

# THE PROTAGONISTS OF THE *WENZI* IN LIGHT OF NEWLY DISCOVERED MATERIALS

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Daoist treatise the *Wenzi* 文子 (Master Wen) has, quite justly, the reputation of being a highly dubious text. Particularly, it is the identity of the protagonists Master Wen 文子 and King Ping 平王 that has challenged its readers. Although they appear only once together in the received text, which features the illustrious Laozi 老子 as the main character, this episode has often played a crucial role in the text's reception. However, a clear understanding of their identity was missing both in the time of the *Wenzi*'s official recognition as a "classic" (*jing* 經)<sup>2</sup> and when its authenticity was increasingly questioned in the centuries that followed, culminating in its denigration as a forgery (*weishu* 偽書) with "no value whatsoever."<sup>3</sup> Nor could the publication of some bamboo strips belonging to a Western Han Dynasty 西漢 (206 BCE–8 CE) edition of the *Wenzi* (hereafter referred to as the Bamboo-*Wenzi*) resolve the uncertainty, leaving the initial expectations aroused by their discovery unsatisfied. On the contrary, it even spurred new hypotheses so that a consensus on Master Wen and King Ping seems less likely now than ever before.<sup>4</sup>

The aim of the present paper, therefore, is to revisit this controversy in light of the evidence provided by several newly discovered sources: the text *Xinian* 繫年 (Connecting Years) from the Tsinghua University Bamboo Manuscripts (abbreviated *Qinghua jian* 清華簡), the two Shanghai Museum manuscripts (abbreviated *Shangbo jian* 上博簡) known as *Pingwang wen Zheng Shou* 平王問鄭壽 (King Ping Asked Zheng Shou) and *Pingwang yu wangzi Mu* 平王與王子木 (King Ping and Prince Mu), and, above all, a *Wenzi*-related excerpt from the *Bielu* 別錄 (Separate Records) fragments.

There have been a number of academic investigations on this topic over the last decades, including those by Barbara Kandel (1973), Li Dingsheng 李定生 (1994),

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- 1 Parts of the present article are based on my doctoral dissertation (Fech 2012, 93–133).
  - 2 Barrett 1996, 65.
  - 3 This drastic characterization was used by the prominent scholar Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929), who (in *Gushu zhenwei changshi* 古書真偽常識, 64) said: 像這類的書，沒有一點價值可說，焚毀也不足惜。"As regards books of this kind, it is appropriate to say that they have absolutely no value and even if fire destroyed them, it would not be something to feel regretful about."
  - 4 For a concise overview of this topic, see Zheng Guorui 2010, 52–53.

Wang Bo 王博 (1996), Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬 (1996), Ding Yuanzhi 丁原植 (1999), Zhang Fengqian 張豐乾 (2002), Paul van Els (2006), and Zheng Guorui 鄭國瑞 (2010).<sup>5</sup> In view of the wide variety of relevant positions, presenting a comprehensive state of the field would easily require an academic paper in its own right. Thus, although different opinions will be mentioned as the paper progresses, I would first like to briefly point out what distinguishes the present article from earlier research and how the current evidence can contribute to a better understanding of this topic.

In the present paper, I have attempted to cover most of the extant sources containing biographical information on Master Wen and King Ping. As a result, I will distinguish between as many as eleven different positions regarding the identity of Master Wen as well as four different views of King Ping, greatly exceeding any previous work on this topic. The fuller picture that is accordingly obtained is only one benefit of this approach. Even more important is the fact that some previously overlooked or seldom considered accounts actually provide important clues and have significant implications. The new pieces of evidence introduced here can be divided into direct and indirect categories, based on their relation to the *Wenzi*. While the significance of the former speaks for itself, the indirect evidence that has been discovered provides important historical perspectives on the various interpretations relating to King Ping put forward in the course of the long *Wenzi* discussion. On this basis, the validity of these views may be confirmed or denied.

