

Confucian Irony? »King Wu's Enthronement« Reconsidered

Yuri Pines

Lord Huan was reading books at the top of the hall.
Wheelwright Pian was chipping a wheel at the bottom of the hall.
He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Lord Huan:
»I dare to ask, what words is my lord reading?«
The lord answered: »Words of the sages.«
[Pian] asked: »Are the sages alive?«
The lord answered: »They are already dead.«
»So—said [Pian]—what my lord is reading is nothing but
the dregs of the souls of the ancients!«

Zhuangzi

Irony is a feature rarely associated with pre-imperial Chinese ideological lore. Scholars of Chinese literature would readily identify irony as a characteristic of the literary production of the mature age of China's intellectual self-awareness, such as the Ming dynasty; others would trace its development to the historical genre (which, as is well known, influenced Chinese literary tradition as well). In a brilliant study, Li Wai-yee has recently identified manifold ironical dimensions in ostensibly serious and straightforward narratives of the *Zuo zhuan*, suggesting thereby that subtle irony is traceable to the very foundations of the Chinese historical genre.¹ Yet should a scholar be

1 For a classical study of ironical dimensions in Chinese literary masterpieces of the Ming period, see Andrew Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); see also his »The Aesthetic of Irony in Late Ming Literature and Painting«, in Alfreda Murck and Wen C. Fong, eds., *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy and Painting* (New York and Princeton, NJ: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, 1991), 487-500. For irony in the *Zuo zhuan*, see Li Wai-yee *The Readability of the Past in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2007).

challenged with finding irony in the intellectual production of the so-called »Hundred Schools« of thought of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), he would be hard pressed to produce convincing examples. Surely, the *Zhuangzi* would be his first stop, for it is a text with a wonderful sense of humor, and a constant readiness to juxtapose direct and indirect readings of established truths and to draw attention to the incongruity between what is expressed and what is intended. The cynical *Han Feizi* would perhaps come second. But is there irony outside the *Zhuangzi* and Han Feizi, particularly in the texts from Confucian lore?

For many the question would seem puzzling. What we now identify as »Confucian« (*Ru*) texts, namely those associated with Confucius, Mengzi, Xunzi, and their multiple disciples, followers and intellectual associates, are usually devoid of humor or ironic dimensions. On the contrary, many (although by no means all) of these texts are dull, didactic, and lack the literary brilliance of *Zhuangzi* or Han Feizi. This is especially true of the many texts related to ritual, which were assembled in several major compendia, such as the canonical *Yili* and *Liji*, or the quasi-canonical *Da Dai Liji*. While some of the »chapters« of these compendia contain interesting and intellectually engaging discussions, looking for irony in them is almost inconceivable. After all, ritual is associated with solemnity, seriousness and precision—features for which irony would be disastrous. Naturally, ritual compendia would appear to be a most unfitting repository for irony.

This said, I think that there is at least one instance in which irony may be the proper prism through which to analyze what pretends to be a serious and solemn text. The chapter I have chosen comes from the *Da Dai Liji*, an early Han collection of heterogeneous texts, many of which deal either with Confucius and his disciples or with the deeds and words of paragon rulers and ministers of high antiquity. The chapter is named »King Wu's Enthronement« (»Wu Wang jianzuo«) and ostensibly belongs to the popular genre of didactic anecdotes.² It is built around an exchange between King Wu, the *de-facto* founder of the Zhou dynasty, and one of his paradigmatic »wise ministers«, Taigong (Grand Duke Wang): the king asks Taigong to provide a recipe for effective rule and is duly inspired by Taigong's advice. However, beneath this standard setting, the short chapter conceals the seeds of an alternative, »subversive« reading, which sheds an ironic light on the classical interaction of an enlightened ruler with his worthy aide.

The »King Wu's Enthronement« is not a well-known chapter. The *Da Dai Liji* compendium, collected by Dai De in the first century BCE, did not obtain canonical status similar to another closely related compendium, the *Liji*. Accordingly, it was far less circulated and studied than the *Liji* or other canonical texts.³ However, very recently the »King Wu's Enthronement« chapter came to light once again when an early version was published as part of the Shanghai Museum collection of bamboo manuscripts. The Shanghai Museum corpus, which until now has only been partially

2 The role of didactic anecdotes in pre-imperial and early imperial ideological lore had been discussed in several studies by David C. Schaberg. See, e.g., his »Remonstrance in Eastern Zhou Historiography«, *Early China* 22 (1997), 133–179 and *A Patterned Past: Form and Thought in Early Chinese Historiography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001).

