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The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of Sagely Writing in Early China

Michael Puett

Allow me to open with a quotation from Wang Chong 王充 (27–c. 100):

> Someone asked: "The worthies and sages were not born for nothing; they necessarily had that for which they used their minds. Starting from the likes of Confucius and Mozi 墨子 and going to the disciples Xunzi 荀子 and Mengzi 孟子, their teachings were created and handed down as writings (*wen* 文). Why is this?"
>
> I responded: "The sages created the classics, and worthies transmitted the records. They corrected the degenerate customs, guiding the people and directing them to return to substance and sincerity. The 13,000 pian of texts in the "Liu lüe" increased the good and decreased the bad ...[1]

According to Wang Chong, the causes of this tremendous proliferation of texts from the fifth century B.C. to his own day were twofold. The most significant was the degeneration from the Western Zhou 周 (c. 1050–771 B.C.). It was this, for example, that prompted Confucius (551–479 B.C.) to write the *Spring and Autumn Annals*:

> Confucius created the *Spring and Autumn Annals* when the Zhou had degenerated. He therefore held up the tiniest good and criticized the smallest

> bad; he discarded the disorder and restored the correct. The way of the people and the way of the rulers were put in order.... Thus, if the way of the Zhou had not declined, the people would not have been uncultured; if the people had not been uncultured, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* would not have been created.[2]

For Wang Chong, writing was undertaken by sages in order to rectify a degeneration. Worthies also began writing for the same reason:

> Had the Han 韓 state not been small and weak, and had its laws and standards not declined, then the book of Han Fei 韓非 would not have been made.[3]

Writing, in other words, became necessary when rulers failed in their duty. Non-rulers therefore had to write in order to restore correctness.

The second cause for writing, however, was an unintended consequence of this first cause. If texts were written to end the degeneration, this inadvertently caused yet more degeneration, for it also meant that false ideas were written down and thereby transmitted to posterity: "There were those who used the brush and ink to produce empty writings, making transmissions of falsities."[4] Since ideas started being "recorded on bamboo and silk",[5] yet more writing was needed in order to correct these errors. This, for example, is why the conversations of Mencius (c. 382–300 B.C.) had to be put in writing: they needed to respond to the writings of Yang Zhu 楊朱 (fourth century B.C.) and Mozi (c. 480–390 B.C.) that had harmed the transmissions of Confucius.

> If the teachings of Yangdi and Mozi had not disordered the transmitted rightness [of Confucius], then the transmissions of Mencius would not have been created.[6]

Writings, therefore, only continued to proliferate.

These passages that I have been quoting all come from the "Dui Zuo" 對作 chapter—a chapter in which Wang Chong is trying to defend his decision to write the *Lun Heng* 論衡. Wang Chong's defense is that he is like the authors of the *Mencius*: the proliferation of false writings has continued, so Wang Chong is adding to this volume of written material by writing yet another text to correct the growing errors of the day. The reason for the making of the *Lun Heng* is that numerous books have lost

what is genuine, and empty words have overtaken what is authentic.[7] Like many before him, Wang Chong is writing reluctantly—only doing so to correct the errors that have been proliferating through other, improper writings. Indeed, Wang Chong presents himself as having no choice in the matter. Looking around at the growth of falsities put down in writing, Wang Chong was spontaneously moved to respond. As he states, "How could my heart be able to endure this?"[8]

Such an argument, however, involves a crucial problem. Even if Mencius's dialogues were written down in order to correct the falsities of the day, Mencius himself did not write: it was his disciples who decided to record them for posterity. Confucius, on the contrary, did write, but he was a sage. If Wang Chong is writing something new, and if he is claiming not to be adding to the proliferation of invented errors, then is he claiming to be a sage like Confucius? Wang Chong takes this on directly:

> Some say: "Sages create, and worthies transmit. If there is a worthy who creates, this is wrong. The *Lunheng* and *Zhengwu* 政務 [another text authored by Wang Chong] can be called creations."
>
> I say: "They are not creations. And they are also not transmissions. They are rather discussions. Discussions are second even to transmissions."[9]

In making such arguments, of course, Wang Chong is appealing to a long tradition of disclaiming sagehood, a tradition that began with the famous quotation attributed to Confucius himself:

> The master said: "Transmitting but not creating (*zuo*), being faithful toward and loving the ancients, I dare to compare myself with old Peng."[10]

We have already seen that Wang Chong does indeed see Confucius as a creator (of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*), so Confucius's disclaimer that he is simply transmitting would represent the modesty of a sage. And Wang Chong's disclaimer outdoes even that of Confucius: Wang Chong denies not only that he is a creator but even that he is a transmitter.

That Wang Chong would so position himself vis-à-vis the earlier tradition with his defense of authorship is telling. During the period that Wang Chong is discussing, writing one's arguments was always a potential claim to sagehood, a claim that one could either deny (convincingly or

not) or celebrate. In this paper, I would like to explore the history of these notions of sagehood and, more particularly, the ways in which such notions were related to the development of authorship during the Warring States and Western Han periods, and the ways in which changes in such notions were related to dramatic shifts in the production of texts over the course of the Eastern Han. As we will see, Wang Chong's sense of his own belatedness vis-à-vis the earlier proliferation of texts is both significant and, in retrospect, accurate: Wang Chong will turn out to mark a dying gasp of the claims of authorship that had predominated before. Over the course of the second century, claims to sagehood (even if made in the form of denials) began to lose their cultural resonance, and with such a loss notions of authorship and the book shifted dramatically as well.