I will begin with a historical overview of the diverse opinions about Master Wen and King Ping. The transmission history of the *Wenzi* will be divided into three different stages: first, from the chapter “Yiwenzhi” 藝文志 (Records of Classical and Other Literature) of the *Hanshu* 漢書, the earliest extant source on the *Wenzi* (first century CE), to the late Southern Song 宋 Dynasty (thirteenth century CE); second, from the late Southern Song Dynasty to the publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* in 1995; and, finally, from the publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* to today. Then, I will introduce new evidence, followed by some deductions regarding the identity of Master Wen and King Ping. By way of conclusion, after contemplating the differences in the *Wenzi* entries in the *Bielu* fragments and the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi,” I will attempt to answer the question of why the dialogue between Master Wen and King Ping was characterized as “fictitious” (*yituo* 依託) in the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi.”

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5 Kandel 1973, 21–23, 46–49; Li Dingsheng 1994; Wang Bo 1996; Wei Qipeng 1996, 2022; Ding Yuanzhi 1999, 22; Zhang Fengqian 2002, 112–129; van Els 2006, 45–57; Zheng Guorui 2010, 42–53.

## 1 Historical Overview

It can be safely assumed that the *Wenzi* has been circulating in its received form since the sixth century CE.<sup>6</sup> That is to say, at least since that time the *Wenzi*'s main protagonist has been Laozi, whose instructions, structured as monologues or, more rarely, dialogues with Master Wen,<sup>7</sup> constitute almost the entirety of its twelve chapters. As for Master Wen and King Ping, they are only introduced together in the following dialogue at the end of the fifth chapter<sup>8</sup>:

平王問文子曰：吾聞子得道於老聃，今賢人雖有道，而遭淫亂之世，以一一人之權，而欲化久亂之民，其庸能乎？文子曰：夫道德者，匡衰以為正，振亂以為治，化淫敗以為樸，醇德復生，天下安寧，要在一人。[...]積德成王，積怨成亡，[...]以一人與天下為讎，雖欲長久，不可得也，堯舜以是昌，桀紂以是亡。平王曰：寡人敬聞命矣。<sup>9</sup>

King Ping asked Master Wen: 'I have heard that you, Master, received the Way from Lao Dan. Now you, a worthy man, are in possession of the Way, yet are encountering a decadent and chaotic world. If you had the power of a ruler [一人] and had the wish to transform the people having been long accustomed to chaos, how could that be accomplished?' Master Wen replied: 'It is that the one who possesses the Way and the Virtue [is competent to] reform decadent customs and put them straight, settle chaos and return to good governance, and to transform debauchery and degeneration into simplicity. To bring about pure virtue again and to put All-under-Heaven into peace and tranquility, the quintessential is the ruler [...]. By gathering virtue one achieves kingly rule, by gathering resentment one vanishes [...]. When the ruler makes All-under-Heaven his enemy, he will not succeed in establishing a long-lasting rule, even if he wishes so. This is why (virtuous kings like) Yao and Shun prospered and (hated tyrants like) Jie and Zhou vanished.' King Ping said: 'I shall reverently listen to your (further) instructions.'<sup>10</sup>

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- 6 The bibliographical catalogue of the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (59.1518) lists the now lost commentary on the *Wenzi* that was penned by Li Xian 李暹 (sixth century CE) and comprised twelve chapters, which corresponds to the scope of the received text.
- 7 There are fourteen such dialogues in the received *Wenzi*. In the text's arrangement by Ding Yuanzhi (1999a), they are found in sections 5.1, 5.3, 5.5, 5.7, 5.9, 5.11, 5.13, 5.15, 7.2, 7.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.12, and 11.6.
- 8 The fifth chapter of the received text is the chapter with the most parallels to the Bamboo-*Wenzi*. For a detailed discussion on the relationship between these two *Wenzi* versions, see van Els 2006, 117–119; Fech 2012, 23–24.
- 9 *Wenzi* (concordance edition) 5/29/3–13.
- 10 Compare the translation in Cleary 1991, 77–78.

Given the fact that both the posthumous title “Ping” and the name “Wenzi” were very common in ancient China,<sup>11</sup> this dialogue – except for the affirmation of Master Wen’s studies with Laozi – provides little evidence regarding their identity.

### 1.1 References from the *Hanshu* to the Late Southern Song Dynasty

In the extant bibliographical sources and philosophical literature from the period in question, it is possible to single out as many as six different ways of referring to Master Wen.<sup>12</sup>

These references are listed chronologically, in order of appearance, as follows:

1. The first reference is contained in the bibliographical chapter of the *Hanshu*:

文子九篇

老子弟子，與孔子並時，而稱周平王問，似依託者也。<sup>13</sup>

[The book of] *Master Wen* [comprises] nine chapters.