3 For the textual history of *Da Dai Liji*, see Wang Wenjin 王文錦, »Ben shu qian yan« 本書前言, in *Da Dai Liji jiegou* 大戴禮記解詁, comp. by Wang Pinzhen 王聘珍 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 1–11.

published, comprises dozens of texts that were plundered from the Mainland and subsequently purchased by the Shanghai Museum at the antique market of Hong Kong in 1994. According to current scholarly consensus, the manuscripts from the Shanghai Museum corpus were produced in the state of Chu in the fourth (or, according to a minority view, early third) century BCE; in any case, it is clear that »King Wu's Enthronement« already existed as an independent text during the Warring States period. Recent publication of the »bamboo version« (as I shall refer to it) allows the place of »King Wu's Enthronement« in the intellectual and literary history of pre-imperial China to be addressed once more.⁴

Since the publication of the bamboo version, numerous studies have addressed manifold textual problems of the unearthed text and its relation to the received version. A few scholars have also proposed a new reading of the »King Wu's Enthronement« chapter as a whole, though they have uniformly analyzed it as a regular »Confucian« essay.⁵ To date, not a single study has paid attention to the oddities in the text's narrative, which appear to me to allow for—or even require—an ironical reading. In this essay I shall focus precisely on these aspects, which have remained beyond scholarly interest.

In what follows I shall translate the entire chapter of »King Wu's Enthronement« and analyze it. I hope to show that behind its overtly serious appearance the text can be read as an ironical treatment, or even as satirical depiction, of the *Ru* obsession with the »sacred legacy« of former monarchs, of the predominant trend of making written records of ideologically important texts and statements, and perhaps of the very genre of didactic anecdotes to which the text ostensibly belongs. My translation follows the better known received version, but when necessary I supplement it with references to the »bamboo version.« At the end of this essay I shall propose a possible explanation for the appearance of this ironic text in Confucian lore.

4 For the unearthed version, see »Wu Wang jian zuo« 武王踐阼, transcribed and annotated by Chen Peifen 陳佩芬, in *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹書, ed. by Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, vol. 7 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 2008), 147–168. In what follows I shall cite the bamboo version with references to its slips, as they appear in the initial arrangement by Chen Peifen. It should be noticed, that the bamboo version comprises two parts, written by different scribes: the first section comprises ten slips which roughly parallel the received version, although the beginning appears to be slightly abridged; the second section (slips 11–15) represent an alternative variant of the anecdote's beginning. See a systematic study by the Fudan University team: Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu gu wenzi yanjiu zhongxin yanjiusheng dushu hui 復旦大學出土文獻與古文字研究中心研究生讀書會, »Shangbo qi Wu wang jianzuo jiaodu« 《上博七·武王踐阼》校讀 <gwz.fudan.edu.cn/articles/up/0240.doc>; cf. Li Songru 李松儒, »Shangbo qi Wu wang jianzuo de chaoxie tezheng ji wenben goucheng« 上博七《武王踐阼》的抄寫特徵及文本構成 (www.gwz.fudan.edu.cn/articles/up/0419.doc) For a more systematic comparison between the received and the bamboo version, see, e.g., Liu Hongshou, 劉洪濤, »Yong jianben jiaodu chuanben Wu Wang jianzuo« 用簡本校讀傳本《武王踐阼》 <www.bsm.org.cn/show_article.php?id=997>.

5 See, e.g., He Youzu 何有祖, »Shang bo jian Wu Wang jianzuo chu du« 上博簡《武王踐阼》初讀 <www.bsm.org.cn/show_article.php?id=756>.

Part A: Translation and Analysis

»King Wu's Enthronement« can be divided into two sections: the first, which focuses on the interaction between King Wu and Taigong and the revelation of the so-called *Cinnabar Document* (*Dan shu*), and the second, which narrates King Wu's creation of his own »admonition book« (*jie shu*). It is possible that both sections originally circulated as independent anecdotes and were later conflated by the redactors of the »King Wu's Enthronement,« but this question is of minor consequence for my analysis and so shall not be dealt with here. Comparing the received and the bamboo versions, we learn that the current form of the text had already been shaped in the Warring States period, with the only major differences relating to the few opening sentences. The received version opens with the following passage:

Three days after his enthronement, King Wu summoned nobles and officials and asked them: »Are there treasured principles that if implemented can become the constant [pattern] for myriad generations of descendants?«

All the nobles replied: »We have never heard of this.«

Then [King Wu] summoned Preceptor Shangfu and asked him: »Does the Way of old of the Yellow Thearch and Zhuaxu still exist? Or is it so unclear that it can no longer be observed?«

Preceptor Shangfu said: »It is in the *Cinnabar Document*, if you, my King, want to hear about it, you should fast.«

Having fasted for three days, the King wore his ceremonial cap; Preceptor Shangfu also wore his ceremonial cap, entered, and stood with his back to the court screen. The king descended from the throne hall, and stood facing south. Preceptor Shangfu said: »The Way of the former kings should not face north!« The king went to the west, then turned to the south and stood facing east; Preceptor Shangfu faced west and read the words of the book.⁶

