

# 1 Wang Pi: Life and Thought

One day Wang Pi went to see the prime minister and was granted a private interview. During the meeting, apparently he discussed at length the meaning of Tao and nothing else. The prime minister, according to Wang's biographer, merely laughed at him. Wang Pi was probably not even twenty years old at the time. This story may conjure up images of a young philosopher who has totally dedicated himself to the quest for the Way, and who has no interest in the more mundane affairs of the political world. Why, then, did he bother to see the prime minister at all?

The standard biography of Wang Pi (226–249 A.D.) is found in the *San-kuo chih* (Records of the Three Kingdoms). It is not, however, an "official" biography that forms a part of the *San-kuo chih* original. Rather, it is a separate work attributed to Ho Shao (236–ca. 300) and is preserved by the commentator P'ei Sung-chih (372–451) in a note appended to the biography of Chung Hui (225–264). More precisely, at the end of Chung Hui's biography, there is a passing reference to Wang Pi, to which P'ei Sung-chih added Ho Shao's account.<sup>1</sup> Since this biography is now available in English in Paul J. Lin's translation of the *Lao-tzu* and Wang Pi's commentary, it need not be retranslated here.<sup>2</sup> Instead, selected details from Wang's biography will be discussed later in this chapter. There are a number of references to Wang Pi in other sources, especially in the fifth-century work *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* (New Account of Tales of the

World);<sup>3</sup> but except for a few to be noted later, they do not provide significant new information. In the biography, we find a general account of Wang Pi's life and work, a brief assessment of his character, opinions of his contemporaries, and, most important of all, records of his response to major intellectual issues of the day. An examination of the relevant biographical and historical data reveals a puzzling ambiguity. On the one hand, we see that the common assessment of Wang Pi as a "pure" philosopher leaves much room for doubt. On the other hand, his connection with the movement of "profound learning" suggests that his philosophic interest is not to be underestimated. According to some, Wang Pi was a leader of the "Neo-Taoist" movement; according to others, he was a staunch defender of the Confucian tradition. This raises the question of Wang Pi's intellectual stance, which has an important bearing on our understanding of his *Lao-tzu* commentary.

To help to resolve this issue, aspects of Wang Pi's life and thought, including his interpretation of the *I-ching* and of the ideal sage, will be examined in what follows. These are selected not only because they provide insight into Wang's intellectual orientation; they also signal in anticipation major themes in the commentary on the *Lao-tzu*. By themselves, as we shall see, these background considerations cannot resolve the question posed here; but they do serve to establish a framework in which Wang Pi's understanding of the *Lao-tzu* can be properly appreciated.

## Wang Pi: Pure Philosopher or Political Activist?

### *Defining the Two Points of View*

According to his biographer, Wang Pi, styled Fu-ssu, was a precocious child; in his teens he was attracted to the *Lao-tzu* and was already fluent in the art of disputation. Ho Yen (ca. 190–249), a leading political and intellectual figure at the time, was certainly very much impressed by the young Wang Pi. He said of him, "Confucius said that 'the young are to be held in awe.' Is he not a person with whom one can discuss the boundaries of heaven and man?"<sup>4</sup> The *Shih-shuo hsün-yü* provides further details:

Ho Yen was the head of the Personnel Ministry, and enjoyed both status and acclaim. At that time his house was always filled by guests who came for debates or conversations. Wang

Pi, who was then not yet twenty, also went to visit him. Since Yen had heard of Pi's reputation, he culled some of the best arguments from past conversations and said to Pi, "These arguments I consider to be final. Could you perhaps refute them?" Pi then proceeded to refute them, and all those present agreed that Ho Yen had been humbled. Pi then went on to act as both "guest" and "host" [i.e., assuming both sides of a debate] several times, and in every case he was unequalled by anyone in the entire company.<sup>5</sup>

This was no small accomplishment, for Ho Yen himself was known to be an expert in disputation. At that time, most of the literati skilled in the art of disputation "looked up to Ho Yen as their ideal."<sup>6</sup> Well conversant with both the Confucian and Taoist traditions, Wang Pi was evidently a young man of great learning and of refined taste. There is little question that Wang Pi was highly regarded by his friends and contemporaries, especially with respect to his philosophic and literary talents.

Nevertheless, despite his close friendship with Ho Yen, Wang Pi never gained prominence in office. This is often explained in terms of his youth and inexperience, and his preoccupation with abstract philosophic thought. Indeed, Wang Pi's talent did not appear to have impressed Ts'ao Shuang (178-249), who then controlled the political machinery of the Wei (220-265) court prior to the "regency" of the Ssu-ma clan. Ts'ao was the prime minister who laughed at Wang Pi.

