact that although the “traces” are there, the Dao remains hard to explain, Laozi answered:

What luck that you did not meet a prince [setting out to] establish [true] order in the world [and trying to use you and your teaching for it]! Because the six classics are [but] the obsolete traces of the former kings—how should they be that by which these traces were made? 夫六經，先王之陳迹也，豈其所以迹哉 [Guo Xiang comments: “That by which the traces are made is the true nature [of beings]. As they [the former kings] relied on the true nature of the other beings, the traces of this are the six classics”]. Now what you are talking about [in holding forth on the classics] are still [just those] traces. Traces, however, are brought about by shoes; how could the traces be the shoes? 今子之所言猶迹也夫迹履之所出而迹豈履哉¹⁸

Laozi's statement describes the classics from two perspectives, their genesis and their decoding. They are, it is true, as Confucius calls them, the traces of the former kings. Confucius, however, made efforts to illuminate these traces to the point of providing the ruler with some accessible matter imbued with the Way. These efforts were frustrated, and Confucius even understood that the relationship between the Way of the former kings and the linguistic configuration of the traces they left in the classics was far less close than he had thought. Laozi picks up this thought and drives it to its natural conclusion. He maintains that what caused these traces, the practice of the former kings, is irretrievably gone. The traces are just *chen* 陳, "obsolete," like the obsolete and exhausted ether, *chen qi* 陳氣, which, according to the *Suwen* 素問, the sick person has to "push out" for the disease to be cured.¹⁹ The traces cannot operate as a pointer to something beyond themselves. By attaching himself in his own oral explanations to the written classics that he studied so meticulously, Confucius attached himself to the obsolete part of the event of the former kings, the empty tracks. The image chosen here by the *Zhuangzi* does not do justice to the passage. When Laozi says, "Traces, however, are brought about by shoes; how could the traces be the shoes?" he invites the thought that, in fact, much about the shoe can be discovered by a careful study of the traces. The Dao, however, is not a shoe, nor anything as neatly definable, and Laozi's description of the workings of the Dao immediately following this sentence makes this quite clear. We thus have to read the intention of this statement by Laozi against the words actually used in the statement. The passage accepts the claim that the classics are the traces of the Dao of the former kings, and it operates in the hierarchical sequence of written word/spoken word/meaning familiar from the *Xici*. But by arguing that this Dao is elusive, it denies the possibility of talking about those traces as a way of getting access to this Dao.

The second *Zhuangzi* passage also comes from a section in the outer chapters that Graham considers "related" to the inner chapters. It runs:

The [form] in which the world cherishes the Way is the written form 書. As the written form is nothing else but the spoken word [written down], it is the spoken word which has [in fact] something to be cherished. That which is cherished in the spoken word is the thinking 語之所貴者意也. Thinking has something it is about 意有所隨. What thinking is about cannot be transmitted by words 意之所隨不可以言傳也; but on account of that [object of thinking] the world cherishes the words [indicating the thinking] and transmits [them] in written form 而因世貴言傳書. Although the world cherishes them

[the written words], I still think they do not qualify for being cherished because their [the written words'] being cherished is not the cherishing of IT [that is, of what the thinking is about, namely, the Dao] 世雖貴之，我猶不足貴，爲其貴非其貴也。 That is why what can be seen when one looks at it is shape and color; what can be heard when one listens for it is name [spoken term] and [musical] tone. How sad that worldly people consider shape and color, name and tone sufficient to get a feeling for THAT [what the thinking is about]! 悲夫，世人以形色名聲爲足以得彼之情! As, however, shape and color, name and tone are definitely not sufficient to get a feeling of IT, “he who knows does not speak, and he who speaks does not know” [as the *Laozi* says in 56.1 and 56.2], and so how should the world [ever] learn about it?²⁰

Graham translates the key phrase 爲其貴非其貴也 “because what is valued in them is not what is valuable,”²¹ and Watson, “what the world takes as value is not real value.”²² Both agree in relating the two *qi* 其 to the same noun, namely, “words,” and attributing two different grammatical functions (verb and noun, respectively) and meanings to the two *gui* 貴. My own translation also assumes that the repetition of *qi gui* 其貴 is a play on words, but I assume that the two *qi* 其 refer to two different objects—the first to the written words, *shu* 書, with whom the entire argument started, and the second to what these ultimately are supposed to be about, the Dao. In this sense, “the cherishing of them [the *shu* 書] is not the cherishing of IT [the Dao].” In the preceding lines, the text made the argument that written characters only reproduce spoken words, which in their turn only refer to thinking, which itself refers to something unnamed and later called “THAT” 彼.