Degeneracy and Authorship

As Wang Chong mentioned, the primary media of writing in the Warring States and Han were bamboo and silk—with bamboo being by far the more common of the two.[11] The utilization of bamboo itself was nothing new. References to writings on bamboo appear in our earliest writings from the late Shang 商,[12] and Western Zhou sources demonstrate that scribes were maintained at the court in order to record significant events on bamboo.[13] Archaeology, however, has confirmed Wang Chong's claim that a dramatic proliferation in the use of bamboo emerged over the course of the fourth and third centuries B.C.[14]

As Hsü Cho-yun argued long ago, these new writings were associated with the growing importance of the *shi* 士.[15] The *shi* were at the lower end of the aristocracy during the Bronze Age. During the Warring States period, however, they came to be hired by rulers seeking to undercut the power of the aristocracy, and they were hired precisely because of their ability to read, write, and argue effectively. Among the many consequences of these political developments are two that are of significance for our concerns. First: the increasing social importance of this group led to a growth in non-court-based writing on a scale never seen before in China.[16] Second: for the first time, members of the *shi* began to have at least the potential to gain significant political positions.

The combination of these two factors led to the very feature of these writings that Wang Chong emphasized so strongly. True sagehood was claimed to reside not in kings but rather in ministers. Or, more commonly, unemployed ministers—members of the *shi* who were not recognized by the rulers and were never given employment, and whose teachings therefore had to circulate not as royal pronouncements and not even as ministerial advice but rather as writings. As Mencius is purported to have said of Confucius:

> As the generations declined and the way became obscure, heterodox teachings and violent practices arose. There were instances of ministers killing their rulers and sons killing their fathers. Confucius was worried and created (*zuo*) the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is an undertaking for a Son of Heaven. This is why Confucius said: "Those who understand me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*; those who condemn me will do so through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*."[17]

Although the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is an undertaking for a Son of Heaven, Confucius had no choice but to write in order to halt the decline.

The early sages, according to this view, were rulers. They may have created the arts of civilization, but they left no writings. They had no reason to do so: their actions and inventions had an immediate effect upon the world. But now, in this degenerate age, sages were no longer rulers but were rather figures like Confucius. And they therefore had to write, or at least have their teachings recorded.[18] In short, as Wang Chong quite correctly argued, the writings of this period were intimately associated with claims to sagehood: since they could no longer be rulers, the sages, in this degenerate age, had no choice but to have their ideas committed to writing in order to provide guides for the rest of us.

The medium of bamboo had a crucial role to play in these claims of sagehood as well. Copying and circulating a text of any significant length in bamboo is no easy task. Using bamboo to record court events was an accepted practice, but doing so to express new arguments was something else altogether. There had to be a very good reason to put such labor into textual production, and the claim of sagehood provided a very powerful rationale.

The fact that using bamboo to record events was an accepted practice, however, also meant that claims of sagehood were usually made in the form of denial. A true sage would never proclaim himself to have achieved such status; he would instead claim to be a mere scribe, transcribing events so as to transmit them to the future. In short, sages in this degenerate age were often to be found among scribes rather than kings, but modesty required the sages to proclaim themselves to be nothing but scribes transmitting the past. It thus fell on the scribes who were transmitting the words of the sages or later generations of readers to proclaim the sagacity of the subject.

We have already seen this process at work with Confucius, who claimed to simply be a transmitter, while those who really did transmit his words had to be the ones to proclaim his sagacity. In many ways the more poignant examples, however, are to be found among those who came after Confucius. I quoted above Mencius's characterization of Confucius as a sage who had to write. A similar motif plays out in the *Mencius*—Mencius himself did not write, but was proclaimed by those who transmitted his words to be a sage. Indeed, at one point in the text a disciple explicitly proclaims Mencius to be a sage, just as Confucius had been so characterized in an earlier generation. Mencius (of course) denies that he is a sage, but only after mentioning that Confucius, who Mencius does regard as a sage, had also denied being one.[19] Another passage, however, makes it quite clear that Mencius considered himself to be the sage of his age, even if Heaven unfortunately spoiled his plans:

> When Mencius left Qi, Chong Yu asked him on the way, "Master, you seem to look displeased. A few days ago I heard you say that 'a gentleman does not resent Heaven nor bears a grudge against men'." Mencius responded, "That was one time, this is another time. Every five hundred years, it must be the case that a king will arise. In the interval there must arise one from which an age takes its name. From the Zhou until now, it has been more than seven hundred years. The mark has passed, and the time, if one examines it, is proper. Yet Heaven does not yet wish to bring order to all under Heaven. If Heaven wished to bring order to all under Heaven, who in the present generation is there other than me? How could I be displeased?"[20]

And, since Heaven did not allow Mencius to bring order to all under Heaven, his teachings rather had to be written down by his disciples and preserved as a book.

The Escalation of Sagehood and the Growth of the Book

As these examples imply, during the fourth century B.C., this claim of sagehood as the basis for textual authority usually took the form of writing down the dialogues of a purported master, be that Mozi, Confucius, or Mencius. Such a claim provided the legitimation for the dialogues being preserved and circulated as writings.

By the third and second centuries B.C., the claim of sagehood had been taken to new levels. Authors began writing texts and circulating them under their own names—or at least collecting heterogeneous works and claiming them to have been authored by a sage. Examples would include the *Xunzi* 荀子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Han Feizi* 韓非子, and *Guanzi* 管子, all of which are enormous compilations, and each of which would have consisted of an extraordinarily large collection of bamboo strips.

