

Chapter 1



Pheasant Cap Master and the Paradox of Unity

Fascination and frustration are the two predominant feelings that the *Pheasant Cap Master* (*He guan zi*) has evoked in the field of Chinese philosophy. Listed among the Daoist texts in the bibliographical chapter of the *History of the Han Dynasty* (*Han shu* 漢書), it has roused great expectations with respect to such longstanding questions as the evolution of “primordial energy” (*yuan qi* 元氣) and the existence of “laws of nature” in early Chinese thought.¹ But its textual complexities have often turned this interest into irritation, indifference and, ultimately, neglect. Combined with the fact that its author is totally unattested in historical sources, these complexities have saddled the *Pheasant Cap Master* with the label of “forgery” (*wei shu* 偽書). The text has suffered recurrent criticism concerning its many corrupt passages, its “base and shallow” style, its accretion over time, and its content, which is confused to the point of being internally inconsistent. Joseph Needham’s unwillingness to elaborate on some “strangely interesting passages” of the *He guan zi*, due to its textual complexity and uncertain dates, typifies this ambiguous and predominantly negative attitude toward the text. “This work is extremely difficult to date because it is highly composite. . . . Until it[s date] has been critically established,” he claims, “interpretations are premature” (Needham, 1956:547).

From the Tang to the Qing dynasty, the *Pheasant Cap Master* was almost unanimously condemned as unworthy of scholarly attention. This negative verdict was challenged for the first time

during the Qing dynasty by the editors of the *Si ku quan shu* and by *He guan zi* scholars such as Yu Yue, Sun Yirang, and Wang Kaiyun.² But it has been only during the past two decades that *He guan zi* studies have gained some momentum, due mainly to the discovery, in a Han tomb near Changsha, of four silk manuscripts that share expressions, ideas, and stylistic peculiarities with it.³ The *Pheasant Cap Master* has nevertheless remained a largely unexplored field, with the exception of one full-scale modern commentary by Zhang Jincheng (1975) and one free translation by Pu Weizhong (1992), both in Chinese. There is as yet no complete translation of the *Pheasant Cap Master* in any other language.

Although one need not wait for the very last textual complexity to be resolved before entering into some philosophical investigation, an analysis of the *Pheasant Cap Master's* philosophy has quite naturally been preceded by an evaluation of its sinological value. Therefore, in addition to a dozen articles, most in Chinese, a few major studies have been devoted to its textual complexities.⁴ As a result, scholarly opinion among *He guan zi* scholars has turned from an overwhelmingly negative verdict, whether wholesale or partial, to a cautiously positive defense. There is nowadays a tendency to believe that the text is more unified, coherent, and authentic than was long thought the case.⁵ Although to date not a single book has been written on its content, a few philosophical articles on the *Pheasant Cap Master* have recently seen the light.⁶

However, this recent rehabilitation of the *Pheasant Cap Master* among a small number of scholars has not determined the general consensus. Discussion continues between those who reject the text because of its obvious fragmentation and others who have reinstated the *Pheasant Cap Master* as a valuable text by reconstructing its unified philosophy on the basis of the extant fragments. Both the rejection and the rehabilitation of the *Pheasant Cap Master* are supported by a general unease with its fragmentation and a shared expectation of unity—feelings that themselves have seldom been explicitly reconsidered.

1.1. Expectations of Unity

As a Chinese author long ago remarked, any discussion or claim to knowledge depends on a common ground which itself remains out of

view (*Zhuang zi*, 25:71/52–3, tr. Graham, 1986:102). In the field of *He guan zi* studies, this common ground is the expectation of unity. Scholars have treated the *Pheasant Cap Master* as one book, thus naturally expecting one author at one moment in time to be expressing one coherent set of ideas. Because the *Pheasant Cap Master* has disappointed these expectations, it has caused some to reject it as a forgery and others to rework it into respectable philosophy. Both reactions are constructed on an intricate network of implicit negotiations of unity.

The Search for Unity

When we listen to a presentation or read a book, we expect to find unity in it: one person, at one time, expressing a unified or coherent set of ideas. Apparent contradictions, abrupt changes of topic or style, and a seemingly incoherent line of thought all prompt the listener or reader to search for a more fundamental unity. The assumption that the statements of an author are connected to each other, relevant to the topic, more or less interesting and understandable, is not merely a familiar attitude but can even be a moral obligation. The “principle of cooperation,” as H. Grice calls it, demands that the reader search for unity in a given text.⁷ When a colleague at work responds to a nasty remark about the boss with a complacent “nice weather today,” everyone assumes—or ought to assume—that he is not providing us with meteorological information. This assumption, of course, is based on the expectation that there is a connection that unites the two apparently unrelated remarks.