The argument of the text is not dealing with language in general but is directed against the attachment of the world to the written, verbalized, and thought forms of the Dao, which in fact “cannot be transmitted by spoken words [not to mention written characters].” The second part of the argument generalizes the first. We are not only dealing with language in all its specificity but with the objects of all the senses that again are characterized by specificity. This specific world altogether does “not qualify to get a feeling of THAT,” and therefore, “he who knows [about THAT] does not speak.”

The hierarchy written word/spoken word/thinking of the Sage, already familiar from the *Xici* passage quoted above, is here extended one further step with the argument that thinking is about something, which itself cannot be transmitted by words, a similar position to that found in

the previous passage, which also denied access to IT through the written traces of the former kings. While the *Xici* only argues that the thinking of the Sages cannot be exhaustively presented, *jin* 盡, through words, the two *Zhuangzi* passages quoted here maintain that there is no way at all to “transmit” the content of this thinking through words and writing. Strictly speaking, as he “who knows [about the Way of the Sages] does not speak,” “how should the world ever learn about it?”

The next passage directly follows the previous one, and the two are linked by their theme:

Duke Huan was reading a book on top of the hall; wheelwright Bian was chipping a wheel at the foot of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan: “May I ask whose words my lord is reading?” The Duke answered: “The words of the Sages.” “Are Sages still alive?” “They have already died.” “But then what you are reading are but the dregs of men of antiquity!” 古人之糟魄!

Duke Huan answered: “How can it be that a wheelwright criticizes my reading books? If you have an explanation you’ll get away with it; if not, you die.” Wheelwright Bian said: “Your subject sees it from the perspective of your subject’s business. If, in chipping a wheel, I am too slow, [the chisel] slides and does not grip. If I am too fast, it bites and won’t budge. Not too slow and not too fast, you’ve got it in your hand and it responds to the heart, my mouth cannot articulate it, there is a knack somewhere in the middle of all of this 有數存焉於其間. Your subject is unable to teach it [even] to your subject’s son, and your subject’s son also is unable to receive it [even] from your subject [his own father]. That is why I have been at work for seventy years always chipping wheels [without ever having myself replaced by my son]. The men of old died together with those things that could not be handed down. Thus what you are reading are just the dregs of the people of old.”²³

The key points of this conversation match the passages from the *Zhuangzi* that I have already quoted. The written form is but a sad record of the words spoken, only the “dregs” left from the Sages of antiquity, another expression for the “obsolete traces of the former kings.” Their Dao “cannot be handed down”; they took it into their graves. Still, like the wheelwright himself, the Sages had this Dao, and to attain it remains a distinct possibility, but it cannot be attained through the verbal mediation of teaching and learning, writing and reading. The only access to this Dao

is through the spiritual practice and exercise described in other passages and here for wheelwright Bian. These *Zhuangzi* passages see no possible access to the Way of the old Sages through the verbal dregs left behind in the classics.

This, however, is what Confucius and Duke Huan are trying to do in the *Zhuangzi* passages quoted above. The *Zhuangzi* mounts the most formidable polemic against this assumption by ridiculing attempts to extrapolate the Way of the former Sages from their sorry dregs, the classics, and by adding one more, ultimate layer of remoteness to the *Xici* list, what thinking is about. Still, the *Zhuangzi* argues against what was and remained to the end of the third century C.E. the common assumption, namely, that the classics (including the *Laozi*) were texts of a special kind coded in a highly sophisticated manner, which managed to purvey a glimpse of the Dao to those who knew how to read them.

DEVELOPING READING STRATEGIES

All three texts for which Wang Bi wrote his commentaries and outlines implicitly, explicitly, and repeatedly stress the inability of language and hence cognition to “name,” that is define, the last things.