By the late Warring States and early Han, however, attempts were made to trump even this notion of the individual sagely author. This is particularly clear in encyclopedic works like the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋[21] and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, wherein the compiler (in these cases Lü Buwei 呂不韋 and Liu An 劉安, respectively) claim to incorporate the ideas of all previous sages into a new and comprehensive synthesis. Most provocative in this regard is the postface to the *Huainanzi*, which explicitly claims to supersede the earlier, individual sages, as their texts were only able to offer advice at particular moments.[22] The *Huainanzi*, in contrast, will offer advice for all time:[23]

> The book of Mister Liu observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of ancient times and the present, weighs affairs and establishes regulations, measures forms and puts forth what is fitting.... It does not follow a path from one trace, nor hold fast to instructions from one corner.... Therefore, one can establish it regularly and constantly and never be blocked; one can promulgate it throughout all under Heaven and never make a mistake.[24]

The *Huainanzi*, in other words, is a text that will last forever. Given these claims of absolute comprehensiveness—to incorporate all knowledge and supersede all previous sagely writings, it is perhaps not surprising that the *Huainanzi* is one of the longest works from all of early China.[25]

Just a few decades later, however, another work was written that rivaled the *Huainanzi* in length. Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史記 is a work staggering in size—in its entirety, it would have consisted of several cartloads of bamboo strips. But unlike the *Huainanzi*, it is a work in competition not with all previous sages but rather with one: Confucius, and particularly his authorship of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.[26] As Sima Qian 司馬遷 famously wrote in his own postface:

> The High Minister Hu Sui asked: "Why is it that, in ancient times, Confucius created (*zuo*) the *Spring and Autumn Annals*?" The Taishigong [i.e. Sima Qian] responded: "I have heard that Master Dong [Zhongshu] said, 'When the way of the Zhou declined and fell to waste, Confucius was the Supervisor of Justice in Lu.... He showed the rights and wrongs of two hundred and forty-two years so as to make a guide and standard for all under Heaven.'"[27]

Sima Qian, of course, plays the game we have now become familiar with—denying that he is a sage creating a new work and pleading that he is instead a transmitter:

> What I am referring to is transmitting ancient affairs and arranging and ordering the traditions passed down through the generations. It is not what can be called creating (*zuo*), and for you to compare this with the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is mistaken.[28]

But Sima Qian then famously goes on to use the term *zuo* to describe the authorship of his chapters, thus making clear his implicit claim to sagehood, and making clear as well the legitimacy of the comparison with the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. I would argue that the implication of the comparison is clear: the *Shiji* is a work that, in size and moral complexity, would fully exceed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

What I would like to suggest is that this notion of sagehood—or, more precisely, this competitive notion of sagehood, of constantly striving to trump one's predecessors—played a crucial role in the development of the book in early China. And the medium of writing was important in this as

well: the difficulty of producing and circulating bamboo strips required that only works of great significance should be written, and thus claims of sagehood, and then of a sagehood trumping previous sages, became all the more important.

In short, the production of texts during this period was intimately involved with claims of sagehood, and the progressive escalation of these claims resulted in a progressive escalation of the size of the texts as well. Indeed, if our criterion were size, it would be safe to call the Western Han the age of the book in early China.

The Rise and Decline of the Comprehensive Empire

This progressive escalation of claims of sagehood, and the directly connected escalation of textual production, occurred together with the rise of the imperial state in early China. Indeed, one finds many of the same claims at the courts of the Qin 秦 and early Han 漢. The First Emperor of Qin (r. 221–210 B.C.), after creating the first imperial state in Chinese history, famously proclaimed himself to be a great sage, creating a bigger, greater, more comprehensive state than any that had preceded him. One of the inscriptions erected by the First Emperor read:

> It is the twenty-eighth year. The First Emperor has created (*zuo*) a new beginning.
> He has put in order the laws, standards, and principles for the myriad things....
> All under Heaven is unified in heart and yielding in will.
> Implements have a single measure, and graphs are written in the same way....
> He has rectified and given order to the different customs....
> His accomplishments surpass those of the five thearchs....[29]

Another of the First Emperor's inscriptions reads:

> ... The great sage created (*zuo*) order, established and settled the laws and standards, and made manifest the relations and principles....
> He universally bestowed and clarified the laws to bind all under Heaven and to stand eternally as a righteous pattern.
> Great indeed! Everyone within the divisions will receive and accord with the intent of the sage.

> The numerous ministers praise his accomplishments, requesting to carve them on stone and display them and hand them down as a constant model.[30]

These claims of surpassing the past were common as well throughout the early Han—the period when both the *Huainanzi* and the *Shiji* were written. This is not, of course, to imply that texts like the *Huainanzi* and the *Shiji* were supportive of the Qin and early Han imperial projects.[31] They were on the contrary quite critical, and this is precisely why their arguments had to be put in the form of texts. (Hence Sima Qian's above-quoted comparisons of himself to Confucius, who authored the *Spring and Autumn Annals* in a time of disorder.) But a similar vision pervaded both the politics and texts of the time—claims to ever greater comprehensivity, claims to supersede the past, claims to great sagacity.

By the end of the Western Han, however, a dramatic shift occurred. The empire was suffering from severe imperial overreach, and several voices emerged in the second half of the first century B.C. calling for a scaling back of the empire. The mode in which they did so was to call for a return to the institutions of the Zhou—the period before the new creations of the self-proclaimed imperial sages. And this also entailed a return to the texts that purportedly dated to that period—and thus that predated the proliferation of sagely texts over the previous three centuries. For example, in the 30s B.C., Kuang Heng 匡衡 argued that the ritual system introduced by Han Wudi 漢武帝 was for the most part a continuation of that instituted by the Qin.[32] He and Zhang Tan 張譚 pointed out in a memorial to the throne that the ritual system "differs from the regulations of antiquity".[33] Using references drawn from the *Shangshu* 尚書 and the *Liji* 禮記 (two of the five classics purportedly organized by Confucius), they called for a return to the ritual system of the Zhou.[34]

As seen in these references to the *Shangshu* and the *Liji*, a key part of this shift at the end of the Western Han was a renewed focus on the five classics—the texts edited and (in the case of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) composed by Confucius. The interest in these texts was precisely that they provided a glimpse of the order of the Zhou—a period before the formation of the empire.