Wang did hold a minor official post for a short time, but he seems not to have taken much interest in it. Moreover, his biography relates how he liked to make fun of others who were not his equal in ability and talent, and this certainly did not contribute to his career in officialdom. He was not interested in "fame and high office."<sup>7</sup> Wang Pi died of an "illness" in the same year when Ts'ao Shuang and Ho Yen were "executed" by Ssu-ma I (179-251), at the age of twenty-four.<sup>8</sup>

What is the personality that emerges from this traditional account? On the whole, it seems clear that the biographer was not entirely uncritical of Wang Pi, and as we shall see there are good historical reasons for this. Although Wang Pi's achievement is not denied, at one point Ho Shao also describes him as "shallow and ignorant of the ways of the world."<sup>9</sup> The Wang Pi that seems to emerge from this biography appears to be a young, bright, and

somewhat proud intellectual who, though very much gifted philosophically and artistically, was perhaps not quite at home in the political world of his day. This view, for example, is reflected in Mou Tsung-san's assessment of Wang Pi as a rather naive young man who because of his "ignorance of the ways of the world" was able to deal with fundamental philosophic concepts in a fresh, concentrated, and "uncontaminated" way.<sup>10</sup> The picture of Wang Pi as a "pure," politically disinterested thinker has thus come to be widely accepted by students of Chinese intellectual history. The reason for this, as we shall see later in this chapter, has also to do with Wang Pi's connection with the movement of "pure conversation" (*ch'ing-t'an*).

There is a second view, however. For example, the Soviet scholar A. A. Petrov has argued that Wang Pi "as a member of the ruling class, discarded quietism and found in philosophic Taoism the justification for a strong central government."<sup>11</sup> According to Petrov, what Wang found in "philosophic Taoism" was a kind of "monism," which underlies the plurality of phenomena.<sup>12</sup>

In a study by Jen Chi-yü and T'ang Yung-t'ung this emphasis on Wang Pi's political involvement is spelled out even more specifically, although it reaches a very different conclusion in terms of Wang Pi's central philosophy.<sup>13</sup> According to this study, Wang Pi was indeed very much a part of the ruling establishment. However, as Wang Pi himself did not have any real political power, he was dependent on his friend and patron Ho Yen for his own security and comfort. Because Ho Yen was opposed to the rising Ssu-ma faction, Wang Pi "therefore" proposed a theory of "individualism," based on the Taoist notions of "nonaction" (*wu-wei*) and "spontaneity" (*tzu-jan*), to counteract the threat generated by the Ssu-ma clan's attempt to centralize power.<sup>14</sup> The historical context and the meaning of these concepts will be discussed later; at this point, it is enough to see that Wang Pi did not appear to some scholars as "disinterested," still less uninterested in politics, as others might have supposed.

It seems to me that this emphasis on Wang Pi's possible political involvement raises a legitimate question. I am not convinced that these views can be rejected offhand, because of their apparent "Marxist" perspective. Their conclusions are of course open to debate, but they deserve a fair hearing. In particular, a few episodes in Wang Pi's biography may be interpreted in the direction of political involvement. In the biography, we are told that Wang Pi sought

out a number of high officials in the Wei government. First of all, he went on his own initiative to see P'ei Hui, who was then secretary or deputy under Ho Yen in the important Ministry of Personnel, overseeing the appointment of officials.<sup>15</sup> The biography then goes on to describe the meeting between Wang Pi and Ho Yen cited earlier, which according to the account in the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* was again initiated by Wang Pi himself. And as soon as Wang Pi was awarded a post, though not the one he had hoped for, he requested a private interview with the prime minister Ts'ao Shuang. This sequence of events merits special attention. It suggests not only that Wang Pi had actively pursued a political career, but that he had done so carefully and in the proper order, beginning with the deputy minister. Incidentally, the biography also tells us that Wang Pi broke off his friendship with Wang Li, after the latter was appointed to the position for which Ho Yen had recommended Wang Pi. If we take the narrative at face value, it would appear that Wang Pi had gone through the proper channels, as one might expect of an ambitious young man. His death, indeed, might have even been caused by an "illness" of a political nature.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Noma Kazunori has likewise argued that Wang Pi should be viewed primarily as a political theorist, who was concerned with limiting the control of the powerful families of the aristocracy in favor of a strong, centralized government.<sup>17</sup> This resembles closely the view of Petrov, and there is no reason to read any "Marxist" agenda into Noma's analysis.

Noma's study, published in 1982, draws especially from Wang Pi's commentary on the *Lao-tzu*. In another Japanese study published in the same year, however, it is argued that Wang Pi's commentary has in fact turned whatever possible political implications in the *Lao-tzu* into moments of a metaphysical theory centered on the notion of "non-being."<sup>18</sup> This conflict of interpretations shows well why we need to examine Wang Pi's life and thought before we turn to the commentary on the *Lao-tzu* itself. To further explore the question of Wang Pi's political orientation, a brief discussion of the historical and intellectual context is in order.

### *The Cheng-shih Political Scene*

The Cheng-shih era (240–249) of the Wei dynasty is what concerns us most. When Ts'ao Fang (Wei Fei-Ti) inherited the Wei empire in 240 A.D., he was merely a young boy. The responsibility of

guiding and supporting the young emperor was entrusted to Ts'ao Shuang and Ssu-ma I. Conflict soon arose between the two. The Ts'ao faction took control early; but it was Ssu-ma I who secured the final victory. In 249 A.D. the latter engineered a coup that led to the death of Ts'ao Shuang, Ho Yen, their families, and scores of others. The Cheng-shih period represents a turning point in the history of the Wei dynasty; from then on, it was the Ssu-ma family who dominated the political scene and eventually established the Chin dynasty in 265 A.D.