The story begins with much solemnity. Upon his enthronement, King Wu acts in a manner befitting the paradigmatic sage monarch: he summons his officials and asks them for instructions.⁷ The only one who is able to satisfy the king and provide him with the sacred wisdom of the ancients is Preceptor Shangfu, who is better known under his posthumous name, Taigong. The Preceptor possesses the mysterious *Cinnabar Document*, which is believed to contain the wisdom of the ancients; this document seems to be his individual property, unknown to anybody else. The sacred text may not be revealed. First, the king must fast for three days in order to purify himself; second, he must agree to treat the text with the utmost respect, and even to yield his regular position as a ruler, who should always face south when meeting his subordinates, and to face east instead, treating the *Cinnabar Document* as his equal. This odd yielding of the

6 武王踐阼三日，召士大夫而問焉，曰：“惡有藏之約、行之行，万世可以為子孫常者乎？”諸大夫對曰：“未得聞也！”然后召師尚父而問焉，曰：“昔黃帝顓頊之道存乎？意亦忽不可得見与？”師尚父曰：“在丹書，王欲聞之，則齊矣！”王齊三日，端冕，師尚父亦端冕，奉書而入，負屏而立，王下堂，南面而立，師尚父曰：“先王之道不北面！”王行西，折而南，東面而立，師尚父西面道書之言。 *Da Dai lji*, »Wu Wang jianzuo« VI.59: 103–104 (hereafter »Wu Wang«).

7 This opening does not exist in the bamboo version, which begins directly with King Wu's conversation with Preceptor Shangfu (Taigong).

king to the intellectual authority of the *Cinnabar Document* is emphasized even more strongly in an alternative variant of the opening passage in the bamboo version:

Taigong Wang answered [the king]: »While personally I am your servant, the Way is the Way of the Sages. When you fast, I shall narrate it. If you do not fast, I shall not narrate it.« King Wu fasted for seven days, and Taigong Wang respectfully delivered the *Cinnabar Document* to the court audience. Taigong faced south, King Wu faced north and asked again.⁸

This variant further emphasizes the unrivalled superiority of the *Cinnabar Document*. Here, King Wu has to fast for a whole seven days rather than three, and when listening to the document he has to face north, as befitting a subordinate rather than a ruler. Clearly, the text (in both versions) wishes the reader to believe that the *Cinnabar Document* contains supreme wisdom that transcends mundane authority. The king's fastidious preparations for the revelation, including self-purification through fasting; the solemnity of the ceremony in which the document's contents are to be revealed; the very name of the *Cinnabar Document*, which is associated with sacred scriptures of potentially celestial origin;⁹ the role of Taigong, who, along with the Yellow Thearch (Huang Di) is frequently identified as the possessor of esoteric wisdom¹⁰—all these prepare us for a mysterious revelation of a kind which is commonly associated with the later, »Daoist« lore.¹¹ I shall not focus on the possible »proto-Daoist« theme here; in the context of the current discussion the central point is that the solemn religious setting of the anecdote heightens the reader's expectations, and it may even make him feel joyous that the secrets of the *Cinnabar Document* are to be revealed to him »free of charge,« without having to undergo all the meticulous preparations of King Wu. The contents of the book are duly narrated:

It [the *Cinnabar Document*] said:

»When reverence overcomes negligence, it is auspicious; when negligence overcomes reverence, you are to be exterminated; when dutifulness overcomes desires—follow it; when desires overcome dutifulness—it is inauspicious. In undertakings, when you are not steadfast,

- 8 太公望答曰：“身則君之臣，道則聖人之道。君齋，將道之。君不齋，則弗道。”武王齋七日，太【公】望奉丹書以朝。太公南面，武王北面而復問。(Slips 12–13).
- 9 The name *Cinnabar Document* appears thrice in pre-imperial texts. One case is irrelevant for our discussion: In the *Zuo zhuan* it is a technical term for official documents which recorded the slaves' names. In two other cases (one in the *Yanqi chunqiu* and one in the *Lishi chunqiu*), the *Cinnabar Document* is revealed by Heaven; most significantly, in the latter case it is sent by Heaven through a bird directly to King Wu's father, King Wen of Zhou (see Chen Qiyu 陳奇猷, *Lishi chunqiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 [Shanghai: Xuelin, 1990], »Ying tong« 應同 13.2: 677). The revelation of the *Cinnabar Document* by Taigong to King Wu is mentioned in the *Current* version of the *Bamboo Annals* (今本竹書紀年) under 42nd year of Thearch Xin 帝辛 of the Shang (»Lord of the West, Fa [i.e. King Wu] received the *Cinnabar Document* from Lü Shang [i.e. from Taigong]« 西伯發受丹書于呂尚). Without entering the controversy about the authenticity and reliability of the *Current* version of the *Bamboo Annals*, I would suggest that this record is highly likely to derive from the *Da Dai Liji* chapter rather than vice versa.
- 10 For multiple identities of Taigong, see Sarah Allan, »The Identities of Taigong Wang in Zhou and Han Literature«, *Monumenta Serica* 30 (1972–73), 57–99.
- 11 For manifold parallels in the Daoist lore to the above scene, see, e.g., Gil Raz, »The Creation of Tradition: The Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure and the Formation of Early Daoism« (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2004).