Many of these same texts associated with Confucius had, of course, been important earlier in the Han dynasty as well. As early as the beginning of the Western Han, Lu Jia 陸賈 had argued, "The later ages declined and fell to waste. Thereupon, the later sage [i.e., Confucius] established the five classics and clarified the six arts to correspond to Heaven, govern Earth, and probe affairs."[35] Several decades later, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 made similar arguments concerning Confucius's authorship of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*: "Confucius created (*zuo*) the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, above calculating it to the Heavenly way, below making it substantive with the fundamentals of man; comparing it with antiquity, examining it with the present."[36] The *Spring and Autumn Annals* thus corresponds to Heaven and Earth themselves: "The great unity of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is the enduring alignment of Heaven and Earth, the connecting propriety of the past and present."[37]

Such claims that a sage created a text to correspond to Heaven and Earth and thus provided guidance for later ages are, of course, very similar to those found in, for example, the relatively contemporaneous postface to the *Huainanzi*. In the early Han, therefore, these claims about Confucius were one of many made about various sages, and they were not terribly influential.[38]

By the end of the Western Han and early Eastern Han, however, this began to change. As figures at court argued for the necessity of curtailing the imperial state and returning to the precedents of the Western Zhou, the five classics attributed to Confucius, along with several other texts that purported to describe the Western Zhou system of ritual and governance (texts like the *Zhouli* 周禮 and *Yili* 儀禮) became increasingly important. Frequent calls were made to replace the grandiose claims of the Qin and early Han and to return to the simplicity of the classics.[39] Court-sponsored scholarship at the beginning of the Eastern Han more and more came to be focused on commentaries to the texts purportedly written and edited by Confucius and by earlier sages, such as the Duke of Zhou.[40]

Just as the grandiose claims of the Qin and early Han imperial order came under critique, so did those texts associated with similar grandiose claims of sagely innovation and comprehensiveness. In his *Fayan* 法言, a

text self-consciously modeled on the laconic dialogue style of the *Analects*, Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 B.C.–A.D. 18) argues:

> Someone said, "Huainan and the Great Historian [Sima Qian], they knew so much. How could they write so eclectically?" I said: "Eclectic, indeed. It is a human fault to make knowing so much into being eclectic. Only a sage makes it into not being eclectic."[41]

For Yang Xiong, the grand, encyclopedic works that attempted to cover all topics and render judgments on all issues—texts like the *Huainanzi* and *Shiji*—are examples not of great sageliness but rather the opposite.

In short, with the end of the Western Han and continuing into the Eastern Han, a reaction developed against the court culture of the early empires—a culture in which emperors and authors alike celebrated their sagehood, their superiority over previous sages, and their ability to create more grandiose works (either territorial or textual) than their predecessors. The reaction involved a call to return to the period before this culture began—to the Zhou, or at least to Confucius, the last sage to preserve the teachings of the Zhou. A call, in other words, to return to the period before the progressive escalation of claims of sagehood and the competitive authorship of ever-larger texts that characterized the culture after Confucius.

The End of Sagely Creation

As the grandiose style, grandiose claims, and grandiose size of texts like the *Huainanzi* came under critique in the Eastern Han, claims to sagehood as the basis of textual authority also began to lose their cultural resonance. Those who called for a return to the earlier sages of antiquity (Confucius and before) would clearly oppose claims by contemporary authors to be superseding the sages of the past. But the concern with claims to sagehood can be seen equally strongly among those who rejected the idea that Confucius was the last sage.

A particularly telling example of this shift can be seen in the *Taiping jing* 太平經.[42] The portion of interest here consists of a series of dialogues between a "Celestial Master" and a group of "Perfected".[43] The Celestial Master is explicitly defined as *not* being a sage. The reason is that there

have already been many sages before—sages who did indeed teach the words of Heaven and Earth, but who ended up creating different things according to their specific abilities. And there have been so many of these sagely creations accumulating throughout the ages that humanity has ended up veering from the path of Heaven and Earth:

> The sages of antiquity and the present have had weaknesses and strengths. Each excelled in one activity. All gave speeches from Heaven and words from Earth, but what each created (*zuo*) was different. Thus, the various sages who have emerged earlier and later have each done different things.... Thus the various sages must not entirely have understood the intentions of Heaven and Earth. For this reason, Heaven and Earth have constantly had horrible illnesses that cannot be stopped.[44]

At first glance, the argument seems in some ways comparable to that seen in the *Huainanzi* postface: sages have emerged throughout history, but each had different strengths. But what is dramatically different between the *Huainanzi* postface and the *Taiping jing* argument is the consequent reading of history and the consequent solution offered. For the authors of the *Huainanzi*, the goal was to articulate yet a more inclusive sagely position that would trump the limitations of all previous sages and thus hold true for all time. For the *Taiping jing* authors, however, the very thing we need to avoid is listening to yet another sage, for this would simply recreate the same problem:

> If they [Heaven and Earth] were to wish again to give birth to a sage, it would just be the same yet again. Heaven has been troubled for a long time. For this reason it sent me down to give its words as announcements to you, the Perfected.[45]

The solution is not that we need yet another sage. Instead, Heaven has sent down the Celestial Master to give us teachings.