A major consideration in this regard is the power of the important families or clans of the nobility in the politics of the day. In particular, key government positions were then basically monopolized by members of these families; their power and the power struggle among them posed a serious threat to a stable, centralized government. This, to be sure, can be traced back to the latter part of the Han dynasty when clashes between the aristocracy and the eunuchs especially had significantly weakened the control of the Han house. When Ts'ao Ts'ao (155-220), the real founder of the Wei empire, rose to power after the Yellow Turban Rebellion (184 A.D.), he certainly saw the problem and attempted to reverse it. Ts'ao Ts'ao himself came from a eunuch family which, though powerful, could not compare with other major clans—for example, the family of his archrival Yüan Shao—in terms of "distinction" and "legitimacy." It is thus not surprising that the ambitious Ts'ao Ts'ao repeatedly spoke against the system of appointing officials from among the nobility.<sup>19</sup>

Despite his effort, the Wei dynasty actually saw an increase of this monopoly of power by the influential families. The question of the lineage of the Ts'ao family was no longer a serious problem when Ts'ao Ts'ao established himself as the unquestionable leader of the dying Han court. Moreover, when his son Ts'ao P'ei (r. 220-226) formally ended the rule of Han and became emperor of Wei, he needed the support of the leading families for his claim to the throne. Ssu-ma I was among those who supported this new regime, and he became a prominent figure during the reign of Ts'ao P'ei. This sets the stage for the later struggle between the party of Ts'ao Shuang and the Ssu-ma clan. By the Cheng-shih period the conflict among the major families has crystallized into a struggle between these two camps.

Most of the leading intellectuals of the period can be shown to have a close connection with either one of these two camps.<sup>20</sup> The

case of Ho Yen, for example, is very clear. From a distinguished family, he was related to the Ts'ao family by marriage. From this perspective, it is not difficult to see why the biography of Ho Yen, and Wang Pi's also, are not properly included in the *San-kuo chih*, which is after all a Chin document. Ho Shao, the author of Wang Pi's "unofficial" biography, was himself a childhood friend of Ssuma Yen (Chin Wu-ti, r. 265–290), the first emperor of the Chin dynasty. Although there is no need to suspect unduly the accuracy of Ho's biography of Wang Pi, the turbulent political situation does not seem to warrant a hasty conclusion with respect to Wang's political noninvolvement.

Was Wang Pi, then, a pure philosopher or political activist? By "political activist" I mean a person who is motivated by political concerns, and actively engaged in political pursuits. A "pure philosopher," on the other hand, is dedicated to the world of philosophic ideas and totally unconcerned with political affairs. These are extreme positions, but they serve to bring the question into sharper focus. In Wang Pi's case, this question has deeper implications, since the view that he was a pure philosopher is generally understood in a "Neo-Taoist" context, which often implies a kind of "anti-Confucian escapism."

### Names and Principles (*Ming-li*)

From traditional Chinese sources, we can piece together the intellectual context of the Cheng-shih period. According to the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü*, Yüan Hung (328–376) in his work *Ming-shih chuan* (Lives of Famous Men of Letters) has singled out Hsia-hou Hsüan (209–254), Ho Yen, and Wang Pi as the representative "famous men of letters" (*ming-shih*) of the Cheng-shih period.<sup>21</sup> What characterizes a "famous man of letters"? Another entry in the *Shih-shuo hsin-yü* reads:

During the Cheng-shih era, Wang Pi and Ho Yen had favored the profound and abstruse discourse of the *Chuang-tzu* and the *Lao-tzu*, and after that the world set great store by them.<sup>22</sup>

In the *Chin-shu* (History of the Chin Dynasty), there is another reference to this same topic: "In the Cheng-shih period of the Wei dynasty, Ho Yen, Wang Pi, and others had expounded on the *Lao-*

*tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*; they established the view that heaven and earth and everything in the world all have their roots in 'non-being' (*wu*)."<sup>23</sup> In the early sixth-century work *Wen-hsin tiao-lung* (The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons), we also read:

When the Wei house first established supremacy, it followed the methods of the "logicians" (*ming*) and the "legalists" (*fa*). Fu Chia [ca. 209–255] and Wang Ts'an [177–217] emphasized the teaching of "names and principles" (*ming-li*). By the Cheng-shih era, the focus was on the preservation of culture. It was then that Ho Yen and his followers had put the (genre of) "profound discourse" (*hsüan-lun*) into wide currency. Thus Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu came to occupy the main road, and competed with Confucius for the right of way.<sup>24</sup>

According to these accounts, there was a Taoist revival during the Cheng-shih era. It was centered on the *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuang-tzu*, and was represented especially by Wang Pi and Ho Yen. Moreover, according to the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, Wang Pi and Ho Yen did not only spark new interests in the Taoist classics, but had in fact charted a new course in the intellectual landscape of third-century China. This is described in terms of a shift from the doctrine of "names and principles" (*ming-li*) to that of "profound discourse" (*hsüan-lun*), which was perceived as a challenge to the Confucian orthodoxy long established since the Han dynasty. This is clearly confirmed by another reference from the *Chin-shu*, in which Fan Ning (339–401) is said to have lamented on what he took to be the sad state of the Chin intellectual scene: "(Fan) Ning thought that its origin could be traced to Wang Pi and Ho Yen; (he argued that) their crime was worse than that of Chieh and Chou."<sup>25</sup> Chieh and Chou are of course the legendary diabolic tyrants of the Hsia and Shang dynasties respectively whose "crime" led to the downfall of their empires. Wang Pi's "crime," as the passage continues, is precisely that he abandoned the teaching of the Confucian sages. I shall return to this serious charge later.