The interpretation of a book as foreign and ancient as the *Pheasant Cap Master* makes higher claims on the reader’s imaginative capacity to discover such links. Although there is a logical possibility that its roughly 15,000 characters are the result of a lunatic randomly copying fragments of texts blown to him in a hurricane, the principle of cooperation—the first condition for good interpretation—is to assume the exact opposite. One’s reading ought to be directed by a cluster of overlapping expectations of unity: grammatical unity in the reconstruction of phrases and sentences, textual unity in the recognition of the *Pheasant Cap Master* as a relevant collection of chapters or passages, and authorial unity

in the attribution of its core to one author or group of like-minded authors.

The Paradox of Unity

Compliance with the principle of cooperation, however familial or moral it may appear, is also problematic. Unity lies in the eye of the beholder and is therefore never innocent. Because it is attributed to the text rather than merely discovered in it, unity is never an absolute given, but depends on the degree and type of unity that the reader expects. The principle of cooperation ought therefore to be handled with a considerable amount of self-awareness and indulgence.

The notion of one author expressing one coherent set of ideas is an unattainable ideal. Multiple authorship is characteristic of every text: even a single modern author gathers ideas from others, implicitly cites from a corpus of texts, and, in making his argument, aims at coherence. How well he or she succeeds in avoiding contradictions and confusion remains a matter of judgment by critics and readers. The multiplicity of authorship of an ancient Chinese text such as the *Pheasant Cap Master* is more obvious: texts circulating under one name were usually collections of treatises written by several authors, and the habit of borrowing passages from other texts or from a common lore was the rule rather than the exception. Even when taking into account all the later hands of commentators, forgers, and scribes who have contributed to its present shape, the obvious multiple authorship of the *Pheasant Cap Master* differs only as a matter of degree from modern assumptions concerning single authorship.⁸

Unity is not only a matter of degree but also belongs to a context of particular expectations. Reasons for reconstructing or abandoning a text are themselves built on specific expectations of unity. Confronted with the fragments of the extant text, an early scribe may have been tempted to restore the *Pheasant Cap Master* by embellishing its style, while present-day supporters of the text would tend to reconstruct its content in philosophical theories or a set of principles, on the presumption that a coherent system must have existed, albeit only inside the author's mind. The same mecha-

nism operates on the critical side: the frequent charges of spuriousness leveled against the *Pheasant Cap Master* because of its confused content, abnormal accretion, incoherent style, and corrupt text ultimately emerge from frustrated expectations of unity and from specific criteria for what is “clear,” “normal,” “coherent,” and “authentic.”

Even the most impatient and critical evaluation of the text inevitably appeals to some kind of unity. The intellectual act of describing disunity itself requires an appeal to unity. In explaining a person who does not make sense as schizophrenic or absentminded, we impart to him or her a new sort of unity and conditions of identity, however vague. The arguments used against the authenticity of the *Pheasant Cap Master* thus have, ironically, attributed to the work such alternative forms of unity. Its earliest characterization, in the Tang dynasty (and often repeated since), is that of “forgery.” Arguments in favor of this description have entailed several variations on a theme, such as the hypothesis that it is a “conscious fabrication” by ignorant amateurs, sometimes attended by accusations of plagiarism. Or it has been explained as an “unintended forgery,” caused by a commentarial interpolation or a conflation of at least two different books.

A simultaneous reconsideration of both a specific piece of evidence and the expectations which make it relevant may qualify the demand for unity without radically rejecting the principle of cooperation. The *He guan zi*'s early resistance to almost all expectations of unity can, moreover, serve as a source of positive insight. It might alert us not only to the fact that *no* interpretation, however careful, is innocent, but also to the inextricable connection between fragmentation and unity.