And what are these teachings? Tellingly, the authors do not present the Celestial Master as creating anew (like the earlier sages), or even as laying out a grand new re-weaving of all previous knowledge into a new encyclopedic system (the sort of project we saw in the *Huainanzi*). On the contrary, the authors explicitly argue that, since the Celestial Master is not a sage, he also will not create anything new at all. Rather, he calls on

humans to collect all previous writings and from them build a proper understanding:

> If the sages of higher antiquity missed something, the sages of middle antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of middle antiquity missed something, the sages of lower antiquity may have obtained it. If the sages of lower antiquity missed something, the sages of higher antiquity may have obtained it. If one has these follow each other by category and thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement.[46]

In other words, a complete sagely understanding can be achieved by literally collecting all of their writings and placing them together.

> If we completely gather their texts and essential sayings and collect their strengths and weaknesses, having them follow each other by category and thereby supplementing one another, then it will be complete.[47]

Absent here is any attempt to claim (even if through denials) a new sagely creation. On the contrary, there is an explicit denial here that a new sage creating anew would accomplish anything other than re-creating the same problems as before. Rather all we need to do is collect and collate all previous writings. And the argument for why we should do this is placed not in the mouth of a human sage but rather in that of a celestial master offering revelations from Heaven. In short, sagehood is no longer being utilized as the basis for textual authority. As the authors bluntly state:

> Therefore, Heaven does not again make a sage speak, as he would be unable to fully eradicate all of the problems. Therefore, it makes all of the people under Heaven speak, and it makes them collect the ancient writings and study them.[48]

For the *Taiping jing*, then, it is the sheer volume of previous sagely writings that is the problem: the accumulation of errors that has resulted from this body of texts has led humanity to such a dangerous point, and the only solution is to deny sagehood as the basis for textual authority altogether. In short: in the *Taiping jing* we see in a particularly strong way the sense of belatedness vis-à-vis the earlier textual tradition and the consequent rejection of sagehood as the basis for textual authority.

The Sages of Today

When we turn back to Wang Chong, we find a very similar set of concerns as those that animated the *Taiping jing* a little later. We have already noted a strong sense of belatedness in Wang Chong—the sense of standing at the end of a lengthy proliferation of texts by and about putative sages over the previous several centuries. And we have noted two responses to this general sense in the Eastern Han. The first—supported by the imperial court—was to oppose the grandiose claims of sagehood that had characterized this proliferation and instead to emphasize the classics authored or edited by Confucius. The second, seen so clearly in the *Taiping jing*, was to reject sagehood as a basis for textual authority altogether. Wang Chong, in contrast to both of these options, went in a quite different direction. Very much in opposition to the dominant strands of Eastern Han thought, Wang Chong fervently opposed the growing sense that the age of author sages was or should be considered over.

To begin with, Wang Chong strongly opposed the attempt to limit the canon to commentaries on a restricted body of these earlier texts. Wang Chong shows the same concern with this development as would appear somewhat later in the *Taiping jing*, namely that the teachings of past sages would be accepted as absolute truths. Like the authors of the later *Taiping jing* section, Wang Chong was highly concerned about an over-reverence for the sages of the past—all of whom, as the authors of the *Taiping jing* section held, were in fact limited. To follow any single one of them completely would just create dangerous errors.

> The scholars of today love to trust their teachers and affirm antiquity, taking what the sages and worthies spoke as without error. They concentrate their essence explaining and putting into practice their sayings, but they do not understand how to ask difficult questions. Now, when the worthies and sages used the brush and created writings, they utilized their intentions and examined issues in particular. But it cannot be said that they fully obtained the substance; moreover, how is it possible for particular words uttered on the spur of the moment to always be accurate?[49]

The issue raised here is the same as the one we saw earlier with the *Huainanzi* and the *Taiping jing*: the words of the earlier sages should not be

taken as true for all time. Wang Chong accordingly devotes entire chapters to critiquing specific masters—Han Feizi,[50] Mencius,[51] and Confucius himself.[52]

But what worries Wang Chong about this over-reliance on the writings of past sages is the opposite of what concerned the authors of the *Taiping jing* section. If the authors of the *Taiping jing* were concerned that people might listen to yet more sages and thus continue the ever-worsening accumulation of errors, Wang Chong is worried precisely that sages of today would not be listened to—or even recognized:

> If today there were one better than Confucius and Mozi in speaking of the Way, his name would not be placed as the equal of theirs.[53]

What concerns Wang Chong is precisely the growing sense of distantiation from the sages—the notion that the age of the sages is over and that we are now condemned to simply follow the texts of the past. Wang Chong is saying we need to accept that sages still arise and that their teachings are every bit as good as the earlier sages. In other words, Wang Chong wants to continue playing the same game of sagely creation that led to the proliferation of texts during the Warring States period.

The solution, therefore, is the opposite of the one offered by the *Taiping jing*. If the *Taiping jing* moves the notion of degeneracy to a new level, ultimately rejecting sagehood altogether as the basis of textual authority, Wang Chong on the contrary goes the other way and attempts to revive the earlier linkage of writing with sagehood. If the *Taiping jing* raised the notion of belatedness to literally apocalyptic levels, Wang Chong wants desperately to overcome it.