they become crooked; when you are not respectful, they are incorrect; the crooked is exterminated and fades; the respectful continues for myriad generations.«

[Shangfu said]: »The treasured principles, which, if implemented, can be a constant [pattern] for the descendants—it is said about this! Moreover, I, your servant, heard: “if you attained it [All under Heaven] in benevolent fashion and preserve it with benevolence, then [your rule] will be measured by hundreds of generations; if you attained it in a non-benevolent fashion but preserve it with benevolence, then [your rule] will be measured by dozens of generations; if you attained it in a non-benevolent fashion and preserve it in a non-benevolent fashion, then [your rule] will not reach the next generation.”«¹²

For those who had hoped to learn the mysterious wisdom of the ancients from the *Cinnabar Document*, the moment of revelation may be somewhat disappointing. The four paired sentences pronounced by Taigong sound too familiar to an educated reader: they belong to a very common set of admonitions aimed at rulers and high ministers, which permeate pre-imperial and early imperial texts. Warnings against negligence and against giving free rein to one’s desires, admonitions against crookedness and repeated calls to preserve reverence/respectfulness (*jing*)—all these are standard features of pre-imperial ideological lore.¹³ The much anticipated encounter with sacred wisdom turns out to be nothing more than the restatement of a few banalities.

After revealing the content of the *Cinnabar Document*, Taigong adds his own words, which are aimed at giving a better impression than the dullness of his »sacred text.« He tries to convince King Wu that the few cited phrases are exactly what King Wu was looking for, namely the constant pattern for lasting political success. Then Taigong adds a personal recommendation: the king should preserve the realm »in benevolent fashion« in order to ensure perpetual rule for his descendants. This is the only section of the entire chapter under discussion that appears relevant to the historical setting of the anecdote. Recall that shortly after the supposed revelation of the *Cinnabar Document*, King Wu launched his famous campaign against the Shang (ca 1600–1046 BCE), in the aftermath of which he became the sole ruler of the subcelestial realm. In this context, Taigong’s warning that the realm should be »preserved with benevolence« is highly appropriate, and it well reflects the image of King Wu’s rule in the eyes of future generations. Taigong’s prediction that should King Wu follow the path of benevolence the Zhou dynasty would »be measured by dozens of generations« is also highly accurate: the Zhou dynasty survived for more than thirty generations. Were the anecdote to end here, with Taigong’s words, it would certainly qualify as a regular didactic anecdote, despite the feeling that the gap between the inflated expectations of the *Cinnabar Document* and its unimpressive content remains unexplained.

The anecdote does not end here, however. Contrarily to the reader’s expectations, based on countless parallels in the Warring States and Han lore of didactic anecdotes,

12 曰：“敬胜怠者吉，怠胜敬者滅，義胜欲者從，欲胜義者凶，凡事，不強則枉，弗敬則不正，枉者滅廢，敬者万世。’藏之約、行之行、可以為子孫常者，此言之謂也！且臣聞之，以仁得之，以仁守之，其量百世；以不仁得之，以仁守之，其量十世；以不仁得之，以不仁守之，必及其世。” »Wu Wang«, 104.

13 Suffice it to mention the recurrence of the formula »the respectful obtains, the negligent loses« (敬者得之，怠者失之) in another text from Shanghai Museum corpus, named *San de* 三德. See »San de«, annot. by Li Ling 李零, in *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhusu*, vol. 5 (2006), 285–304 (slip 2).

the king does not simply acknowledge the appropriateness of Taigong's instructions, but behaves as if the banalities of the *Cinnabar Document* are exactly the sacred revelation that he—and the readers—had been expecting:

When the king heard the words of the book, he became fearful as if deeply scared; he went back and made an admonition book. He incised it on the four edges of his mat, he incised it on his armrest, incised it on his mirror, incised it on his washbasin, incised it on the pillar, incised it on his staff, incised it on his sash, incised it on his shoes, incised it on his cups and food vessels, incised it on the door, incised it on the window, incised it on his sword, incised in on his bow, incised it on his spear.¹⁴

King Wu's reaction to the *Cinnabar Document* is quite unexpected. Not only does he seem to be genuinely impressed by Taigong's »revelation«, but he is even inspired to produce his own »admonition book.« The latter is created in a very odd fashion, which may be an inversion of the *Cinnabar Document*: rather than preparing a hidden text on bamboo, King Wu does his best to immortalize and publicize his admonitions by incising them on a large number of durable objects. This manner of immortalizing one's ideas is not entirely idiosyncratic in the context of the Warring States period: the notion of incising admonitions on durable bronze vessels had already appeared in the Springs-and-Autumns period;¹⁵ and in the Warring States period it was supplemented by a new tendency of recording important maxims on everyday objects, which allowed the owner, in Mark Csikszentmihalyi's words »to keep the words of the sages literally in front of one's eyes at all times.«¹⁶ By the Han period, this tradition had gained momentum; Csikszentmihalyi notices that early imperial »literati circulated texts suitable for staffs, carriage tables and clothing.«¹⁷ King Wu's frantic outburst of writing might thus have looked somewhat familiar to the reader of the Warring States period; yet once again, certain details of the above account suggest that it is an ironic interpretation of the common *topos* of making ideologically significant inscriptions.

