

PAUL VAN ELS, *The Wenzhi: Creativity and Intertextuality in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Studies in the History of Chinese Texts, 9. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2018. iii-xiv, 233 pp. Figures and Tables, Conventions, Bibliography, Index. USD \$119.00. ISBN 978-90-04-26479-3

“The *Wenzi* is not a popular text,” Van Els recapitulates in his epilogue to *The Wenzhi: Creativity and Intertextuality in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Ever since the Tang dynasty, scholars have considered the *Wenzi* a spurious work that impossibly portrays itself as a true record of the teachings of Laozi. As a result, it has been considered a text devoid of value. Van Els offers a corrective to the scholarly assumptions that make a text’s value a direct product of its originality (being composed of new material without parallels elsewhere) and authenticity (being traceable to the master that gives it name and/or the masters whose teachings are therein transmitted). The very fact that caused the *Wenzi*’s historical dismissal lies at the center of Van Els’ interest in this underrated and relegated text. While intertextual borrowing is a common phenomenon in Chinese literature and philosophy, the *Wenzi* is an extraordinary specimen: three quarters of the *Wenzi* have close parallels in the *Huainanzi*, while sections of the quarter left also do in other texts. The complex textual history of the *Wenzi*, rather than inducing its dismissal, Van Els argues, should be enough to raise our attention and curiosity, especially when it comes to scholars interested in textual formation, textual history, and reception theory. The *Wenzi* is not a popular text. Will the publication of Van Els’ study make it more popular? This study “seeks to establish the boundaries of what we thought we knew about the *Wenzi*, what we now know about the text, and what still remains to be known” (2). The book accomplishes what it sets to do, and in doing so, it prepares the stage for a renovated interest in the *Wenzi*. In my view, now that we are coming to realize how privileged Chinese sources are for engaging in a more sophisticated analysis of intertextuality and reception at a global and comparative level (the different means by which texts are borrowed, sampled, paraphrased, quoted, mashed-up, reframed, attributed, etc.), the *Wenzi* should without a doubt be at the center of our attention.

What is the *Wenzi*? Van Els analytically divides *Wenzi*-related materials in three different categories: (1) The proto-*Wenzi*, a collection of politico-philosophical writings dating to the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE-9 AD) in Van Els’ estimation, which made their way into different textual instantiations. (2) The earliest textual instantiation of the proto-*Wenzi* materials

to which we can testify is the Dingzhou *Wenzi*, a bamboo manuscript partially recovered from a Han dynasty tomb (202 BCE-220 CE) in the year 1973. (3) The received *Wenzi*, which Van Els dates between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE, an edited patchwork of materials from the *Huainanzi*, the proto-*Wenzi*, the *Laozi*, and, to a very minor extent, other texts. When dealing with texts with such a complicated history, arguably all our early texts yet to different degrees, it is fundamental to separate discrete manuscripts from other textual instantiations and the pools of materials from which these derived. Van Els explains that the proto-*Wenzi* and the received *Wenzi* should not be seen as two versions of the same text, despite sharing a title and some passages, for they were written for different audiences and purposes by people in different historical periods (200). In this vein, I need to point out that the denomination proto-*Wenzi* for the collection of materials that made their way into different textual instantiations might mistakenly lead readers to assume an illegitimate teleology, as if those materials were conceived as the prototype or the precursor of texts that would later take form as the *Wenzi*. Calling these materials “*Wenzi* collection” or “ancient *Wenzi*” (as Van Els does in his 2006 dissertation, which lies at the basis of this book, and his 2006 *Oriens Extremus* article “Persuasion Through Definition: Argumentative Features of the Ancient *Wenzi*”) as opposed to proto-*Wenzi* solves this problem by avoiding establishing an invalid relation of teleological necessity between a pool of materials and the discrete instantiations of texts discovered to date that make use of this pool.

The first four chapters of this book are dedicated to the proto-*Wenzi* and the Dingzhou manuscript, while the last four chapters analyze the received *Wenzi*. Chapter 1, “The Dingzhou Discovery,” presents an analysis of the Dingzhou tomb, the texts and other objects that were found in this tomb, and the array of disasters to which these objects were subjected, including robbery, fire, and earthquake, which are responsible for the poor conditions in which the Dingzhou *Wenzi* has reached us. Chapter 2, “The Dingzhou *Wenzi*,” analyzes some of the 277 bamboo fragments, seriously damaged in the most part, that have been identified as the *Wenzi*, its handwriting, and the transcription of the manuscript published by *Wenwu* in 1995. Van Els makes good use of the work of Kern, Boltz, and Richter to introduce a needed critique to the processes involved in transcribing manuscripts. Common practices that Van Els and others have challenged include identifying bamboo fragments with known texts, and ordering and interpreting them by means of their received counterparts; using simplified characters in the transcriptions; and inserting modern punctuation while omitting the punctuation marks that