All of this, of course, raises the question of whether Wang Chong considered himself a sage. We have already noted that his postface is an attempt to play the old Warring States/early Han game of denying sagehood—presumably as a means of implicitly claiming it. Let us return to Wang Chong's defense of his authorship, and more particularly to how he presented himself vis-à-vis the earlier sages. The first stage in his argument was quoted above:

> Some say: "Sages create, and worthies transmit. If there is a worthy who creates, this is wrong. The *Lunheng* and *Zhengwu* [another text authored by Wang Chong] can be called creations."

> I say: They are not creations. And they are also not transmissions. They are rather discussions. Discussions are second even to transmissions."[54]

Wang Chong then elaborates on each of these distinctions:

> The emergence of the Five Classics can be called a creation. The book of the Great Historian [Sima Qian] ... can be called a transmission. Huan Junshan's [Huan Tan's] *Xin Lun* ... can be called a discussion.[55]

As we have already seen, Wang Chong argues that Confucius was indeed, despite his denials, a creator. Wang Chong further, however, claims that Sima Qian really was just a transmitter, and he posits yet a third category—a "discussion"—even farther removed from creation. Wang Chong, of course, puts himself in this category, thus outdoing both Confucius and Sima Qian in denials of sagely creation. These arguments are very much an attempt to replay the old game that was so common in the period of the sagely writing—a period that Wang Chong looks to nostalgically.

As discussed above, Sima Qian, after making his disclaimer about creating, goes on to describe his authorship of individual chapters as precisely that of creation—thus showing that his disclaimer should not be taken at face value. It should not surprise us by this point that Wang Chong's argument continues along a similar line: having made his requisite disclaimer, Wang Chong tacitly admits that he is in fact creating anew. But he does so by shifting his argument altogether, claiming that creating anew should not be restricted to sages anyway:

> In ancient times the rulers ordered the collecting of poems, desiring to see the customs and know the feelings of those below. The poems were created among the people. The sage kings could have said, "You people, how could you create anew?", and have imprisoned their bodies and wiped out their poems. Now, it was not done this way, and therefore the *Poems* were transmitted down to today. The *Lunheng* and *Zhengwu* are like the *Poems*.[56]

Creating anew is a common activity; it is not something that should be imbued with such a sense of significance. If Sima Qian's statement of having created the chapters of his work read like a claim to the very sagehood that he had earlier provided the requisite disclaimer to, Wang

Chong is arguing that he is creating anew, but that this is not something restricted to sages anyway. Unlike Wang Chong's other argument that sagehood should not be seen as something relegated to the past, the argument here is that creation is not something that should be restricted to sages at all. Anyone can create.

This is a much weaker argument than one would find in Western Han works like the *Huainanzi* and Sima Qian. But, as a claim of legitimation for the *Lun Heng*, it in some ways rings truer than Wang Chong's attempts to argue that sagely creation should not be restricted to the past. Although, as mentioned above, the *Lun Heng* does indeed contain critiques of earlier sages, those critiques pale in comparison to the sorts of things one sees in the *Huainanzi*, or the kind of competitive agon that Sima Qian seems to feel against Confucius. Wang Chong's critiques of earlier sages are done simply to show that the previous sages are not perfect, and that their doctrines contain contradictions or limitations. But absent is any attempt to define a grand, new, overarching vision—the sort of thing to which the *Huainanzi* is devoted. And equally absent is the attempt to provide an absolute summation of all of history—the sort of thing Sima Qian attempted in his competition with Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals*. Although Wang Chong bemoans the prevailing view that sages are a thing of the past, his own writing betrays little of the sagely arrogance that defined so much of early Western Han writings. Indeed, despite the radically different claims, Wang Chong's actual treatment of earlier writings is in fact quite similar, ironically enough, to the approach that would be called for later in the *Taiping jing*: Wang Chong is simply going through previous writings and collating their teachings and correcting their errors. Although the *Taiping jing* may have represented a radical form of this Eastern Han tendency toward collation (as opposed to sagely creation), Wang Chong's *Lun Heng* is pointing in that direction as well. Indeed, the historical influence of Wang Chong would lie not in his attempt to bring back the earlier claims of sagely creation but rather in his approach of discussing earlier texts. The genre of "discussions", which Wang Chong invoked as a third category behind even transmission to emphasize his modest denials of sagely creation, would in fact become a significant genre over the course of the second century.[57] Ironically, the lasting influence of the figure most

concerned with bringing back notions of sagely creation was a genre of writing removed from the claim of sagehood.

Writing Without Sages

Historically, Wang Chong's attempts to revive the old game of sagely authorship was to fall on deaf ears. Despite Wang Chong's calls for a rejection of the notion that sages are simply of the past, such a sense of belatedness would only grow more strongly over the course of the Eastern Han. Indeed, the entire genre of the grand comprehensive sagely treatise, which had flourished and grown in size in relation to the progressive claims of sagehood that occurred over the course of the third and second centuries B.C., largely comes to an end in the Eastern Han. The vision of a sage-author, writing his own arguments in a grand text to last for eternity, largely disappears. Wang Chong marks in many ways one of the last attempts to claim (even if through denials) authorial sagely creation. And, as we have seen, even Wang Chong's attempt reveals the shift from the Western Han almost as dramatically as a text like the *Taiping jing*. The legitimation for the production of new texts came increasingly to focus on other claims than that of sagehood—such as divine revelation, or access to an early esoteric tradition. The proliferation of new, ever-larger texts by self-proclaimed (even if implicitly) sages largely came to an end.