14 王聞書之言，惕若恐懼，退而為戒書，于席之四端為銘焉，於机為銘焉，於鑿為銘焉，於盥盤為銘焉，於楹為銘焉，於杖為銘焉，於帶為銘焉，於履屨為銘焉，於觶豆為銘焉，於戶為銘焉，於牖為銘焉，於劍為銘焉，於弓為銘焉，於矛為銘焉。»Wu Wang«, 104–105.

15 The first known instance of an incised admonition is a now lost bronze inscription on the washbasin made by Shi Hui (fl. late 7th c. BCE), which is cited in the late 10th century CE *Taiping yulan* 太平禦覽 collection (see *Taiping yulan* [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 1998], 758: 3365). The bronze was initially the medium of communicating with ancestral spirits (see Lothar von Falkenhausen, »Issues in Western Zhou Studies: A Review Article«, *Early China* 18 [1993], 139–226), while Shi Hui's inscription, directed at the posterity, may reflect a new, secular usage of this metal. It is difficult to assess how much this usage was widespread; I am unaware of archeologically discovered bronze vessels with inscribed admonitions, and all the extant examples are cited from early compendia (see He Youzu, »Shang bo jian«). The closest archeologically verifiable parallel to these »admonition vessels« may be short moralizing slogans inscribed on clay seals used by Qin 秦 officials. See Wang Hui 王輝 and Cheng Xuehua 程學華, *Qin wenzi jizheng* 秦文字集證 (Taipei: Yinwen, 1999), 299–309.

16 See Mark Csikszentmihalyi, »Reimagining the Yellow Emperor's Four Faces«, in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, ed. by Martin Kern (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 2005), 226–248, cited from p. 230. Csikszentmihalyi conveniently summarizes many instances of inscribed bronze objects with ideologically significant inscriptions on them; see also He Youzu, »Shang bo jian.«

17 Csikszentmihalyi, »Reimagining the Yellow Emperor's Four Faces«, 230.

The problem with King Wu's explosion of inscription-making is its obviously exaggerated scope. The king utilizes no less than 14 objects, some of which are appropriate for this activity (e.g. bronze utensils), while others are clearly not (e.g. a mat and a pair of boots). Given that the text consistently talks of »incision« (*ming*), which is technically impossible for such objects as sash, boots or a mat, King Wu's behavior looks even odder. The major problem, however, is the cumulative effect of King Wu's activity. It puts the king into a kind of a room filled with objects that communicate with him, issuing their admonitions and instructions. This creates an unmistakably comic effect: the king is surrounded by the words of his own wisdom, which cover his furniture, utensils, garments and weapons, turning his palace into an early anticipation of the TV-walls in Ray Bradbury's immortal *Fahrenheit 451*. Not a single text from the Warring States period contains anything similar to this »admonition room«, and I maintain that the obvious inflation of the incised objects is not incidental, but is deliberately constructed so as to highlight the improbability of the scene.

But let us for a moment take the scene seriously. For a reader from the Warring States period, King Wu is the sage monarch, on a par with early Thearchs, whose wisdom was brought to him through the *Cinnabar Document*. Surely, if such an important personality inscribes everything around him with his admonitions, then they should be highly significant sayings, should they not? Let us now look at these 17 maxims (one record was made on each object, except the mat, for which a separate record was made on each corner; I have numbered the maxims for the reader's convenience):

1. The inscription on the front left corner of the mat read: »Be reverent when you are at peace and joyous.«
2. The inscription on the front right corner read: »Do nothing shameful.«
3. The inscription on the back left corner read: »Even when turning restlessly—you should never forget [the Way].«
4. The inscription on the back right corner read: »The mirror to be watched is not far away—look at those whom you replaced.«¹⁸
5. The inscription on the armrest read: »Magnificent is reverence! Your mouth gives birth to insults; mouth hurts the mouth.«
6. The inscription on the mirror read: »Look at what is in front, think of what is behind.«
7. The inscription on the washbasin read: »It is better to be drowned in the abyss than to be drowned among the men. One who is drowned in the abyss, still may swim; one who is drowned among the men cannot be saved.«
8. The inscription on the pillar read: »Do not ask 'how to injure'—your disaster will be burning; do not ask 'how to harm'—your disaster will be great; do not ask 'how to wound'—your disaster will be everlasting.«
9. The inscription on the staff read: »How does danger arise?—From becoming angry.—How does one lose the Way?—Through attractions and desires.—How does one forget this?—Through riches and nobility.«
10. The inscription on the sash read: »Even when facing fire and extermination, his appearance is rectified; cautious and watchful, he is surely to be reverent; reverence brings about longevity.«

18 Referring to the Shang dynasty; this is an anachronism, since the replacement of the Shang should have happened shortly *after* the depicted events.