(Its author) was a disciple of Laozi and a contemporary of Confucius. Yet the assertion of being asked for advice by King Ping of Zhou seems to be a fictitious construct.

This entry<sup>14</sup> identifies Master Wen as a disciple of Laozi and a contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BCE), while casting doubt on his purported encounter with King Ping of Zhou (d. 720 BCE).<sup>15</sup> However, the entry does not clarify how, if at all, the character

11 While in the chapter “Gujin renbiao” 古今人表 of the *Hanshu* 漢書 we find eleven rulers with the posthumous title “Ping”, Zheng Guorui 2010 (45–47) lists twenty-one different persons with the name “Wenzi” as mentioned in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, *Guoyu* 國語, and some philosophical texts.

12 I will consider only the sources mentioning Master Wen in connection with either Laozi, or King Ping, or the authorship of the *Wenzi*. Thus, two figures bearing this name, who are sometimes regarded as the protagonist of the *Wenzi*, will not be taken into account here. One of them appears as the interlocutor of a king of Qi 齊 in the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 30/66/24–25), whereas the other one has been characterized as a disciple of Zixia 子夏 in the *Bielu* (*Shiji* 74.2350, n2).

13 *Hanshu* 30.1729.

14 The *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi” was created on the basis of another bibliographical work, the now lost *Qilüe* 七略 (Seven Summaries), which, for its part, was an abridged version of the previously mentioned *Bielu*. See Wolff 1998, 64. Thus, it is quite possible that it was not the *Hanshu*’s author, Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE), who initially introduced the given view of Master Wen and King Ping, as was often concluded in the *Wenzi* discussion. For this conclusion, see Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩 (1716–1798), in *Hanshu gujin renbiao shuzheng* 漢書古今人表疏證, 370; Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753–1818), in *Wenzi-tang ji* 問字堂集 4.87 (“*Wenzi xu*” 文子序).

15 In the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi,” the term “fiction” (*yituo* 依託) was usually applied to those works that could not have been produced by their alleged authors, such as Shen Nong 神農,

Wen 文 was related to the person it describes.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the *Wenzi* is listed immediately after the *Laozi* could be construed as suggesting a close relationship between their supposed authors, Master Wen and Laozi, respectively.

2. Another mention of Master Wen in the *Hanshu*, this time found in the chapter “Gujin ren biao” 古今人表 (Table of the Persons of Past and Present),<sup>17</sup> portrays him as an elder contemporary of King Ping of Zhou. Several first millennium sources that also identify Master Wen as a contemporary of the mentioned Zhou ruler demonstrate that this mention was not based on a mistake or an oversight.<sup>18</sup> In this case, the anachronism between the characters of the *Wenzi* does not exist. However, there is a clear contradiction with the previous statement in the “Yiwenzhi.” One possible explanation for this could be that, as is well known, the tables in the *Hanshu* were completed only after Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) death by his sister Ban Zhao 班昭 (45–116).<sup>19</sup> Thus, the entries in the “Yiwenzhi” and the “Gujin ren biao” could have had different authors. Nonetheless, even in this case, it is unlikely that Ban Zhao is the origin of the presented view of Master Wen. The contradiction must therefore be accepted for the moment.

3. In Wang Chong’s 王充 (27–97) *Lunheng* 論衡 and in the *Baopuzi* 抱樸子 by Ge Hong 葛洪 (280–340), Master Wen is referred to solely as a student of Laozi. But whereas Wang Chong saw their relationship as exemplifying the utmost harmony between a teacher and a student – comparable only to Confucius and his favorite disciple, Yan Hui 顏回 (521–481 BCE)<sup>20</sup> – Ge Hong held that Master Wen, in spite of his

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Huangdi 黃帝, etc. But in this case, it was used to call attention to the anachronistic character of the dialogue between Master Wen and King Ping of Zhou.

16 See, for example, the entry on the *Yuanzi* (*Hanshu* 30.1730): 蜎子十三篇。名淵，楚人，老子弟子。“*Yuanzi*: thirteen chapters. (Master Yuan’s) given name was Yuan 淵. Being a native of Chu, he was a disciple of Laozi.” Although the family name of the *Yuanzi*’s author, also a student of Laozi, is not stated here explicitly, the reference to the given name (*ming* 名) suggests that his full name was Yuan Yuan 淵淵.