1.2. A Celebration of Fragments

This book approaches the extant *Pheasant Cap Master* as a collection of fascinating ruins standing amid the landscape of ancient Chinese texts, by focusing on its textual and philosophical fragmentation. An illustration of the positive appreciation of fragmentation in the field of history is Arthur Waldron's study of the Great Wall, China's symbol of unity. The Great Wall is usually thought of as one

continuous construction, originally built at one moment in time and conceived for one particular aim. By tracing the various short walls erected at different moments in the Chinese past, invariably following a complex political controversy as to their function and efficiency, Waldron has deconstructed this myth of unity into fragments of material, time, and function without, however, denying its cultural value and national importance (Waldron, 1992). In a similar vein, and without thereby renouncing the principle of cooperation, the present study seeks to provide the *Pheasant Cap Master* with a place in Chinese intellectual history as a fragmented wall.

Textual Unity in Expectations and Explanations

To unravel the intricate cluster of textual complexities into relatively separate discussions, part 1 of this book is organized according to the four types of evidence that Harold Roth has distinguished in his study of the textual history of the *Huai nan zi*: biographical, bibliographical, commentarial, and textual evidence (Roth, 1992:9–10). Each kind of evidence entails particular expectations of unity, generating different kinds of frustration, and, ultimately, leading *He guan zi* scholars to explain the textual complexities in terms of alternative types of unity. The four chapters of part 1 provide, in roughly chronological order, an evaluation of the traditional arguments, joining the discussion by analyzing what seems in each instance to be the most relevant case study.

Two traditional cornerstones of biographical evidence discussed in chapter 2 concern the dates of the author and his place of origin. The earliest information on Pheasant Cap Master is from the Han dynasty: it is cryptic, dubious, and has no other source than the text itself. But it attests to the tendency, which existed already in the Zhou dynasty, to gather a collection of writings under a single name, thus providing it with some sort of unity. As the biographical evidence on Pheasant Cap Master increases, it also becomes more confusing, thus arousing discussion of its putative author and ultimately casting doubt on the value of the book. One way of explaining contradictory biographical information is to reconstruct the author's life, taking geographical changes into account. The most recurrent

explanation, however, appeals to multiple authorship, thus calling the strict demands of single authorship into question.

The first organization of bibliographical information in Chinese history and the oldest bibliographical evidence on the *Pheasant Cap Master* both date from the Han dynasty. This information consists of the stipulated length and philosophical filiation of a text in the bibliographical notices and catalogues of imperial and private collections. As shown in chapter 3, on both counts the evidence on the *Pheasant Cap Master* has been so inconsistent across history that it has reinforced doubts about the authenticity of the extant Daoist text in nineteen chapters. The alternative explanations suggested are, first, the possibility that the *Pheasant Cap Master* is a conflation of several texts and, second, the hypothesis that one author changed his philosophical affiliation during the process of writing.

Commentarial evidence on the *Pheasant Cap Master*, presented in chapter 4, consists mainly of comments on the text since the Tang dynasty. They basically express a concern with stylistic coherence, which emerged as a criterion for evaluating texts during the Chinese Middle Ages. In the case of the *Pheasant Cap Master*, the expectation of stylistic coherence became so strong that it dominated the discussion until the beginning of this century. Great stylistic differences within some chapters gave rise to charges of plagiarism.

Textual evidence, finally, is a very recent concern. As a result of the growing interest in philology during the Ming and Qing dynasties, and the emergence of textual criticism in this century, scholars have started to compare variants from different editions and older quotations in search of the "ancestor" of all presently corrupt editions. In addition to prompting both condemnation and neglect of the *Pheasant Cap Master*, the recent attention to textual corruptions has led to a new explanation: the hypothesis of commentarial interpolations.

Intellectual Unity in Various Reconstructions

Having resolved major textual complexities and freed the text of those dubious passages, some scholars have embarked upon an

investigation of the content of the *He guan zi*. On the assumption that the *Pheasant Cap Master* is a “philosophical” text, and urged on by expectations traditionally associated with such writings, the conventional approach has been to reconstruct its fragmentary content into unitary metaphysical, epistemological, and political theories. Although Western philosophers have tended to consider the Chinese Masters too fragmented, rhetorical, and mundane to count as genuine “philosophy,” sinologists have often provided such reconstructions as the most charitable approach to these texts. Instead of joining these efforts, part 2, which can be read independently from part 1, explores alternative ways to comply with the principle of cooperation, seeking more positive explanations for what only seems to be fragmentation when viewed from a “philosophical” perspective.