appear in the manuscripts. These first two chapters were previously published in *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques* 63 (2009). Chapter 3, “The Proto-*Wenzi*: Dates, Protagonists, Author,” explores the unknown origins, date, and authorship of the proto-*Wenzi* through an examination of lexical and rhetoric features of the Dingzhou *Wenzi*. This chapter disabuses readers of long-held beliefs, such as the pre-Qin origins of the *Wenzi* and the historical character of its protagonists: King Ping of Zhou and his advisor Wenzi, who are to be understood as rhetorical devices. The problem with using lexical features for dating (like Pines, Baxter, and Liu Xiaogan have previously done, and Van Els attempts here) is that we rely on the also uncertain dating of other texts which are used as point of reference, which leads to an inevitable vicious circle. The Western Han date for the ancient *Wenzi* seems better sustained by its similarities in content and approach with the writings of Lu Jia, Jia Yi, and Liu An than by any other attempted piece of evidence provided. Chapter 4, “The Proto-*Wenzi*: Philosophy,” compares the philosophical tenets of the proto-*Wenzi* with the *Laozi* by exploring the Dingzhou manuscript and its parallels in the received *Wenzi*. I will comment on this chapter together with Chapter 7, “The Received *Wenzi*: Philosophy,” below.

Chapter 5, “A New *Wenzi*,” discusses the intertextual processes of formation of the received *Wenzi* and the changes that the proto-*Wenzi* experienced, such as eliminating dialogues, particles, and connectors to make the text more succinct and discursive. The revisions that Van Els identifies are typical of the manuscript-to-received text transmission process. We find proof of this in the excavated military texts, which contain more practical, technical, and dialogical material than their transmitted counterparts. In this chapter, Van Els also establishes a clear direction of textual borrowing from the proto-*Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi* to the received *Wenzi*. Chapter 6, “Received *Wenzi*: Date and Author,” suggests a date between the 3rd and the 5th centuries CE for the creation of the received *Wenzi*, and imagines its editor as a literate male responding to a growing demand for the wisdom of Laozi. Finally, Chapter 8, “*Wenzi* Reception,” analyzes the reception of the *Wenzi* in catalogs, encyclopedias, argumentative writing, commentaries, and eulogies, along with the long period of textual rejection up to the Dingzhou discovery, which gave way to a stage of textual reevaluation.

Clearly, this book is a rigorous study in textual history and reception. Any exploration of the *Wenzi*’s philosophy plays a subordinated role for a better understanding of the formation of

the *Wenzis*: their connections with other texts and with the different time periods in which they evolved and were put to use. In chapter 4, sections of which had previously appeared in *Oriens Extremus* 45 (2006), *Sixiang yu wenhua* 9 (2009), *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy* (2015), and *Debating War in Chinese History* (2013), Van Els identifies the *Laozi* as the major philosophical influence for the proto-*Wenzi* (64). The Dingzhou *Wenzi* displays ideas that highly resemble key concepts in the *Laozi*, such as *wuwei*, holding on to the one, and preserving quietude, among others. At the same time, Van Els notices how the *Wenzi* deviates from the *Laozi*: an emphasis on certain values (the four guidelines: virtue, ritual, humanity, and righteousness) to politically lead the people, and certain skills (sagacity and wisdom), which the *Laozi* despises. Another important deviation from the *Laozi* that Van Els points out is a defense of righteous warfare. Van Els's examination concludes that these deviations are however incorporated in the *Wenzi* in a way to conform to the general quietist philosophy of effortless action of the *Laozi* (81).

In my view, a comparison of the role that these concepts (virtue, ritual, humanity, and righteousness; sagacity and wisdom; and warfare) play in the *Wenzi* and in the military corpus, where they appear connected to non-quietist, active modes of adaptive agency, leads to a different conclusion. The military texts, and prominently the *Sunzi*, also find in the *Laozi* an important source of conceptual inspiration. Nevertheless, much like the *Wenzi*, they forge the *Laozi*'s conceptual imagery into a philosophy of purposive and efficacious action. The model of non-action and non-intervention of the *Laozi* is transformed into a model of adaptive agency where acting efficaciously, while an intentional and planned endeavor based on rigorous strategizing, implies not taking the initiative (*xian* 先) but rather reacting or following after (*hou* 後) by anticipating tendencies and transformations, and adjusting one's actions accordingly (*yin* 因). As Van Els explains, sagacity and wisdom, the capacity to foreknow and anticipate tendencies of development by an acute awareness of what one is hearing and seeing, is a central tenet of political philosophy in the *Wenzi*. Unsurprisingly, it is also a central tenet in the military literature, for theoretical discussions of political and military action often inform one another. In both cases, the goal is to achieve a maximum degree of efficacy in action by using any and every element at hand and turning it into the agent's favor. This implies adaptive psychology, using rituals and other humane ways of social interaction to get the people's allegiance (whether these

are the commander's soldiers or the ruler's subjects); and an adaptive strategizing of the most appropriate course of action through a perspicacious analysis of each situation.

