With the vast majority of the texts dating from the Zhanguo (475–221 BC) through Han (206 BC–AD 220) periods, finding the structure of the text goes a long way toward helping the reader establish the meaning within the text. Well organized ventures, in the received literature and the newly excavated texts, generally reflect a profound knowledge of earlier and contemporaneous traditions, and an unexpectedly forthright approach to probing the kinds of knowledge they have seen or heard through intertextual conversations—in tent as they are to analyze a particular subset of the questions remaining in the universe of meaning that they have inherited. These texts demand a leap of faith so familiar to modern readers that they routinely fail to discern the outlandish premise that underlies all examples of this dominant textual form: meaning can be formulated and articulated via language, and, more narrowly, the establishment of precise terminology manipulated within a few preferred grammatical constructions. Think, for example, of the rhetoric favored by the Xunzi 荀子 or the Han Feizi 韓非子 when laying out propositions about social engineering, or the Guodian and Mawangdui manuscripts’ descriptions of the complex relations binding body, heart, and soul, in this life and the next.

However, a very few texts composed by philosophical masters during the classical era consciously challenge the confident assertions about meaning and form that the usual class of texts encourage. They do this, I would argue, by obscuring and scrambling the very structures of meaning on which the usual

---

type depends. For pat question-and-answer, they substitute infinite regressions and *reductio ad absurdum*. They replace the patterned essay with constellations of fragmented ideas that fail to cohere or build to a satisfying conclusion. They are by no means averse to reminding readers how contingent and context-driven is each and every act of linguistic transmission deemed a rousing success. It is into this second and more rarefied class of texts that there falls the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and Yang Xiong’s 楊雄 (53 BC–AD 18) *Fayan* 法言. That the *Zhuangzi* is a special sort of text most readers would readily concede, but few, if any readers, if the extant corpus is any guide, have regarded Yang Xiong’s *Fayan* as anything but a moralistic tract—a tract more sophisticated and well-wrought than most, perhaps, but a humourless, didactic tract nonetheless. Readers before me have read into the format of the *Fayan*—where dialogues are interspersed at seemingly random intervals with pronouncements rendered in more archaizing language—a concerted attempt merely to imitate the *Lunyu* 論語, and undoubtedly that characterization suffices to elicit some superficial resemblances in the first round of reading. (Some have gone so far as to treat the *Fayan* as the first commentary on the *Analects*.) But that comparison falls short of the whole truth, or so it seems to me. The *Fayan* is hardly a coded text whose message can be ‘unlocked’ by reference to the *Analects* it mimics, for it is chockfull of puzzles that the *Analects* ignores and the *Analects* analogues cannot elucidate.

In the end, I will suggest, the *Fayan* works primarily by forcing its readers to toss out structure altogether. To advance in understanding the *Fayan*, readers must begin by asking themselves two related questions: (1) What calculations may have prompted Yang to devise this odd mixture of formats in the *Fayan* to promote his particular set of teachings? and (2) Why does Yang adopt this peculiar format, where his “dialogues” with unnamed interlocutors are often so manifestly monologic, his carefully constructed persona as classical master so autocratic? Why not, for example, employ the formal essay form, avoiding the first-person altogether, when condemning others or advancing new ideas, given the prior employment of the essay form to these very ends by previous Confucian masters such as Mencius and Xunzi—models Yang himself celebrates? Alternatively, why not choose to compile a chronicle, since that type of

---

2 See Matsukawa Kenji 松川健二, *Rongo no shisōshi* 論語の思想史 [History of Thinking about the Analects] (Tokyo: Kyūko Shoin, 1994), which has been translated into Chinese by Lin Qingzhang 林慶彰 (Taipei: Wanjuan lou tushu, 2006.)

3 NB: The *Analects* also includes such maxims, in addition to the dialogues for which it is better known.

4 See *Fayan* 2/19, 12.5.