The *Zhouyi* consists of two parts, the *jing* 經 and the *zhuan* 傳. The former contains the hexagrams with the *tuan* and *xiang* as well as the line statements, the latter, the commentaries appended to all of these statements and inserted into the main text by Wang Bi, as well as additional interpretive material such as the *Xici*, which remains in separate chapters. Generally speaking, the *jing* part is considered older and directly related to prognostication, while the *zhuan* are more interpretive and philosophical.²⁴ As a communication construct, the *Zhouyi* makes ample use of nonverbal devices, whether graphic/structural (hexagrams, trigrams) or relational (lines, their positions, and the dynamics of their relationship). The wording used to explain the meaning of the different clusters is grammatically and terminologically diffuse, seemingly full of allusion and metaphor. Its particular meaning is established in a complex interplay with the nonverbal structural context of the hexagram or line to which a given statement refers. At the same time, the statements are firm and definite enough to evoke the impression of systematic thinking of an impenetrable depth. The silent structure and the textual surface of the *Zhouyi* can both be read as an implicit commentary on the insufficient potential of verbal and/or written communication and as explorations of alternative and more complex forms of expression. The actual use of these devices thus suggests an implicit theory about the limits of language in dealing with

such elusive and complex matters. The above-quoted passage from the *Xici A* thus continues with a statement about the particular strategy used by the *Zhouyi* to circumvent this problem.

The Master said: “[It is true that] writing does not fully express what is said [by the Sages about the Dao], and that what is [thus] said does not fully express what is thought [by the Sages about the Dao].”

[Question:] “Is one accordingly unable to see the thinking of the Sages?” 然則聖人之意 其不可見乎？

The Master said: “The Sages set up the images in order to fully express [their] thinking, and set up the hexagrams in order to fully express what is actual and what is false. It was through appending [written] statements [to both, in the form of the *gua-ci* and the *yaoci*] that they fully expressed what they [intended to] say 聖人立象以盡意設卦以盡情僞繫辭焉以盡其言. They made it flexible as well as comprehensive in order to fully express what is beneficial 變而通之以盡利. They drummed and danced about it in order to fully express the spirit 鼓之舞之以盡神.²⁵

The two statements carry high authority, because the “Master” is commonly assumed to be Confucius.²⁶ The entire passage is not a general statement on language but on the language of the *Zhouyi* as a means of expressing “the thinking of the Sages.” The second statement of the Master, however, makes the entire complex verbal and nonverbal structure of the *Zhouyi* an attempt to circumvent the accepted limitations of writing and speaking in expressing the Sages’ thinking. Accordingly, the *Zhouyi* as a whole *is* in fact the thinking of the Sages. In the presentation of the *zhuan*, especially the *Xici*, the *Zhouyi* code is based on the code of the universe, and thus the *Zhouyi* contains all of the mysteries of the universe’s operation, and there is enough language to justify a transition from a cosmological to an ontological reading of the *Zhouyi*. In short, the thinking of the Sages as present in the *Zhouyi* is focused on the only subject matter deserving the thoughts of the Sages, the Dao 道, but the Dao has a role both in the universe and in society.

The first statement by the Master in this *Xici* passage about written and spoken words and the thinking of the Sage does not exactly match the second with its series of measures taken by the Sages themselves to overcome this limitation of language.²⁷ For the expression of the Sages’ thinking, images are set up, and for the full expression of their spoken

words, the “Appended Statements,” *xici*, are made. There is, however, no counterpart in the first part to the phrase that they “set up the hexagrams in order to fully express what is actual and what is false,” nor to the last two phrases on making “it flexible as well as comprehensive” and on drumming and dancing about it.

The *Zhouyi* thus describes its own form of communication as being the result of the insight into, and the acceptance of, the inability of language to fully express what is thought by the Sages. It accepts this insight and claims to be in fact a structure that can at the same time respect this rule and circumvent it through a different use of language and sign. The appended statements, *guaci* and *yaoci*, which make written statements indicating the content of the hexagrams and their individual lines, are here said to “fully express” what the Sages said, and the images *xiang* 象—that is, the specific form of the hexagram—are said to “fully express” what the Sages thought. The *Xici* states that but does not explain why these appended statements should be able to fully express what the Sages said, while regular writing cannot do so. The same is true for the images or symbols in relation to the Sages’ thinking. Both symbols and appended statements of the *Zhouyi* have their point of reference beyond themselves in a hierarchy that leads from the “Appended Statements” to spoken words, from spoken words to symbols, and from them to thinking.