The received *Wenzi* shows a central concern with agency, and a clear advocacy for adaptive agency. This is to be expected, given that 75% of the received *Wenzi* finds parallels in the *Huainanzi*. The concern with agency is also apparent in a passage from the Dingzhou *Wenzi* that Van Els analyzes, a more complete version of which appears in the received *Wenzi*. In *Wenzi* 5.7, *Wenzi* asks what is the best course of action or model of agency (*wei zhi nai he* 為之奈何) to govern the world using the *dao*. Governing the world using the *dao* implies embodying *dao*-features, such as enabling things to be what they are rather than imposing certain modes of being on them, nurturing each and every thing with equanimity, and endlessly responding to their milliard transformations. Laozi's response to which model of agency will allow this *dao*-like quality in a ruler to flourish clearly eliminates the possibility of forceful, constraining agency. He explains that the world is like a sacred vessel which cannot be acted upon (*wei* 為) or controlled (*zhi* 執), a discussion that we also find in the *Laozi* and the *Huainanzi*. The *wuwei* mode of action that Laozi suggests implies creating adaptive and situational courses of action ad hoc in response to the multiple alterations and transformations that happen in the world (*yin* 因), rather than imposing one's self-centered preferences by force. In other words, when connected to notions such as adaptation, sagacity, and acting after, *wuwei* does not stand for a quietist philosophy of non-action but rather for the advocacy of adaptive agency. Indeed, both the *Wenzi* "Dao yuan" chapter and the *Huainanzi* "Yuan dao" chapter provide a definition:

是故聖人...漠然無為，而無不為也；澹然無治也，而無不治也。所謂無為者，不先物為也；所謂無不為者，因物之所為。所謂無治者，不易自然也；所謂無不治者，因物之相然也。（*Wenzi* 1.2; *Huainan honglie jijie* 1: 24)

Therefore, the sages... Still! Take no action, yet there is nothing left undone. Cool! Do not govern, but nothing is left ungoverned. What we call "take no action" is not to act before things. What we call "nothing left undone" is to adapt to things' doings. What we call "not to govern" is not to change how [things] are of themselves. What we call "nothing left ungoverned" is to adapt to how things are in their interdependent relationship.

Much as the *dao* generates and completes but does not possess and dominates (生物而不有，成化而不宰, *Wenzi* 1.1), the sages' mode of agency respects each thing's proper tendencies, adjusting to them rather than imposing egotistic and arbitrary prerogatives. The received *Wenzi* is

full of examples of this philosophy of action, which leads us to the second of Van Els' philosophy chapters.

Rather than directly engaging with the philosophical arguments of the received *Wenzi*, chapter 7 attempts to understand the editor's creative process in four phases: (1) selecting the *Wenzi*, associated with the wisdom of Laozi, as base text. (2) Adding content from the *Huainanzi* and other texts. (3) Making the text more Daoist by adding direct quotations from the *Laozi*. (4) Making the text more discursive: a patchwork of *Wenzi*, *Laozi*, and *Huainanzi* materials presented as the words of Laozi. From the discussion of how contents were added to *Wenzi* 5, presumably the most coherent of the received *Wenzi* chapters, Van Els concludes that the editor did not care so much for the internal consistency of the text as he did for making sure that certain content from the *Huainanzi* was included (142). I believe that an understanding of the philosophy of adaptive agency proposed in the *Wenzi* and the *Huainanzi* would help today's readers more clearly see the connections that the editor of the received *Wenzi* made between sections. I give you one example. Van Els presents the pair *Wenzi* 5.13 (from the proto-*Wenzi*) and *Wenzi* 5.14 (from the *Huainanzi*) as a clear illustration of the text's inner inconsistency. The first section "explains that a ruler must govern the people in accordance with the Way and Virtue, without resorting to arrogance or force" (140), while the second "argues that a sage must assess each situation individually and act accordingly, rather than as directed by a set of constant guidelines. The link between the two sections is unclear, if not entirely absent..." (140). The connection between these ideas is however quite common in the literature among texts that advocate for adaptive modes of agency. An epistemic precondition for being able to assess situations individually and respond to them in an adaptive manner is to abandon self-centered views and preferences. Neither forcing or imposing one's will onto things, nor following pre-established, fixed guidelines for action are considered in the *Wenzi* efficacious modes of agency. But in order to be adaptive one must leave one's arrogance behind and learn how to act *from* things in each particular situation. The philosophical connection between the two sections shows that the editor knew the literature in adaptive agency (at least from the *Huainanzi*, but possibly also from the military corpus), and that he made the connection purposely. Van Els' study of the editor's decisions and intentions, as well as the intertextuality and structure of the received *Wenzi*, provides a well-informed stage for a larger examination of the philosophy of the *Wenzi*. This is to be much appreciated. This larger examination, nevertheless, is still needed, and it will likely

reveal more meaningful connections in and between chapters, and a more consistent structural design than we had presumed.

Van Els combines in this book many years of research dedicated to the *Wenzis* with an exhaustive and critical understanding of the existing literature, mainly in Chinese and Japanese. The result is a brilliant, concise, highly-legible piece on the history of a misunderstood and neglected Chinese text with a fascinating and unique journey. With this publication, Van Els has finally placed the *Wenzi* back in the minds of Anglo-Saxon and European researchers. Beyond the interest it might provoke among Sinologists and scholars of comparative textual history, intertextuality, and reception theory, I also expect with excitement a renewed interest in the philosophy of the *Wenzi*, an area where there is still much to be known.

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