What do "names and principles" and "profound discourse" mean in this context? The early Wei dynasty is, first of all, said to have been dominated by the teaching of *ming* and *fa*. These two terms hark back to the so-called School of Names (*Ming-chia*) and the Legalist School (*Fa-chia*), which first arose during the Warring



States period (480–221 B.C.). It may be said that whereas the former is concerned with the nature of names and their relation to reality, the latter seeks to establish a strict rule of law.<sup>26</sup> Although Confucianism was made the official state ideology during the Han dynasty, the School of Names and the School of Law remained active and were integrated into the Confucian orthodoxy.

The dominant interpretation of Confucianism in the Han dynasty, as is well known, was based on a cosmological theory that emphasized a direct correspondence between heavenly and human phenomena.<sup>27</sup> For example, on the basis of an analysis of the word *wang*, "king," the great systematizer of Han Confucianism, Tung Chung-shu (ca. 179–104 B.C.) explained that the figure of the king assumes the key role of interrelating the three realms of heaven, earth, and humankind.<sup>28</sup> When translated into a political ideal, this means that the way of government should mirror the "Way of heaven"—that is, the perceived structure of the cosmos itself. In terms of political office, this means that appointed positions must not be determined arbitrarily, for they hold the key to a harmonious empire. As Wang Fu (ca. 76–157 A.D.) remarks in his work *Ch'ien-fu lun* (Discourse of a Recluse):

When there is a title, it must be recorded in legislative documents. What is of "names and principles" (*ming-li*) must be verified in actuality. Then indeed no office would abandon its duty, and no position would be filled by the wrong person.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, *ming-li* may be defined as a type of inquiry that aims at discerning the "names and principles" of the cosmos, so as to institute a perfect political system. There are, in other words, two aspects to the term *ming-li*. In the Wei-Chin period, as Robert Henricks has pointed out, the art of disputation enjoyed a strong revival. "Famous men of letters" (*ming-shih*), including Ho Yen and Wang Pi, engaged in debates and intellectual conversations that probably involved the kind of logical tools associated especially with the School of Names.<sup>30</sup> *Ming-li*, in a technical sense, thus refers to the methods of argumentation and more generally to a type of theoretical discourse that seeks to identify the meaning of "names and principles." Yet these methods were not used for the sake of winning debates alone; they were engaged in the political arena to ensure that "names and principles" are matched in "reality," especially in terms of political appointment and performance. This is in-

dictated by the fact that in the Wei period, *ming-li* was extended to include the methods of judging and evaluating human character. In other words, *ming-li* served to identify the best candidates for political office, so that no office would be "filled by the wrong person."

Ideally, of course, only those who were "worthy" of the position would be appointed. And in the traditional Confucian understanding, what made a person worthy of office was largely a matter of learning and individual virtues; integrity and filial piety were especially important in this regard. In practice, however, this often meant that only members of the wealthy and well-connected families were considered "virtuous"—that is, having been brought up in the proper way, taught the classics, groomed for office, acquired a good reputation, and judged to be outstanding individuals.

When Ts'ao Ts'ao took control of the political stage, he attempted to reverse this trend by emphasizing the ability of an individual as opposed to "virtue." Indeed, he went as far as to say that even those "who lack benevolence and filial piety but are skilled in the art of government and military strategy" should not be left out of office.<sup>31</sup> This direct challenge to the old Confucian model means that the measure of a good official cannot be determined by empty "reputation," but by actual performance. This was essentially a "legalist" view, which together with a system of reward and punishment sought to ensure the effective operation of government.

The question of "names and principles" was hotly debated during the Cheng-shih period, usually in the context of a discussion of the notion of "talent" (*ts'ai*) and its relation to human nature (*hsing*). Again, this should not be limited to the kind of semantic and logical analysis of names and concepts associated with the School of Names in the Warring States period. Although the analytic tools may be traced there, they were made to serve the political process. Once "talent" and "nature" were understood, a system of official appointment could be implemented, which would ideally lead to a strong government.<sup>32</sup> It is in this sense that the early Wei ethos is said to be characterized by the teachings of both *ming* and *fa*.

Although there is no historical record of Wang Pi's having participated in this debate, he was undoubtedly aware of it. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, Wang Pi's concern with the problem of appointing officials is reflected in his *Lao-tzu* commentary. The importance of this question indicates that literati of the Cheng-shih period were not interested only in the kind of abstract speculation known as "profound discourse" (*hsüan-lun*).

## Pure Conversation (*Ch'ing-t'an*)

### *From Ch'ing-i to Ch'ing-t'an*

The movement of "profound discourse" is more commonly known as "profound learning" (*hsüan-hsüeh*). The term *hsüan*, originally a color word signifying a shade of dark red, is often translated by the word "mystery." Although *hsüan* does signify the "dark," "mysterious," "secret," it is not entirely satisfactory to render *hsüan-lun* as "mysterious discourse" or *hsüan-hsüeh* as "mysterious learning." The subject under investigation may verge on the "mysterious," but the discourse itself does not. Of course, if a pejorative meaning is intended, then "mysterious" or "abstruse" would be appropriate. Otherwise, as an adjective modifying a type of learning or discourse, the term *hsüan* is better served by such words as "profound" or "sublime." *Hsüan-lun*, in this sense, is a type of discourse that addresses fundamental concepts not easily intelligible to the common people; it is a "profound" discourse in that it seeks to lay bare the meaning of what is beyond common understanding.

