Chapter 6

The Received *Wenzi*: Date and Editor

In the previous chapter, I described the received *Wenzi* as a patchwork text that consists of material borrowed from various sources, including the proto-*Wenzi*, the *Huainanzi*, and a few other texts. This raises the question of when this patchwork was created and who it was created by.

6.1 Date

The received *Wenzi*’s date of creation is a hotly debated topic, as we shall see in the course of this chapter, and not all the arguments in the debate are equally persuasive. In order to discover what can be said with relative certainty, and what is less likely, so as to delineate the boundaries of when the received *Wenzi* may have been created, I propose to start with the period in which the text was demonstrably in existence, namely, the Tang dynasty. I then gradually proceed to earlier periods, in which evidence for its existence becomes increasingly sparse.

6.1.1 Dunhuang

The earliest surviving copy of a *Wenzi* that resembles the received text is a paper manuscript discovered in Dunhuang by Paul Pelliot in 1906. The manuscript, which contains almost 3,000 legible graphs, dates from the Tang dynasty, or more precisely from the year 751. The colophon at the end of the manuscript reveals that the text was reviewed and corrected by an Erudite Scholar of the Studies of the Way (*daoxue boshi* 道學博士) by the name of Suo Sulin (fl. eighth century). The colophon is dated to the seventeenth day of the seventh month in the tenth year of the Tianbao 天寶 (Heavenly Treasure) reign period, or August 12, 751. The paper manuscript contains only one chapter of the *Wenzi*. At the end of the chapter, Suo Sulin notes: “*Wenzi*, ‘Way and Virtue,’ number 5” (*Wenzi daode diwu* 文子道德第五). This suggests that in the year 751, the *Wenzi* contained a chapter with the title “The Way and Virtue,”

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which served as the fifth chapter in the text. This corresponds to the received text. Moreover, a comparison of the Dunhuang manuscript with received editions of the text indicates that, with the exception of minor textual variations, their content is basically the same. Like the received text, the Dunhuang manuscript places statements in the mouth of Laozi, and they are occasionally prefaced by a question from Wenzi. Furthermore, it presents the statements in almost the same wording and in the exact same order as the received text. All this suggests that the Wenzi already resembled the received text by the year 751.

### 6.1.2 Encyclopedias

While the Dunhuang manuscript is the earliest direct testimony to the existence of the received Wenzi by the mid-Tang dynasty, indirect evidence from earlier periods abounds. Several texts quote phrases or passages from the Wenzi. One example is the Qunshu zhiyao 群書治要 (Anthology of Texts on the Essence of Government), which Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) presented to the throne in 631. The Qunshu zhiyao quotes passages from all twelve chapters of the Wenzi, which amount to over 7,400 graphs, or almost one fifth of the received text’s content. It includes chapter titles that match those in the received Wenzi, with only two minor variations. While some Wenzi chapters are quoted sparingly, others are almost quoted in full, as this text focuses on passages related to governing the state and cultivating the self. The Qunshu zhiyao consistently leaves out the introductory phrase “Laozi said,” except for sections in which Wenzi poses a question to his mentor. For example:

Wenzi asked: “What should one do for the people to feel affection for their superiors?” Laozi said: “Employ them according to the proper seasons, treat them with admiration and trepidation, like facing a deep ravine, or treading on thin ice. All those between heaven and earth who are good, are our friends, and those who are bad, are our enemies. In the past, the subjects of the Xia and Shang dynasties came to see [their tyrannical rulers] Jie and Zhou as enemies and subjected themselves to [the

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4 It lists the titles of Wenzi 8, usually “Ziran” 自然 (Spontaneity), as “Dao ziran” 道自然 (The Way and Spontaneity); and Wenzi 10, usually “Shangren” 上仁 (The Highest Humaneness), as “Shangxing” 上行 (The Highest Conduct).