CHAPTER SEVEN

WANG ANSHI AND THE ZHOULI

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The importance of the Zhouli to the great Northern Song reform leader Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) is well known. He was not the first in his era to see in the Zhouli an all-encompassing system for realizing the common good: Li Gou 李覯 (1009–1059) had preceded him with a fifty-one part series, *On How the Rituals of Zhou Realized the Great Peace (Zhouli zhi taiping lun 周禮致太平論)*, although he had not written a commentary on the Zhouli.¹ For some the point to be made is that Wang used the Zhouli as a source for, or at least a justification for, the “New Policies,” policies that greatly increased the state’s role in the economy, society, and culture.² I suspect that many of us have tended to see the Zhouli in the same light, but as Jaeyoon Song demonstrates in his essay in the present volume (chapter 8), a large number of Southern Song commentators set out to disprove that the Zhouli in fact provided justifications for a strongly centralized activist state.

Surprisingly, little has been written about Wang’s understanding of the Zhouli.³ It was one of three classics for which special commentaries were prepared by the New Policies regime (along with the Classic of Poetry [*Shijing 詩經*] and Classic of Documents [*Shangshu 尚書*]), and its commentary was the only one of the three that Wang claimed to have personally authored. Although his commentary, printed and widely distributed, disappeared (possibly by mid-Ming), it is quoted in many Southern Song texts, and the larger part of it was included in the Great Compendium of the Yongle Reign Period (*Yongle dadian 永樂大典*) in the early fifteenth century, from which it was retrieved and copied into the Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries (*Siku quanshu 四庫全書*) in the eighteenth century. Cheng Yuanmin has exhaustively culled Song and later texts for further quotations and

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¹ Li Gou ji chaps. 6–14.
³ An important exception is Azuma 1995.
comments on Wang’s views, creating the best possible edition we can expect short of a Song imprint reemerging. \(^4\)

I am not sure how we can account for the lack of interest in Wang’s commentary on the *Zhouli*, but I suspect (to generalize from my own case) that many, having looked at the commentary, found it to be little more than that: a commentary on a rather dry text that consists mainly of lists, devoid of argument and lacking a narrative. Moreover, the wealth of Wang’s literary writings and records of his activities as a chief councilor provide far richer grounds for probing his ideas and intentions.

*Contexts for Wang Anshi’s Commentary*

I shall not pursue the effort to tie the *Zhouli* to specific policies. Instead, I shall examine Wang’s commentary in two contexts. The first context is its intended use. The commentary, which was finished in 1075, was part of the creation of curriculum for a newly instituted national school system and a new examination system. Wang had abolished the various memorization fields in the civil service examination and had replaced the regulated verse and regulated rhapsody in the first session of the prestigious “presented scholar” (*jinshi*) examination with essays on the Classics. In support of the new education program the court promulgated three new commentaries: on the Rituals of Zhou (*Zhouli*), the Classic of Documents, and the Classic of Poetry. In retirement Wang composed the *Explanations of Characters* (*Zi shuo* 字說), which explained the meaning of words used in the Classics. Wang submitted the *Explanations of Characters* to the court in 1082, but it was not officially printed and distributed until 1094. The text is lost but a good number of examples of Wang’s explication of characters appear in his *Zhouli* commentary. \(^5\)

Thus, the commentary was part of a broader program of learning (*xue* 學) that would come to be known as the “Wang Learning” (*Wang xue* 王學) or the “New Learning” (*xin xue* 新學). Perhaps for strategic reasons, opponents of the New Policies were generally more critical of the curricu-

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\(^5\) Zhang Zongxiang and Cao Jinyan (2005) reprint definitions of 618 characters found in the *Zhouli* and in citations of Wang Anshi in other texts. It is still not clear, however, how the entries in Wang’s original text were composed. Unfortunately, Zhang and Cao do not specify the locations of citations in the *Zhouli* commentary or analyze their meanings in context.