17 *Hanshu*, 20.902.

18 See, for example, *Yilin* 1.18b: 周平王時人師老君。“(Master Wen) was a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou and followed Lord Lao as a student.”

19 Knechtges *et al.* 2010, 21.

20 *Lunheng* (concordance edition) 54/242/18–22: 以孔子為君，顏淵為臣，尚不能譴告，況以老子為君，文子為臣乎！老子、文子，似天地者也。“Although Confucius was like a prince, and Yan Yuan like a minister, he could not make up his mind to reprimand Yan Yuan how much less would Laozi have been able to do so, if we consider him as a prince and *Wenzi* as his minister? Laozi and *Wenzi* were like Heaven and Earth.” Translation adapted from Forke 1907, 100.

great efforts, was still inferior to his illustrious teacher.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the bibliographical chapter of the *Suishu* 隋書 (636) speaks of Master Wen merely as a disciple of Laozi.<sup>22</sup>

4. According to the catalogue *Da Song Mingdi suoshang mulu* 答宋明帝所上目錄 compiled by the Daoist master Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–477) in 471, the name of the *Wenzi*'s author was Wen Yang 文陽.<sup>23</sup> Here, the character *wen* seems to represent the family name of Master Wen. However, Lu did not specify either Wen Yang's biographical data or his philosophical affiliation.

5. Another point of view, which has been highly influential up to the present day, posits that Master Wen is Xin Jiran 辛計然, an enigmatic adviser to the illustrious King Goujian 勾踐 of Yue 越 (r. 496–464 BCE). According to a number of works, including the *Yuejue shu* 越絕書, *Wu Yue chungiu* 吳越春秋, and others, he played an important role in the hard-won victory of the state of Yue over its sworn enemy, the state of Wu 吳. It is generally assumed that this view was first put forward by Li Xian 李暹 (sixth century CE), who wrote in his now lost commentary on the *Wenzi*:

姓辛，葵丘濮上人，號曰計然。范蠡師事之，本受業于老子，錄其遺言為十二篇。<sup>24</sup>

(Master Wen) had the family name of Xin. Being a native of Kuiqiu<sup>25</sup> on the Pu River, he chose to be called Jiran. Fan Li followed him as a student. Originally, he received teachings from Laozi, whose imparted words he recorded in a work of twelve chapters.

Thus, in addition to stating Master Wen's family name (Xin 辛), place of origin (Kuiqiu 葵丘), and affiliation with Laozi, Li Xian also called him a teacher of Fan Li 范蠡, by far the most prominent minister of King Goujian.<sup>26</sup> Master Wen's connection to Fan Li was also mentioned by Li Shan 李善 (630–689), the first commentator of the *Wenxuan* 文選 compiled by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), who not only provided similar information, but also specified the source of his reference as the lost work *Fanzi* 范子 (Master Fan).<sup>27</sup>

21 *Baopuzi*, “Neipian” 內篇, 8.151.

22 *Suishu* 34.1001.

23 Cited in Fa Lin's 法琳 (572–640) *Bianzheng lun* 辯正論 8.546b.

24 This line was quoted in Chao Gongwu's 晁公武 (1127–1279) catalogue *Junzhai dushu zhi* 郡齋讀書志 11.474.

25 Kuiqiu, situated in the vicinity of the modern-day county of Minquan 民權 at the border between Henan and Shandong Provinces, was a historically significant place. In the year 651 BCE, Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (?–643 BCE) presided over an important assembly of the feudal lords in Kuiqiu (*Shiji* 32.1648).

26 His supposed teachings are recorded in the second “Yueyu” 越語 chapter of the *Guoyu* 國語. *Guoyu* (concordance edition) 8.2/121/20–125/23.

27 Li Shan commented on a *Wenzi* quotation in *Wenxuan* 37.20b–21a [693–694]: 《范子》

As a teacher of Fan Li and a participant in a military conflict that ended in 473 BCE,<sup>28</sup> Master Wen would in fact have been a contemporary of Confucius. However, assuming we accept his involvement in this matter, it is unlikely that Li Xian gave Master Wen the new identity of Xin Jiran simply to match the description in the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi.” Therefore, there must have been another reason for his opinion on Master Wen.