Intriguingly, however, if Wang Chong's claims that sagehood should not be relegated to the past failed to win the day, his attempts at the end of the "Dui Zuo" to divorce the notion of creation from sagehood were on the contrary to become increasingly common. Soon after Wang Chong made these arguments, a dramatic invention occurred that would fundamentally alter the manuscript culture of the time, and with it notions of authorship. Paper was introduced. The significance of this development for Chinese history cannot be over-exaggerated.[58] Although the court continued to use bamboo, paper quickly became the preferred medium of writing among the literati. Instead of the tremendous difficulty of writing and circulating bamboo documents, paper made possible a dramatic increase in the relative commonality of authorship.

As Wilt Idema has argued,

> The perfection of paper as a suitable material for writing by the end of the first century marks a watershed in the development of Chinese literature ... Prior to the first century A.D ... only the great historical and philosophical works have come down to us. Letters, memorials, and other short prose forms were preserved only if they happened to be included in historical works such as the *Shiji* and *Hanshu* 漢書.[59]

The consequence of this is that the notion of *zuo*, of creation, gradually lost its restrictive resonance. As Stephen Owen has argued:

> ... the Sage maker (*zuo zhe* 作者) formulates how things both should be and historically were. By the Han [I would specify: Eastern Han], this grander sense of sagely "making" had diminished ... to a weaker and broader sense of "writing" or "composition".[60]

Writing, in other words, increasingly came to be divorced from the notion of sagehood, and *zuo* came to be seen as something that could be done commonly, with no potential claim to sagehood.

Thus, this shift to the use of paper only intensified the cultural changes that we were discussing above. As the circulation of writings became relatively easier and the creation of new writings itself came to be seen as a more and more common activity among the literate elite, the notion of sagehood as a basis for textual authority continued to lose its cultural resonance. Writing new ideas was thus no longer seen as restricted to sages, and claims to authority thus had to appeal to other objects—either great sages of the past or revelations from divine powers.

Seen in this light, Wang Chong's ultimately failed attempt to revive the old game of claiming (through denial) sagely authorship takes on a certain poignance. Despite his best efforts, Wang Chong lies at the end of the classical period, a period that began to come to an end with the changes that occurred at the end of the Western Han, and that reached its full conclusion with the introduction of paper.

And thus ended the age of the great sagely book. Once writing came to be more accessible to the literate elite, then the need to defend the authorship and circulation of texts with claims (even if through denial) of sagehood became unnecessary. The process that began with the cultural

changes at the end of the Western Han was furthered with the introduction of paper. The age of writing as a more common activity began; the age of the great sagely book was over.

Notes

1. Wang Chong, *Lun Heng* 論衡, "Dui Zuo", chapter 84, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (hereafter referred to as ICS), 84/362/8–10. Here and throughout my discussion of Wang Chong, my translations of the *Lun Heng* have been aided greatly by those given by Alfred Forke in his *Lun-Heng, Part I: Philosophical Essays of Wang Ch'ung* (New York: Paragon Book Gallery, 1962).
2. Wang Chong, *Lun Heng*, "Dui Zuo", 84/362/11–14.
3. Ibid., 84/362/14–15.
4. Ibid., 84/363/1–2.
5. Ibid., 84/363/2–3.
6. Ibid., 84/362/14.
7. Ibid., 84/362/23.
8. Ibid., 84/363/6–7.
9. Ibid., 84/363/16.
10. *Lunyu*, 7/1.
11. For a superb analysis of the forms of writing in early China, see Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962).
12. William G. Boltz, "Language and Writing", in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China, From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 107–108; Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, pp. 90–92.
13. Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Western Zhou History", in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China, From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, pp. 297–299.
14. Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, pp. 90–113. See also Donald Harper, "Warring States, Qin, and Han Manuscripts Related to Natural Philosophy and the Occult", in *New Sources of Early Chinese History: An Introduction to the Reading of Inscriptions and Manuscripts*, ed. Edward L. Shaughnessy (Berkeley: The Institute of

East Asian Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 1997), pp. 223–252.

15. Hsü Cho-yun, *Ancient China in Transition: An Analysis of Social Mobility, 722–222 B.C.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965). More recently, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 30–33, 75–78; and Lewis, "Warring States: Political History", in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China, From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.*, pp. 641–645. For a superb study of the *zi* literature as a genre, see the excellent dissertation by Wiebke Denecke, "Mastering Chinese Philosophy: A History of the Genre of 'Masters Literature' from the *Analects* to the *Han Feizi*" (Harvard University, 2004).
16. Archaeology leaves little doubt about the proliferation of non-court-based writings during the Warring States period relative to what had existed before. What is still hotly debated, however, is precisely how extensive this proliferation was. In forthcoming works, David Schaberg and Martin Kern are arguing that writing was still quite rare during this period. A counter-argument to this view has been offered by Michael Radich in his seminar paper, "The Oral Hypothesis in the Study of Early Chinese Philosophical Texts: Bases, Criteria for Evaluation, and Consequences" (Harvard University, spring 2003).
17. *Mengzi*, 3B/9.
18. See the excellent discussion by Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
19. *Mengzi*, 2A/2.
20. Ibid., 2B/13. My translation of this passage follows closely that given in *Mencius*, translated by D. C. Lau (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 94.
21. See the excellent essay by Scott Cook, "The *Lüshi chunqiu* and the Resolution of Philosophical Dissonance", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62.2 (December 2002): 307–345.
22. See the excellent discussions of the *Huainanzi* postface by Sarah Queen, "The Trouble with Taxonomies: Rethinking the 'School' Affiliation of the *Huainanzi*", forthcoming in *Asia Major*; and Judson Murray, "A Study of 'A Summary of the Essentials': The *Huainanzi* from the Point of View of the Postface", forthcoming in *Early China*.
23. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 159–160. See also the excellent discussion in Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An's Claim to Moral Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