The appended written statements do not mean what they say, they do not define a given object, they are not co-determinous with their object but point beyond themselves to “spoken words,”²⁸ and they get their content only from this referral. They differ from regular written statements by being “appended” and thus structurally signaling that they have their point of reference beyond themselves. Through this interaction they are able to develop with great economy a more complex form of communication that evokes the richness of oral communication. These spoken words again do not define their object but are there to point to and elucidate a still more refined form of communication, the symbol, which again does not in itself define but becomes the ultimate pointer, indicating where the meaning is and getting its own content not from itself but from this interaction. In this manner, a four-tiered structure of communication is developed to mediate between the immediately accessible written language and the ultimately targeted thought, with the result that this thought is being “fully expressed” without ever appearing in the manifest verbal or nonverbal structures of the *Zhouyi*.

The *Zhouyi* does not describe itself as a book consisting of a text and one or more commentarial layers added by a sequence of commentators. What might be seen as different strata of the text with the later strata com-

menting on the earlier ones, whose meaning had become inaccessible or whose point of reference had to be adjusted to new concerns, is depicted within the *Xici* as a historic creation to which a sequence of Sages contributed, the final product eventually enabling them fully to express their thinking without ever directly putting it into the inept media of symbol, speech, or writing.

There was a common assumption that the Sages of old shared the same thought and purpose.²⁹ For this reason it is not necessary to specify which Sage's thinking went into this or that passage. They can be referred to by a collective name, indifferent as to singular and plural, "Sages." By linking the structure and content of the *Zhouyi* to this "thinking of the Sages," *shengren zhi yi* 聖人之意, the *Xici* established a unity for the text that is certainly not evident on its surface.

The self-referential *Xici* statement about the crafting of the *Zhouyi* is thus at the same time a statement about reasons for its complex structure and a guide for the reader about how to approach and handle this structure without undue reification. It advises him or her that the textual surface has a multilayered, referential character unified by an underlying thinking, and that the immediately accessible text is in itself unreliable and possibly trivial and meaningless, because it is thrice removed from the meaning. The reader is instructed to remember that the writing and the words themselves are unable to express the Sages' thinking, and that only by handling the specific forms of writing, words, and symbols as tentative, tenuous, and referential will he or she be able to reach this meaning. This explanation of the *Zhouyi* form of communication and Sagely communication altogether has dramatic consequences. By defining these communications as those by the Sages, they become impregnated with high meaning perfectly independent of the often overwhelming triviality that the surface text might seem to exude. At the same time, they open a wide window of opportunity for the specialists able to handle such arcane matter. While this construct provides much freedom for the commentator by loosening his or her ties to the surface text, it also establishes a demanding and rigid framework of analysis by requesting a unified and unforced explanation of the entire body of Sagely communication, and it lays upon the reader the heavy responsibility and challenge to access the thinking of the Sages, which precludes any frivolousness in the operation. In *Lunyu* 16.8, Confucius himself is said to have called the words of the Sages "fearsome." Kongzi said:

The Junzi has three [things] he fears: He fears the orders of Heaven, he fears the Great Man, and he fears the words of the Sages.

The Great Man is identified with the Sage in the *Wenyan* to the first *Zhouyi* hexagram. What makes these three fearsome is that all are hard to fathom. In fact, Wang Bi's senior contemporary, He Yan, comments on the last phrase:

What is deep and far-reaching, impossible to easily understand and fathom are the words of the Sages.³⁰

Huang Kan's 皇侃 (488–545) subcommentary to this passage states that “the ‘words of the Sages’ means writings left behind by the Sages [in the form] of the Five Classics as well as the official records”³¹ 五經典籍. In this reading, the words left behind by the Sages present a fearsome challenge even to a Junzi because of the difficulty of their subject and the awkwardness of language. There is no question, however, that these texts contain and express the truths discovered by the Sages.

While the *Lunyu* contains statements by Confucius on the Sages, it is mostly a record of the *acta, verba et gesta* of Confucius and some of his disciples. Its anecdotal and aphoristic form of hundreds of very short, unrelated individual pieces again is a possible implicit commentary on the limits of language in describing the Master's thinking and what he embodied. A systematic and defining description would by necessity run afoul of the rule that Confucius is as undefinable as the thinking of the Sage is according to the *Xici*, and thus tentative, suggestive, contradictory statements and anecdotes might be read as hints at what language cannot define in its entirety.³² This implicit level of form and structure is again supplemented by explicit statements about the insufficiency of language when dealing with the Sages and their thinking, some of which have been quoted above.