11. The inscription on the shoes read: »One who is cautious, works hard; the hard-working becomes rich.«
12. The inscription on cups and food vessels read: »Behave yourself when eating, behave yourself when eating; be watchful about indolence, indolence will lead to your end.«
13. The inscription on the door read: »Reputation is hard to obtain and easy to lose. You are not diligent and do not aspire [at certain matter], but are saying: ‘I understand this.’ You are not diligent and do not persist [in demanding certain matter] but are saying: ‘I rely on this.’ When one disturbs and blocks the water to make it into the mud, he will be the first to be shaken when the wind arrives.¹⁹ Even if there will be a sage around him, he will not be able to plan for him.«
14. The inscription on the window read: »Follow Heaven’s seasons, utilize resources of the Earth, reverently sacrifice to August Heaven, be reverent in advance of proper timing!«
15. The inscription on the sword read: »Bring it to subdue; move it to implement virtue; when you implement virtue you will prosper, when you turn your back to virtue, you will collapse.«
16. The inscription on the bow read: »In the appropriateness of bending and stretching, in the conduct of fading and prospering—never forget your mistakes!«
17. The inscription on the spear read: »A spear-maker, a spear-maker: a shortest moment of inattentiveness means life-long humiliation for him.«

»This is what I, the only man, have heard, and I caution thereby my future descendants.«²⁰

The seventeen statements constitute almost one half of the entire text of »King Wu’s Enthronement«, but once again their content is singularly unimpressive. Most of these maxims are merely stock phrases taken from Chinese political wisdom, the like of which are scattered throughout many contemporaneous texts and which might have been well known to the literate public. For instance, statements 1 and 2 appear in the manuscript »The Way of Being a Clerk« (*Wei li zhi Dao*), unearthed from the Qin Tomb no. 11, at Shuihudi, Hubei;²¹ statement 4 recurs in several texts, starting with the *Shijing*

- 19 This sentence is the least comprehensible in the entire text; it is missing from the bamboo version and the commentaries are not helpful.
- 20 席前左端之銘曰：“安樂必敬”；前右端之銘曰：“無行可悔”；后左端之銘曰：“一反一側，亦不可以忘”；后右端之銘曰：“所監不遠，視邇所代”。机之銘曰：“皇皇惟敬，口生嘶(詬)，口戕口。”鑿之銘曰：“見爾前，慮爾后。”盥盤之銘曰：“与其溺於人也，宁溺於淵，溺於淵猶可游也，溺於人不可救也。”楹之銘曰：“毋曰胡殘，其禍將然，毋曰胡害，其禍將大。毋曰胡傷，其禍將長。”杖之銘曰：“惡乎危？於忿寔。惡乎失道？於嗜欲。惡乎相忘？於富貴。”帶之銘曰：“火滅修容，慎戒必恭，恭則壽。”履屨之銘曰：“慎之勞，勞則富”；觴豆之銘曰：“食自杖，食自杖！戒之僑，僑則逃。”戶之銘曰：“夫名，難得而易失；無勲弗志，而曰我知之乎？無勲弗及，而曰我杖之乎？擾阻以泥之，若風將至，必先搖搖，雖有聖人，不能為謀也。”牖之銘曰：“隨天之時，以地之財，敬祀皇天，敬以先時。”劍之銘曰：“帶之以為服，動必行德，行德則興，倍德則崩。”弓之銘曰：“屈伸之義，廢興之行，無忘自過。”矛之銘曰：“造矛造矛！少閒弗忍，終身之羞。”予一人所聞，以戒后世子孫。»Wu Wang«, 105–106. The last sentence belongs to King Wu but it is not an addition to the spear inscription but rather a summary to the entire inscribing enterprise.
- 21 *Wei li zhi Dao*, in *Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡, published by Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹簡整理小組 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001), 165–176, slips 40A, 41A.

ode;²² statement 14 appears in the aforementioned »San de« text from the Shanghai Museum corpus;²³ statement 7 is cited in the inscription on the Zhongshan Wang Cuo *dading*, which cites it in turn from an earlier source.²⁴ It is highly unlikely that these very disparate texts have either borrowed phrases from the »King Wu's Enthronement« or alternatively influenced the latter (although this is possible in the case of the *Shijing* ode). In all likelihood, the similarities reflect the fact that the cited phrases belong to what might have been a set of ancient proverbs, a kind of a common denomination of basic political wisdom. Once again, the reader who had hoped to learn the secrets of King Wu's wisdom would be disappointed. For the second time in a short chapter, inflated expectations are crushed by a series of banal and intellectually uninspiring sayings. The contrast between the efforts invested by King Wu in preparing his »interactive room« and the dullness of his self-admonitions could not be more striking.