While "profound learning" first arose during the Cheng-shih period, it was a major characteristic of the more general movement known as "pure conversation" (*ch'ing-t'an*). This latter is usually discussed from a historical point of view; that is, *ch'ing-t'an* is generally explained in terms of a reaction to the socio-political realities at the time. The phenomenon of *ch'ing-i*, "pure criticism," "unspotted, purifying critique," or "righteous protest," which arose during the Later Han dynasty, is often cited as the immediate predecessor of *ch'ing-t'an* in this connection.<sup>33</sup>

According to this view, *ch'ing-i* is primarily a political movement organized by the scholar-officials who collectively came to criticize the politics of the Later Han court. However, because these attempts were met with harsh reprisals and because the Wei dynasty later was torn by power struggles among factions of the ruling elite, the *ch'ing-i* movement is thus said to have been transformed into an essentially nonpolitical phenomenon, *ch'ing-t'an*. Instead of criticizing the questionable political practices of the day, the Wei literati turned their attention to, as it were, "purer" pursuits. Instead of engaging in political criticism that might easily invite personal danger, "pure conversationists" diverted their creative energy to music, poetry, witty repartee, and—most important for our

purposes—discussion of abstract philosophical concepts. The Cheng-shih era is thus taken as the turning point after which active political involvement gave way to a more politically disinterested, "pure" and "free" way of life, on the part of the literati.

### *The Decline of Han Confucianism*

This view seems to find further support in a consideration of the decline of Han Confucianism, especially with regard to the interpretation of the classics. As indicated above, a key feature of Han Confucianism was the emphasis on the correspondence between the human and the heavenly realms. This is reflected in the interpretations of the classics as well, in that individual concepts were seen to refer to many other related phenomena in the framework of a cosmology based especially on the notions of *yin-yang* and *wu-hsing* (five phases or elements).<sup>34</sup> The five phases themselves—metal, wood, water, fire, and earth—were correlated with the five Confucian virtues, the five musical notes, the five cardinal points, the five mythical emperors, and so forth. The potential for further elaboration of this kind is virtually endless; even the four seasons were split into five in order to accommodate this five-faced cosmological scheme. The task of the interpreter, in this context, has thus become one of identifying this "referential" dimension in the classics. In other words, when a text speaks about "x," it is "in fact" also referring to "y," "z," and so on. In practical terms, however, this often led to inordinately long and cumbersome discussions on the multiple meanings of a particular word or phrase. Indeed, it is not difficult to see why Pan Ku (32–92 A.D.) complained in the *Hanshu* that the study of the classics had greatly deteriorated; often, he says, "a discussion of a text of five words can take up to twenty or thirty thousand words."<sup>35</sup>

The importance of this consideration will become more apparent when we compare Wang Pi's *Lao-tzu* commentary with that of Ho-shang Kung. Here, what merits special attention is that the *ch'ing-t'an* movement is seen to be a reaction against the "corrupt" political and intellectual conditions at the time. Because the literati were disillusioned by the political reality, concerned with their own safety, dissatisfied with the prevalent thought and scholarship, they "therefore" turned to wine, music, and speculative discourse. The movement of "pure conversation" is, as a result, often regarded as essentially a form of escapism.<sup>36</sup>

To supplement this historical interpretation of *ch'ing-t'an*, Yü Ying-shih has argued that it may also be understood in terms of the individual and collective self-consciousness of the literati that peaked especially during the Cheng-shih period.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, it was when the literati acquired a sense of group identity that they emerged as a united front to form the *ch'ing-i* movement. Similarly, it was when the literati developed a sense of individual identity that *ch'ing-i* was transformed into *ch'ing-t'an*. In other words, the movement of "pure conversation" seems to presuppose a strong sense of individualism, a deep awareness that the intellectual is standing apart from the socio-political whole. Although the historical context is important, according to Yü Ying-shih, the phenomenon of *ch'ing-t'an* cannot be properly understood if this self-awareness of the literati is not recognized.

Thus, the political background, the decline of Han Confucianism, and the self-awareness of the literati all contributed to the rise of "pure conversation." The phenomenon of "profound learning" is to be placed in this context. In terms of content, the importance of the *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* has already been mentioned. In addition, the *I-ching* was central to the *hsüan-hsüeh* movement as well. Indeed, these three texts were then together known as *san-hsüan*, the "three profound treatises," to which most "famous men of letters" of the Cheng-shih era were drawn.<sup>38</sup> Ho Yen, for example, is known to have "favored the words of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, and written a 'Discourse on the Way and Virtue' (*Tao-te lun*)."<sup>39</sup> Chung Hui, another major figure of the Wei period, is known for his discourse on the *I-ching*; in a gloss to his biography, it is further said that he "especially favored the *I-ching* and the *Lao-tzu*."<sup>40</sup> Wang Pi himself has commented on both the *I-ching* and the *Lao-tzu*.<sup>41</sup> In general, it can be said that the early *hsüan-hsüeh* of the Cheng-shih era has primarily focused on the *Lao-tzu* and the *I-ching*; the special emphasis on the *Chuang-tzu* belonged to a slightly later period.