The form of the *Lunyu* thus becomes another attempt to deal with a unified, undefinable subject—the Sage and his thinking—by using language in a nondefining, referential way. Confucius himself develops the principles for this form. He claims “only to transmit and not create [new things himself]” [*Lunyu* 7.1]; this might presuppose a great diversity in what he transmitted. At the same time he claims against Zengzi, who obviously is holding forth on the diversity of the Master's teachings, “My Way has one [single motive] to thread through it” or, in Wang Bi's reading, “My Way has the One to thread through it” [*Lunyu* 4.15]. The surface of the Master's *acta et gesta* again is unreliable; they do not get their rhyme and logic from their relationship with each other but from their common point of reference beyond themselves, namely, the Sage and what he embodies.

Confucius continues to speak and act, since no other communication seems to be available. He does not write a book, and this no-book is his

most elaborate statement on language and philosophy. But he is seen as rearranging what were to become the classics in a manner so as to transform them into philosophic signposts. As Yang Shixun 楊士勛 (Tang) writes in his subcommentary to the *Guliang Commentary to the Chunqiu*: “What Confucius edited are called the classics. The classics, *jing* 經, are what is constant, *chang* 常. Being the great work of the Sage, they are constantly to be revered and used. That is why they are called classics.”³³ Confucius claims a unity of thinking in the midst of great formal diversity of the different classics with his comment about the *Shijing*, that its 300 songs “could be summed up by one single statement [taken from it]” 一言以蔽之 [*Lunyu* 2.2].

His students, however, always have the impression that what he means is different from what the surface of his words and actions seems to suggest. The Master will give largely different answers to the same question; he will throughout refuse to define his terms. His personality seems to be such that the students constantly have the feeling that he is withholding something from them, to the point of asking the Master’s son what Confucius was saying in the intimacy of his home [*Lunyu* 16.13] and maintaining, as Zigong did, that they only have the writings for their perusal but failed to get to hear what the Sage thought in the depth of his heart “about human nature and the Way of Heaven” 性與天道 [*Lunyu* 5.13].

The controversy about the proper reading of this passage shows the interpretive pressure to which readers and commentators subjected the text. The entire passage runs in Huang Kan’s *Lunyu jijie yishu*: 子貢曰夫子之文章可得而聞也。夫子之言性與天道不可得而聞也已矣。He Yan comments on the first phrase: 章明也文彩形質著見可以耳目循。 “Zhang 章 means clear. The ornamentation of patterns and the particulars of form are manifest and [thus] it is possible to perceive them with one’s eyes and ears.” He Yan thus deviates from the Han readings by separating *wen* 文 and *zhang* 章 and in reading the latter as a verb. The first phrase thus has to be read: “The texts of the Master are clear, [therefore I] am able to perceive them.” These “texts” [patterns], whether read in He Yan’s manner or together as *wenzhang*, in the manner of Zheng Xuan, were seen since the Han dynasty as a reference to the classics, an opinion shared by Huang Kan.³⁴

The classics put together by the Sage are thus clear and readable to one like Zigong. The second sentence marks the difference from the first; what is said about these two items even Zigong does not get to hear. This must refer to the “words,” *yan* 言, of the Master. Following Huang Kan’s reading, the “Master’s words” are “what the *wenzhang* are talking about” 言即文章之所言也. Thus 夫子之言 has to be rendered, “[But] what the

Master is talking ABOUT,” namely, as Huang Kan “translates” it, “the pointers the six classics are talking about” 六籍所言之旨. The next part, 性與天道, seems to have been read by He Yan as “human nature and the Way of Heaven,” with the common point that both are elusive and not manifest, and therefore even Zigong is unable to perceive them. The translation would be, “[But] what the Master is talking about [in these texts], [namely] human nature and the Way of Heaven [I am] perfectly unable to perceive!” Zigong perceives the texts that have been handed down, but it seems impossible to grasp the deep and subtle things to which they might point.