Part B: Discussion

Let us summarize our findings. The »King Wu's Enthronement« is constructed as a regular didactic anecdote: the wise ruler asks advice of his sagacious aide, and is enlightened as a result. However, beneath this regular surface, the anecdote presents a different perspective on its own genre. Twice it inflates the readers' expectations, promising to reveal to them the supreme wisdom of ancient sages; twice the readers remain disappointed with a series of banalities. This recurring pattern is highly unlikely to be coincidental: the contrast between meticulous preparation for the revelation of the *Cinnabar Document* and King Wu's frantic incision of every object in his vicinity on the one hand, and the dull and intellectually unimpressive content of both »books« on the other is too obvious to be ignored. It seems that behind their ostensible seriousness and solemnity, the authors are laughing at our credulity and our desire to find traces of the sages' wisdom in their written legacy. The result is surprisingly similar to the anecdote by Zhuangzi that is cited in the epigraph.

What, then, were the anonymous authors of the »King Wu's Enthronement« striving for in their ironical twist of the common didactic motifs? To answer this, we should briefly remind ourselves of the intellectual atmosphere of the Warring States period. This age of extraordinary dynamism and endemic violence was exceptionally favorable for the members of educated elite, the »intellectuals« (*shi*). The competing

22 *Mao shi zhengyi* 毛詩正義, annot. by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達; repr. in *Shisanjing zhusu* 十三經注疏, comp. by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), »Dang« 蕩 18.554; it appears also in Mozi's 墨子 citation from the »Great Pledge« (»Tai shi« 泰誓) document (see *Mozi jiaozhu* 墨子校注, comp. and annot. by Wu Yujiang 吳毓江 [Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994], »Fei ming xia« 非命下 37: 425).

23 »San de«, slip 1.

24 Zhongshan Wang Cuo *da ding* inscription, cited from Hebei Sheng wenwu yanjiu suo 河北省文物研究所, ed., *Cuo mu—Zhanguo Zhongshan guo guowang zhi mu* 罍墓—戰國中山國王之墓 [Beijing: Wenwu, 1995], vol. 1, 341–369. The possible source for the Cuo inscription may be Shi Hui's inscription mentioned above, note 16 (see details in Li Xueqin 李學勤, »Pingshan mu zangqun yu Zhongshan guo de wenhua« 平山墓葬群與中山國的文化, *Wenwu* 文物 1/1979, 37–41.

courts vied to attract gifted *shi*, who were believed to possess expertise that would benefit the state militarily, administratively and economically. Bewildered by the enormity of domestic and foreign challenges, rulers of the age were keen to listen to the *shi* advice, treating their aides with the utmost respect. Never in China's history had the intellectuals' position been more enviable.

The intellectual prestige of the *shi* was rooted in the widespread belief, shared by the rulers and the ruled, that members of that stratum had preferential access to and a superior understanding of the Way (Dao), namely, the guiding principles of individual and collective behavior. Yet the precise nature of the Way remained a matter of serious controversy. Thinkers of various intellectual affiliations bolstered their divergent ideals by resorting to highly distinctive argumentation: some claimed a sort of mysterious understanding of the ineffable and inscrutable Way, others argued that their policy proposals had demonstrably practical advantages; and yet others—perhaps the majority—based their recommendations on the claim that they implemented the superior Way of ancient sage kings.²⁵ It is this latter group which concerns us here, and it is against their claims that the ironic perspective of »King Wu's Enthronement« becomes fully comprehensible.

The two most popular thinkers of the Warring States era, Confucius and Mozi, spoke on behalf of the legacy of the past. Confucius explicitly stated that he »transmitted« the ancients' wisdom rather than creating anything new;²⁶ while Mozi, whose proposals differed markedly from those of Confucius, similarly argued that his views reflected the true legacy of the »former sage kings.« Mozi was also the first to substantiate his arguments with explicit reference to his textual mastery, through which he allegedly learned the ancients' ideas:

I am not a contemporary of [the ancient sage kings]. I have not heard their voices, nor seen their faces. [Yet] I know [their ideas] from what they wrote on bamboo and silk, engraved on bronze and stones, carved on ritual vessels, and transmitted for descendants of future generations.²⁷

The desire of competing thinkers to appropriate antiquity, and the growing respect for written documents, as reflected in the above saying, created curious intellectual dynamics. In due time, followers of both Confucius and Mozi, as well as many of their intellectual opponents, began searching intensively for ways to validate their historical arguments by creating texts and attributing them to those former sages. Some introduced a variety of new historical personages; others invented texts associated with early and recent sages, from the legendary Thearchs of remote antiquity to Confucius and Mozi themselves. Significantly, among most popular personages to whom a great variety of texts were attributed we find the Yellow Thearch, whose legacy was invoked by King Wu in the opening passage of the »King Wu's Enthronement« chapter, and Taigong, the alleged possessor of the *Cinnabar Document*. These and other personages

25 See detailed discussion in Yuri Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 115–135.

26 See *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注, annot. by Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), »Shu er« 述而 7.1: 66.