Since their first emergence on Greek soil, “philosophy” and “rhetoric” have been engaged in a “quarrel” in terms of which, according to Stanley Fish, “the history of Western thought could be written.” Many such histories have indeed been written, with predictably different emphases, depending on the intellectual affiliation of the writer (Fish, 1989:484). While “philosophers” consider rhetoric a biased and therefore inferior type of philosophy, the “rhetorical” tradition considers every text rhetorical, traditional philosophy included.⁹ A “rhetorical” approach to the *Pheasant Cap Master* thus inevitably entails a characterization of its content as “rhetorical.” Given the almost total absence of this “quarrel” in ancient China, the term *rhetoric* needs to be qualified in contrast to its Western connotations, an endeavor to which part 2 is devoted.¹⁰

Chapter 6 describes Master He guan as a rhetorician, not, of course, in the sense that he joined the “rhetorical” countercurrent against a predominantly “philosophical” tradition—there was no such tradition—or in Aristotle’s second and most favored sense that he provided an examination of one’s verbal persuasiveness. The author was a rhetorician in the first and most familiar sense: he tried to uphold an argument, defend himself, and accuse others.¹¹ A treatise such as the *Pheasant Cap Master* is primarily an act of persuasion, not just a description of reality. The discussion of the content of this ancient Chinese treatise, therefore, attempts to reconstruct the general political context in which the author’s most tenacious assertions and recurrent complaints are to be situated.

Another sense in which the *Pheasant Cap Master* can be said to be rhetorical is in its language use. Aside from the concrete context, the actual form of the used language is often neglected in a “philosophical” reading and is considered merely the irrelevant mode of transportation of the intellectual content. The language on which chapter 7 focuses is the judicious use of words, the stress on how one calls something (*suo wei* 所謂), and the function of definitions in the book. He guan zi’s use of language attests to a growing awareness and exploitation of its power and influence on political reality. The type of coherence attributed to the treatise in this chapter, therefore, concentrates on its modes of argumentation, presenting the content only as an illustration of the author’s powerful use of language. Rather than lacking “philosophical” rigor, the abundance of short passages and various redefinitions in the *Pheasant Cap Master* provides its readers with a rich spectrum of politically and morally loaded insights.

The final two chapters of this work are rhetorical in the sense that they elaborate on the explicit statements on language in the *He guan zi* and reconstruct the content of the book by focusing directly on its ideas concerning, respectively, the power of “names” and the realm beyond names. The author’s views on names discussed in chapter 8 fall between the Western categories of, on the one hand, systematic elaborations on the persuasive power of speech (*téchne rhetoriké*) and, on the other, philosophical theories of language that tend to attribute to reality an unquestioned dominance over language. The views on “names” (*ming* 名) expressed in the *He guan zi* attest to an awareness of the growing importance of language as indicated by its increasingly explicit use. The views expressed in chapter 8 therefore further illustrate and explicitly support rhetorical claims and modes of argumentation discussed in the two previous chapters. Rather than considering names of peripheral importance to He guan zi’s view of reality—as “philosophy” tends to do—reality is presented through the spectrum of names, as one of the norms for naming.

The realm beyond names presented in chapter 9, finally, is not a systematic presentation of all the topics that have hitherto been left out of the discussion, but a reconstruction of the author’s views on the “unnamed.” He guan zi’s fascination with the “metalinguistic”—the nameless—thus functions as a rhetorical counter-

part to the conventional appeal to a “meta-physical” realm, an appeal that seems to be absent in pre-Buddhist Chinese thought.

The positive appreciation of fragmentation that has driven the present study is influenced by the recent revival of the “rhetorical” tradition. In part 1, this approach is adapted implicitly by reconsidering the textual complexities of the *Pheasant Cap Master* together with the unquestioned expectations of unity that have undergirded the traditional evaluations. The interpretation of the content as a rhetorical text in part 2 reinforces this approach. The political context of the *Pheasant Cap Master*, the concerns of its author, and his concrete modes of expression attest to an implicit use of language that is explicitly attested in his views on the power, the limitations, and the source of language. This alternative approach to the fragments constituting the *Pheasant Cap Master* certainly does not deny the text any unity but tries to appreciate the inherent complexity of this notion. While it does not invalidate a “philosophical” reading of the *Pheasant Cap Master*, it certainly does contest its claim of exclusivity.¹²