There were, however, two more readings of this passage, one of them definitely earlier than He Yan. This has been mentioned by Qian Daxin 錢大昕 (1728–1804): “Some say 性與天道 is like saying ‘nature is in agreement with Heaven’” 性與天合. He gives some examples for this reading from the *Hou Hanshu*, the separate biography of He Yan’s senior contemporary, Guan Lu, quoted in the *Commentary to the Sanguo zhi* and the *Jinshu*.³⁵ This would result in a translation: “[But] as in the words of the Master [his] nature is in agreement with the Way of Heaven, one is unable to hear [= understand] them.” A third reading known from a critique of the previous reading in Yan Shigu’s *Commentary to the Hou Hanshu* identifies *xing* 性 as an adverbial *ziran* 自然: “When the *Lunyu* quotes Zigong as saying . . . [above quotation] this means that he [Confucius] does not talk about human nature 性命 and the Way of Heaven, but the scholars have misread this, 學者誤讀, and explain it as ‘Kongzi’s words spontaneously [‘in their nature’] agree with the Way of Heaven’ 孔子之言自然與天道合.”³⁶ This last reading seems well in tune with Xuanxue thinking after He Yan and Wang Bi. We see already before Xuanxue started to flourish that the readers were looking for passages in the *Lunyu* that would explain the Master’s use of language and guide the reader to the deeper levels beyond the surface. Zigong’s confession that he was unable to understand these deeper meanings served as a warning to the later born about the formidable obstacles in their way.

By including seemingly trivial incidents and statements of the Master, lifted through this inclusion onto the level of major if not easily perceptible wisdom, the *Lunyu* could be seen as a conscious attempt to provide a glimpse of its elusive object by exploding the limitations of language and expanding the means of discourse far beyond simple words. As a record of the Master’s performance, it translated his own statements on language into devices of textual structuring. The explicit statements about the undefinability of the Master and his teaching in the *Lunyu* again serve as a guide for the reader to stay focused on the absent center of the text. The easy shimmer of the surface, however, has made this a painfully difficult

enterprise for the Master's students, and more so for later commentators.

At the same time, the *Lunyu* could be only a weak and awkward attempt at preserving the traces of what seemed irremediably lost with the death of the last of the Sages. Ban Gu (d. 92 C.E.), who more than anyone else was depressed about the finality of the Sagely dispensations,³⁷ opens his preface to the book catalogue in the *Hanshu* with the words:

Since Zhongni [= Confucius] is no more, the subtle words have been cut off 仲尼沒而微言絕. Since the 70 disciples [of Confucius] have departed, [even] the overall meaning [of what Confucius had to say] has become confounded 大義乖. That is the reason why the *Chunqiu* [interpretation] became divided into five [different strands], the *Shi[jing]* into four, and [even] the *[Zhou]yi* has several school traditions. With the conflicts of the *Zhanguo* period, correct and false [theories] were contending here and there, and the sayings of the different philosophers were bubbling forth in utter confusion. When it came to the [establishment of the] Qin dynasty, they loathed this [situation], and thus proceeded to burn and destroy [these] works, with the result [however] of stultifying the black-haired people. Once the Han dynasty had fully established itself [a few decades after its founding in 206 B.C.E.], it changed the destructive [course] of the Qin [which it had continued during the first decades], proceeded to collect writings and records in a great way, and broadly opened the road for presenting manuscripts [to the court]. When it came to the time of Filial Emperor Wu (reg. 140–86 B.C.E.) the manuscripts [previously collected] had deteriorated [again] and the bamboo slips [previously collected] were coming apart [again] [with the result] of the rituals being in decay and the music collapsing. The emperor cried out in desperation “I am truly upset!” Thereupon he instituted a policy of storing books, assigned officials for the writing [= copying] of manuscripts, and down to the sayings of the philosophers handed down [by their students] everything was put into the Secret Archive [= Imperial Library].³⁸

First, the original dispensation of “subtle words” ceased, then even the broad meaning got thwarted, and eventually the texts themselves were destroyed. The manuscripts and scrolls that were left and had been recollected deteriorated again. Since Emperor Wu, the Han dynasty did its best to have the surviving texts collected, and Emperor Cheng (reg. 32–8 B.C.E.)

proceeded to have them edited by specialists under the direction of Liu Xiang and his son. But while Ban Gu clearly praises these emperors for their actions and mentions that Liu Xiang gave a summary of the purport 指意 of each book after the editing had been completed, the presence of competing commentaries of the classics during his own lifetime prompts a wide lacuna in his description: Ban Gu pointedly fails to mention that the “broad meaning” of the Sage’s dispensation had been recovered, or that people had arisen who were capable of uttering “subtle words” in their own right. In his eyes, the Han scholars, all their seeming reliance on the classics notwithstanding, could definitely not claim even a general understanding of Confucius’ “subtle words.”