27 See *Mozi*, »jian'ai xia« 16: 178.

were invoked to validate the thinkers' claims with regard to a variety of political, ethical and even metaphysical issues.²⁸

The Warring States period also witnessed the unprecedented rise in the importance of the written media. While certain texts might have circulated orally, as claimed by David Schaberg and Martin Kern, there is no doubt that the authority of written texts was far greater than that of the oral tradition.²⁹ It is not by chance that the first claims of mysteriously obtained »sacred books« as the primary source of intellectual authority were made during the Warring States period.³⁰ Yet it was precisely during this age of respect for the written medium that many ideologically important texts were either forged outright or significantly redacted. It is against this background that we can understand the increasing opposition to the concept of textual knowledge being the primary source of intellectual authority. Zhuangzi's statement cited in the epigraph is one example of such opposition; Han Feizi's assault on those who pretend to know the past is another. Han Feizi ridiculed the followers of Confucius and Mozi, who disputed each other's claims to have precise knowledge of the Way of Yao and Shun:

Yao and Shun cannot come back to life, so who would settle who is right: Confucians or Mohists? [...] It is therefore clear that those who rely on former kings, and claim they can fix with certainty [what was the way of] Yao and Shun, should be either fools or impostors.³¹

Having exposed the fallacy of his rivals' claims, Han Feizi concluded:

Accordingly, in the country of an enlightened ruler there are no texts written in books and on bamboo strips, but the law is the teaching; there are no »speeches« of the former kings, but officials are the teachers; there is no private wielding of swords, but beheading [enemies] is the valor.³²

28 For creation of the new historical figures amidst the desire of competing thinkers to claim possession of antiquity, see Gu Jiegang, »Gu shi bian di yi ce zi xu« 古史辨第一冊自序, in *Gu Jiegang gu shi lunwenji* 顧頡剛古史論文集, ed. by Pian Yuqian 駢宇騫 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 1: 1–100; cf. Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001). For proliferation of alleged records of the ancient paragons' sayings during the Warring States period, see Yuri Pines, »Speeches and the Question of Authenticity in Ancient Chinese Historical Records«, in *Historical Truth, Historical Criticism and Ideology: Chinese Historiography and Historical Culture from a New Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer, Achim Mittag, and Jörn Rüsen (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 195–224.

29 See Schaberg, *A Patterned Past*; Martin Kern, »The Odes in Excavated Manuscripts«, in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, 149–193. For an alternative view, that emphasizes the importance of written communication of ideologically important information, see Pines, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqin Period, 722–453 B.C.E.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002).

30 For the tradition of »revelation texts« among the military specialists, see Mark E. Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 98–103.

31 See *Han Feizi jijie* 韩非子集解, annot. by Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), »Xian xue« 顯學 50: 457.

32 *Han Feizi*, »Wu du« 五蠹 49: 452.

Han Feizi's weariness of the disruptive and misleading texts in books and on bamboo slips, most specifically »speeches« of the former kings,³³ is stated here in a very radical form, and is directly related to the infamous »biblioclasm« launched by Han Feizi's ideological associate and personal rival, Li Si in 213 BCE.³⁴ However, many other thinkers, including some affiliated with Confucius's legacy, such as Han Feizi's and Li Si's teacher, Xunzi, might have shared a dissatisfaction with the proliferation of obviously unreliable documents through which a variety of thinkers claimed their superior understanding of the past. Few would go as far as to propose prohibiting these texts, but many more might have felt as weary as Han Feizi of the unsubstantiated claims of talkative *sbi* to speak on behalf of antiquity.

It is against this background of an increasingly critical mood toward the fabrication of the past and the proliferation of faked textual authorities that »King Wu's Enthronement« was composed. Rather than adopting Han Feizi's idea of utilizing the state's power to impose ideological uniformity or Zhuangzi's nihilistic perspective, the authors of this chapter deployed the much more subtle and far less harmful weapon of irony in order to ridicule those intellectuals and rulers who credulously accepted any textual revelation as the source of absolute wisdom. Perhaps, though, this was too subtle a message for its intended audience. At a time when irony was still a relatively marginal literary device, with credulity and taking texts at face value still widespread, few could have apprehended the subtleties of this short anecdote. Perhaps some readers felt uneasy with the overtly ridiculous scene of King Wu's frantic inscription writing and the disappointingly banal *Cinnabar Document*, but they probably considered them weaknesses of the text rather than understanding them to be its strengths. Thus, »King Wu's Enthronement« was denied canonical status and its circulation remained limited, until a chance discovery 23 centuries later brought it back into light.

33 For the »speeches« as a separate historical genre, see, e.g. Jens Østergård Petersen, »Which Books Did the First Emperor of Ch'in Burn? On the Meaning of *Pai Chia* in Early Chinese Sources«, *Monumenta Serica* 43 (1995), 1–52.

34 For the analysis of Li Si's biblioclasm, see, e.g. Pines, *Envisioning Eternal Empire*, 180–182.