As far as the *Lao-tzu* is concerned, the notion of *wu* is particularly important. It is often singled out as the one major concept that characterizes the *hsüan-hsüeh* movement as a whole. More specifically, it is *wu* as the underlying principle of being, as the ultimate source of everything in the world, that is at issue here. Although a more detailed discussion of this concept will not be presented until the next chapter, *wu* is essentially employed in this context to describe the nature of Tao. As far as the *I-ching* is concerned, a new interpretation based on this understanding of Tao came into wide

currency and challenged the traditional Confucian interpretations. We shall have occasion to see an example of this in the next section.

The historical background of the "pure conversation" movement is clear enough. It is also clear why Wang Pi has been understood as a "pure" philosopher. But the generally negative assessment of *hsüan-hsüeh* as "escapist" and "anti-Confucian" remains a debatable interpretation. Whether this is a valid assessment of *ch'ing-t'an* and *hsüan-hsüeh* as a whole need not concern us. Our task is to see if this general understanding of *hsüan-hsüeh* may be applied to Wang Pi's thought.

### Wang Pi: "Taoist" or "Confucian"?

#### *The Reinterpretation of Confucianism*

According to Ho Shao's account, when Wang Pi was not yet twenty he went to see P'ei Hui. The latter was "immediately amazed" by the appearance of the young Wang Pi, and asked:

*Wu* is indeed that on which all things rest. But the sage did not venture a word on it. Why is it then that Lao-tzu found it necessary to keep explaining it?

To this, Wang Pi replied:

The sage embodied *wu*, and since *wu* cannot be taught, he therefore did not discuss it. Lao-tzu, however, remained on the level of "being" (*yu*); thus he constantly addressed the inadequacies (of being).<sup>42</sup>

This reply may seem a little surprising in view of the fact that Wang Pi is so often seen as the leading spokesman of "Neo-Taoism." The "sage" in question here is of course Confucius. In fact, according to the fifth-century scholar Chou Yung, "The old views of Wang (Pi) and Ho (Yen) all regarded Lao-tzu as inferior to Confucius."<sup>43</sup>

This reference is important because it points to the complexity involved in an assessment of Wang Pi's intellectual stance. As we may recall, the Chin scholar Fan Ning has precisely accused Wang Pi of abandoning the way of Confucius. Here we have an opposite assessment suggesting that Wang Pi was a supporter of the sage.

In the *Lun-yü* (Analects), there is an interesting story relating how Tzu-lu, one of Confucius's chief disciples, was displeased with

the Master after the latter's visit to Nan-tzu, the wife of Duke Ling of Wei, whose character and reputation apparently left much to be desired. The Master, in response, exclaimed: "If I have done anything improper, may Heaven's curse be on me, may Heaven's curse be on me!"<sup>44</sup> Despite Confucius's vehement protest, the incident has proved to be a source of embarrassment to later Confucians. For one thing, the visit to an "unworthy" woman itself seems to have compromised the sage's integrity. Worse still, from the account in the biography of Confucius in the *Shih-chi* (Records of the Historian), one may even surmise that the sage visited Nan-tzu because of the latter's influence on her husband.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of the real motive or even the historicity of the incident, one can easily see how critics of Confucianism might react to this story. Wang Ch'ung (27-97 A.D.), the famous "skeptical" philosopher of the Later Han period, for example, has found both the visit and Confucius's reply problematic.<sup>46</sup> Wang Pi, however, has argued that Confucius was unable to avoid the meeting with Nan-tzu because it was a matter of "heaven's ordinance" (*t'ien-ming*). Indeed, according to Wang Pi, Confucius's declaration has little to do with his conduct during the meeting with Nan-tzu; rather, it was a solemn admission that his unsuccessful political career then was part of heaven's ordinance.<sup>47</sup> It is significant that Wang Pi found it necessary to defend the behavior of the sage. In fact, in the T'ang dynasty, Wang Pi was officially recognized as one of the twenty-eight "worthies" (*hsien*), to whom sacrifices were to be made in Confucian temples.<sup>48</sup>

If Wang Pi did not criticize Confucius, his adherence to Confucian teachings was nevertheless not a naive or unquestioning one. The reply to P'ei Hui's question above, for example, is a good indication of how Wang Pi has reinterpreted the Confucian tradition in a new and profound way. Although Lao-tzu is said to be inferior to Confucius, the sage is now described as the champion of the doctrine of *wu*, the key doctrine in the *hsüan-hsüeh* movement. To further explore this radical reinterpretation of the Confucian tradition, we may turn briefly to Wang's understanding of a controversial passage in the *I-ching*.

#### *The Number of the Great Expansion*

Since the T'ang dynasty, Wang Pi's commentary on the *I-ching* was recognized officially by the imperial government.<sup>49</sup> Before that, the commentary was not without its critics. For example, Wang

Chi (ca. 240–285 A.D.), a high official and Confucian scholar who “criticized the *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*,” described it as largely “mistaken.”<sup>50</sup> The noted historian Sun Sheng (302–373 A.D.), to take but one more example, found it strong on “flowery expression” but feared that it might leave the great Way blemished in the end.<sup>51</sup> These comments are suggestive especially because they were made by well-known Confucians; in other words, the commentary on the *I-ching* will provide us with excellent clues with respect to Wang Pi’s departure from the traditional understanding of Confucian teachings.