In a similar vein, King Zhang, known for his attempts at recovering some of the lost meaning through the imperially sponsored interpretation meeting in the White Tiger Hall, complained in an edict in 83 C.E. about the danger of losing contact with the Sage’s subtle words altogether:

The Five Classics are in shambles; the longer the time separating [us] from the Sage grows, the more the *zhangju* 章句 commentaries forget [the meaning] of [his] statements, so that errors and doubts are [ever more] difficult to correct, and it is to be feared that the subtle words of the late Master [= Confucius] will become completely cut off [from us] 恐先師微言將遂廢絕, and will cease to be the means by which to venerate antiquity and to search for the truth of the Way.³⁹

The term *weiyán* 微言, “subtle words,” in the sequence of this quotation expanded to a complete *weixue* 微學, “scholarly study of the subtle [words of the Sage],” here refers to oral communication in all the complexity of its contextuality and interaction with other elements such as intonation and gesture, of which the written form is at best a distant and uncouth relative. The term *weiyán* 微言, which might have become a standard attribute of Confucius’ communications through Ban Gu’s much-read statement, is used in both cases for the Master’s elusive oral statements. It might have been taken from an anecdote reported in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 and the *Huainanzi* about a conversation between Duke Bai and Confucius, where it refers to a communication beyond words and symbols, as might be used among Sages.⁴⁰ It seems that, already toward the end of the Former Han, the earlier optimism of fully comprehending the Sage’s teaching gave way to a feeling that his essential teachings were being lost, and that the mushrooming *zhangju* commentaries were more a symptom of this loss than a remedy for it.

With its eighty-one unlinked short *zhang*, the *Laozi* in its turn repeats

core features of the structure of the two other texts. Each *zhang* starts anew and takes another angle or example. In addition to this implicit comment on defining and systematic language as a tool of Sagely articulation, the *Laozi* is most explicit in its assessment of language's capabilities in dealing with ultimate things. The statements are well known.

The *Laozi* does not restrict itself to this purely negative description. Thirty-three times the *Laozi* uses the expression *wei* 謂, “[I] call.” The standard form, twenty-four cases, is “this [I] call . . . ,” 是謂, to be followed by an expression. In the large majority of the thirty-three cases, namely, twenty-five, the expression following the *wei* 謂 refers to a quality of the That-by-which, or the Sage who embodies it. In a number of cases the term following *wei* contains the word *xuan* 玄, “dark,” or similar expressions, with no other purpose than to indicate the darkness and abstruseness of the object under consideration, namely, that it cannot be defined by a “name,” *ming* 名. From this record, Wang Bi does have a case to impute a conscious use of the term *wei* 謂 to the *Laozi*. As opposed to *ming* 名, a “definition,” *wei* 謂 is a way of speaking that does not claim to define its object in its entirety. In many cases the term following the *wei* is not found elsewhere in this meaning. The standard translation “is called . . .” therefore has to be replaced by an “[I] call . . .” Wang Bi will develop this factual use of the term *wei* 謂 in the *Laozi* into a core feature of his philosophy of language, claiming in the process that he is only making explicit the *Laozi*'s implied insights. *Laozi* 25.4 f. says about the “entity that completes out of the diffuse,” mentioned in 25.1, that “I do not know its name” and give “it the style ‘Way’” and [only] “[when] forced to make up a name for it, I would say [it is] great.” The term *zi* 字, translated here as “style,” stands for *wei* 謂. With the proviso that these are only “ways of speaking,” the *Laozi* in fact makes possible a rich communication about the Dao by language. It should be mentioned, however, that the *Laozi* is not absolutely consistent in maintaining the terminological difference between *wei* 謂 and *ming* 名.⁴¹

The *Laozi* then proceeds to spell out again the makeshift nature of the language used for them. “As they were undiscernible, [I] say, when forced to give a sketch of them: Hesitant [they were] as if crossing a [frozen] river in winter, undecided . . . , formal . . . , brittle . . . , genuine . . . , vast . . . , murky . . .” [15.3]

Beyond these properly announced “ways of speaking,” the *Laozi* also uses a great deal of metaphoric and/or onomatopoeic language concerning ultimate things, indicating (in Wang's reading) their diffuseness and inaccessibility in terms of language. The basically untranslatable expressions for the Dao and the Sage who embodies it such as “Vacant it is, alas, still” 索兮寔兮 [25.2], “deep” 淵兮 and “immersed” 湛兮 [4.1], “intangible it