24. *Huainanzi*, "Yaolüe", ICS, 21/228/28–31.
25. This attitude of superseding previous writings is common throughout the chapters of the *Huainanzi* as well. Although the specific content of the chapters varies considerably, one attribute that characterizes all of the chapters is a willingness to re-write previous claims into a new, all-inclusive vision. I have referred to the *Huainanzi*'s use of earlier texts as one of "violent misreadings". See my "Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the *Huainanzi*", *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, 72 (2000): 29–47.
26. On Sima Qian's relationship to Confucius, see Stephen W. Durrant, *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).
27. *Shiji*, Zhonghua shuju edition, 120.3297.
28. Ibid., 120.3299–3300.
29. Ibid., 6.245.
30. Ibid., 6.249.
31. Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 141–176.
32. *Hanshu* "Jiaosi zhi", Zhonghua shuju edition, 25B.1257.
33. Ibid., 25B.1254.
34. Ibid., 25B.1254.
35. Lu Jia, *Xinyu*, "Dao ji", ICS, 1/2/12–13.
36. *Hanshu*, 26.2515.
37. Ibid., 56.2523.
38. Dong Zhongshu's influence on court politics in particular has been exaggerated. Sima Qian, for example, clearly did not see Dong as a significant figure at Wudi's court. See Sarah Queen, *From Chronicle to Canon: The Hermeneutics of the Spring and Autumn Annals, According to Tung Chung-shu* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 205; Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 166–168, 262–263n93; Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 33–41.
39. For a discussion of the late Western Han ritual reforms, see Michael Loewe, *Crisis and Conflict in Han China 104 BC to 9 AD* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), pp. 154–192; Martin Kern, "Ritual, Text, and the Formation of the Canon: Historical Transitions of *wen* in Early China", *T'oung Pao* 87.1–3 (2001); Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early*

China, pp. 351–360; Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), pp. 307–313.

40. Qian Mu 錢穆, "Liang Han boshi jia fa kao" 兩漢博士家法考, in *Liang Han jingxue jin gu wen pingyi* 兩漢經學今古文平議 (Taibei: Dadong, 1978); Patricia Ebrey, "The Economic and Social History of the Later Han", in *The Cambridge History of China, Volume I: The Ch'in and Han Empires, 221 B.C.–A.D. 220*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Michael Loewe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 608–648; Robert P. Kramers, "The Development of the Confucian Schools", in idem, pp. 756–765; Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China*, pp. 351–360.
41. Yang Xiong, *Fayan*, "Wen Shen", ICS, 5/12/21–22. For excellent discussions of Yang Xiong, see Michael Nylan and Nathan Sivin, "The First Neo-Confucianism: An Introduction to Yang Hsiung's 'Canon Of Supreme Mystery' (*T'ai hsuan ching*, c. 4 B.C.)", in *Chinese Ideas about Nature and Society: Studies in Honour of Derk Bodde*, ed. Charles le Blanc and Susan Blader (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1987), pp. 41–99; Michael Nylan, *The Canon of Supreme Mystery by Yang Hsiung* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).
42. My understanding of the *Taiping jing* has been aided tremendously by Max Kaltenmark, "The Ideology of the *T'ai-p'ing ching*", in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 19–45; Xiong Deji 熊得基, "Taiping jing de zuozhe he sixiang ji qi yu Huangjin he Tianshidao de guanxi" 太平經的作者和思想及其與黃巾和天師道的關係, *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, 4 (1962): 8–25; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the Taiping jing, Part One", *Acta Orientalia* 50 (1989): 133–171; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the Taiping jing, Part Two", *Acta Orientalia* 51 (1990): 173–216; Jens Østergård Petersen, "The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping jing*", *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* (Autumn 1990) 3: 1–41; Barbara Hendrischke, "The Daoist Utopia of Great Peace", *Oriens Extremus* (1992) 35: 61–91; and Barbara Hendrischke, "The Concept of Inherited Evil in the *Taiping Jing*", *East Asian History*, 1991 (2): 1–30.
43. The extant *Taiping jing* is clearly a heterogeneous collection. However, the majority of the extant text (forty-four chapters of the total fifty-seven) consists of these dialogues between a Celestial Master and the Perfected. The dialogues are also written in a distinctive style and have a very coherent argument.

They do, therefore, seem to be a homogeneous set. The precise date is difficult to determine, but most scholars agree that the content seems to belong to a later Eastern Han context. See the helpful summary by Barbara Hendrischke, "Early Daoist Movements", in *The Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 143–145.

44. Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 91.350.
45. Ibid., 91.350.
46. Ibid., 91.351.
47. Ibid., 91.352.
48. Ibid., 91.356.
49. Wang Chong, *Lun Heng*, "Wen Kong", chapter 28, 28/121/17–18.
50. Ibid., "Fei Han", chapter 29.
51. Ibid., "Ci Meng", chapter 30.
52. Ibid., "Wen Kong", chapter 28.
53. Ibid., "Qi shi", chapter 56, 56/250/17.
54. Ibid., "Dui Zuo", 84/363/16.
55. Ibid., "Dui Zuo", 84/363/18–20.
56. Ibid., "Dui Zuo", 84/365/4–6.
57. See the discussion by Anne Behnke Kinney, *The Art of the Han Essay: Wang Fu's Ch'ien Fu Lun* (Tempe, Arizona: Center for Asian Studies, Arizona State University, 1990), pp. 21–49.
58. See the excellent discussion in Tsien Tsuen-Hsuin, *Written on Bamboo and Silk: The Beginnings of Chinese Books and Inscriptions*, pp. 131–157.
59. Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1997), p. 105.
60. Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, 1992), p. 77.