Needless to say, a detailed study of Wang Pi’s commentary on the *I-ching* is beyond the scope of the present work. The particular passage that concerns us is from the first part of the *Hsi-tz’u* (Appended Remarks) and has to do with the meaning of the so-called number of the Great Expansion. The text reads: “The number of the Great Expansion (*ta-yen*) is fifty, but use is made only of forty-nine.”<sup>52</sup> On this, Wang Pi comments:

In the amplification of the numbers of heaven and earth, fifty form the basis. Forty-nine are used, but “One” is not used. Because it is not used, use (of the others) is made possible; because it is not a number, numbers are made complete. This indeed is the Great Ultimate (*t’ai-chi*) of Change. Forty and nine, these mark the end of the numbers. As *wu* cannot be made manifest by *wu* itself, it must be mediated by *yu*. Thus, focus on the ultimate of things, then one will understand the root from which they spring.<sup>53</sup>

Before I examine Wang Pi’s remarks more closely, a brief excursion to a few of the Han interpretations of this passage of the *I-ching* will prove illuminating. For instance, Ching Fang (ca. 77-37 B.C.) has read this passage in a radically different way: “The number 50 here refers to the 10 days [of the traditional Chinese ten-day ‘week’], the 12 hours [of the day], and the 28 stellar constellations [*hsiu*, or ‘lunar mansions’]. The total amounts to 50. The reason why ‘one’ is not used is because heaven produces the breath of life (*ch’i*), so as to fill (the universe) by what is empty (*hsü*). Thus only 49 are used.”<sup>54</sup>

Ma Jung (79–166 A.D.), the master commentator of the classics during the Later Han dynasty, is even more elaborate. On the “number of the Great Expansion” he comments:



Change has the Great Ultimate, and that is the North Star. The Great Ultimate gives birth to the Two Forms; the Two Forms give birth to the Sun and the Moon; the Sun and the Moon give birth to the Four Seasons; the Four Seasons give birth to the Five Phases or Elements; the Five Phases give birth to the 12 Months; the 12 Months give birth to the 24 calendrical periods. The North Star resides in the middle and does not move, while the remaining 49 revolve around it and are used.<sup>55</sup>

One + 2 + 2 + 4 + 5 + 12 + 24 = 50; it is quite an ingenious scheme indeed.

These examples reflect well the emphasis on cosmology, on the direct correspondence between the natural and the cosmic, to which attention has already been drawn. They reflect also the kind of "referential" reading that I have ascribed to Han interpretations of the classics in general. Even Cheng Hsüan (127–200 A.D.), arguably the greatest Han commentator of the classics, was not untouched by this mode of understanding. With regard to this passage of the *I-ching*, Cheng Hsüan attempted to combine it with another passage of the *Hsi-tz'u* that reckons the numbers of the universe to be fifty-five.<sup>56</sup> Although the number of the "Great Expansion" is fifty, according to Cheng, it does not include the five phases or elements. After explaining the genesis of these numbers by correlating heaven, earth, the numbers one to ten, the five cardinal points, and the five phases, Cheng Hsüan then goes on to say quite simply that "one" is not used in the "Great Expansion," because it does not serve the purpose of divination. That is to say, when the divining stalks are divided into two sets, fifty would yield two even or two odd numbers; forty-nine, on the other hand, would give one even and one odd, which can then be correlated with the *yin* (broken) and *yang* (unbroken) lines of the hexagrams.<sup>57</sup>

What is important here is that Wang Pi's interpretation of the *I-ching* has abandoned this "referential" mode of understanding typical of the Han period. As the Sung poet Chao Shih-hsiu (fl. 1190) writes, "In (Wang) Fu-Ssu's command of the *I-ching* there is no Han learning."<sup>58</sup> Instead of concentrating on what the numbers stand for, Wang Pi is concerned with unveiling the deeper significance of the "One," which seems to stand apart from the other numbers. The "One," as we have seen, is described as the "Great Ultimate of Change" (*I-chih t'ai-chi*). Although it is not used and is not a number, the "One" makes possible and complete the process

of change. Moreover, according to Wang Pi, "One" is also related to "non-being" (*wu*). This becomes a very important point when we come to Wang Pi's commentary on the *Lao-tzu*.

### *Words and Meaning*

The traditional Confucian understanding of the *I-ching* is thus transformed into an explication of the fundamental ground of change. This has important hermeneutical implications. How did Wang Pi arrive at his interpretation? On what basis could he justify his departure from the older hermeneutical model? The answer to this may be gathered from Wang Pi's understanding of the relationship between "words" (*yen*) and "meaning" (*yi*), or as Tu Wei-ming puts it, between "expressed form" and "implied meaning."<sup>59</sup>

The whole issue of *yen* and *yi*, words and meaning, has its root in the *I-ching* as well. In the *Hsi-tz'u* we read: "The Master said, 'What is written does not completely express what is said, and what is said does not completely express the intended meaning.'"<sup>60</sup> Obviously this raises a key hermeneutical question as to the possibility of fully understanding the meaning of an author or a text. Indeed, as the passage goes on to ask, "If so, does it mean that the thoughts of the sages cannot then be seen?" To this, the "Master" (Confucius) replied:

The sages established the "images" (*hsiang*) to fully bring out what they mean; the "hexagrams" (*kua*) were designed to fully express the true and the false; and the "Appended Remarks" (*Hsi-tz'u*) to give full expression to their words.<sup>61</sup>

This explanation serves to outline the place of the "images," the "hexagrams," and the "Appended Remarks" in an understanding of the *I-ching*. It has a modern ring to it, in that the question of meaning is here brought to the forefront of intellectual inquiry. Are the "images," then, enough to bring across the meaning of change? Wang Pi could hardly avoid this question, for he was concerned with the underlying principle of change. For Wang, the problem goes beyond the "images" and the "hexagrams." In section four of his *Brief Discourse on the I-ching* (*Chou-i lüeh-li*), entitled *Ming-hsiang* (Elucidation of the Images), he writes:

An "image" (*hsiang*) is that which yields "meaning" (*yi*). And "word" (*yen*) is that through which the image can be un-

derstood. To fully bring out the meaning there is nothing better than the images; to fully express the image there is nothing better than words. Words are born of the image; thus one can untangle the words to view the image. Images are born of meaning; thus one can untangle the images to view the meaning. Meaning is reached by the images, and the image is expressed by words. *Therefore* while the image is made understood by words, the words themselves are forgotten when the image is attained. And while images preserve the meaning, they are forgotten when meaning is comprehended.<sup>62</sup>

Although this is not a direct commentary on the passage in question, Wang Pi is clearly addressing the same issue raised by the author(s) of the *Hsi-tz'u*. At first glance, Wang Pi appears to be following the basic argument of the *Hsi-tz'u*; that is, the fundamental relationship between *yen*, *hsiang*, and *yi* is preserved. The "expressed form," epitomized by the *Hsi-tz'u* itself, serves to explain the "images," which in turn bring out the deeper meaning. Yet Wang Pi has also introduced a new element here, which in effect takes away the ultimate importance invested in the "words" and "images," including the hexagrams, by the *Hsi-tz'u*. From the above passage, it is clear that the "therefore" with which Wang Pi introduces his own view does not quite follow from the preceding argument taken basically from the *Hsi-tz'u*. When meaning is understood, as Wang Pi now argues, words and images can then be forgotten. In other words, the emphasis is shifted from the *means* of interpretation to the *end* itself.

How can this be justified, especially when the *Hsi-tz'u*, and indeed the *I-ching* as a whole, does not seem to support it? It is interesting to note that Wang Pi sought help from the *Chuang-tzu* to push his argument one step further. As Wang sees it, "words" and "images" are like the tools of the hunter or fisherman:

They are like the trap or net which catches the hare; when the hare is caught, the trap is forgotten. Or (they are like) the container that catches the fish; when the fish is caught, it too is forgotten. In this sense, words are the "traps" of the image; and the images are the "containers" of meaning. For this reason, those who cherish the words have not attained the image; those who cherish the images have not attained the meaning.<sup>63</sup>

This metaphor may not carry the kind of necessity that Wang Pi's argument claims to demonstrate, but it brings out clearly the logic of the argument. It is not only that words and images may be forgotten when meaning is comprehended; rather, it is *necessary* to "forget" these tools of interpretation before meaning can be truly understood. According to Wang Pi, "The attainment of meaning lies in the forgetting of the images; the attainment of the image lies in the forgetting of the words."<sup>64</sup> In the concluding lines of this section of his *Brief Discourse on the I-ching*, Wang Pi speaks very forcefully against the Han method of reading the *I-ching* in terms of external referents. In the end, as Wang concludes, "it misses the original meaning (of the *I-ching*)."<sup>65</sup>

The whole issue of the relationship between *yen* and *yi* was evidently a much debated topic in the Wei-Chin period. Ou-yang Chien (ca. 265–300), for example, has written a treatise entitled "Words Fully Express Meaning" (*Yen-chin-i lun*).<sup>66</sup> Hsün Ts'an (ca. 212–240), on the other hand, is a well-known supporter of the opposite view—that "words do not fully express meaning" (*yen pu chin-i*).<sup>67</sup> For our purposes, the importance of this debate lies in the fact that it points to the interpretive framework in which Wang Pi stands. Meaning, in this framework, is above all "nonreferential," in the sense that it is not to be found in external objects to which the author or text may be seen to refer. On the contrary, meaning is identified with the essence or ground of the ideas themselves. Although meaning is mediated by words and images, understanding itself transcends the tools, the media through which meaning is brought to light. In this respect, interpretation is primarily a process of "reduction," though in the descriptive, nonpejorative sense of the word. Instead of extending a concept or "image" to include other phenomena, Wang Pi is arguing for a return to the essential ground of what lies behind the "words" and "images." The importance of the intermediate steps is not denied; what Wang Pi is arguing against is a kind of "idolatry" that attaches ultimate significance to "words" and "images." This insight, as I shall argue in the next chapter, can ultimately be traced to Wang's understanding of the Tao as what is "nameless" and "formless."

### *Sagehood and Feelings*

Wang Pi is thus somewhat of an iconoclast. There is little doubt that he found the traditional interpretations of the classics