6. More recent sources have finally provided comprehensive accounts that address several aspects of Master Wen’s biography. The earliest account is contained in Xu Lingfu’s 徐靈府 preface to his commentary on the *Wenzi* (completed between 809 and 815):

文子者，周平王時人也。著書一十二篇。

《史記》云：文子亦曰計然，范蠡師之。姓辛，名妍，字文子，蔡丘濮上人，其先晉公子也。嘗兩遊，蠡得而事之。老子弟子也。

平王問文子曰：聞子得道於老君，今賢人雖有道，賢人，文子也。而遭淫亂之世，以一人之權而欲化久亂之民，其能庸乎？文子對曰：道德匡邪以為政，振亂以為理，使聖德復生，天下安寧，要在一人。故積德成王，積怨成亡，而堯舜以是昌，桀紂以是亡。平王信其言而用之，時天下治。然安危成敗，匪降自天，在乎君王任賢而已。故聖人怵怵為天下，孩其人同於赤子，欲以興利去害而安之，非欲有私已也。<sup>29</sup>

Master Wen was a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou. He wrote a book in twelve chapters.

*Shiji* says: “Master Wen was also called Jiran. Fan Li followed him as a student. He had the family name of Xin, the given name of Yan, and the style [zi] of Master Wen. He was a native of Kuiqiu<sup>30</sup> on the River Pu, and the lords of Jin were his ancestors. Once he set out to travel. (Fan) Li then sought after him and followed him. He was a disciple of Laozi.”

King Ping asked Master Wen: ‘I have heard that you, Master, received the Way from Lord Lao. Now you, a worthy man (the worthy man is Master Wen) are in possession of the Way, yet are encountering a decadent and chaotic world. If you had the power of a ruler [一人] and had the wish to transform the people long accustomed to chaos, how could that be accomplished?’ Master Wen replied: ‘The Way and the Virtue reform decadent customs and put them straight, settle chaos and establish order, transform de-

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曰：文子者，姓辛，蔡丘濮上人也，稱曰計然。南游於越，范蠡師事。“*Fanzi* said: ‘Master Wen had a family name of Xin. He was a native of Kuiqiu on the River Pu and had an epithet of Jiran. Once he travelled south to Yue, where Fan Li followed him as a student.’” Thus, while basically agreeing with Li Xian, Li Shan made no reference to Laozi.

28 Cohen 2009, 24.

29 *Tongxuan zhenjing* 通玄真經, “xu”, 442c.

30 In view of the absence of records about Caiqiu on the Pu river, I read the graph *cai* 蔡 as *kui* 葵.

bauchery and degeneration into simplicity. To bring about sagacious virtue again and to put All-under-Heaven into peace and tranquility, the quintessential is the ruler. Therefore, by gathering virtue one achieves kingly rule, by gathering resentment one vanishes. This is why (virtuous kings like) Yao and Shun prospered and (hated tyrants like) Jie and Zhou vanished.’ King Ping believed his words and made use of them and at that time the world became ordered. In this way, safety and danger, success and failure do not come from Heaven, but depend only on whether the ruler employs able (ministers). Therefore, the sage is concerned with the management of the state, and treats his people like newborn babies. He wishes to bring them peace by producing gain and doing away with harm and doesn’t wish any personal benefits for himself.<sup>31</sup>

In identifying Master Wen as an adviser to King Ping of Zhou, a student of Laozi, and a teacher (as Xin Jiran) of Fan Li, Xu Lingfu presents a biography that, with the sole exception of Liu Xiujing’s catalogue, contains most of the information provided by the previously mentioned sources. The new information offered here on Master Wen (regarding his given and style names, his ancestry, and his travels) can again be found in the biography of Jiran recorded in the *Fanzi*. However, Xu Lingfu identified his source as the *Shiji* 史記. Given that the *Shiji* does not contain this line, what are the reasons for this allusion? In my opinion, there are two possible explanations. First, as will be discussed later, the given *Fanzi* account is quoted, among others, in the “Jijie” 集解 commentary (fifth century) on the *Shiji*. Thus, in the statement above, Xu Lingfu may have confused the commentary with the commented text. Alternatively, the same line (without a reference to the *Fanzi*) also appears in the text “Suwang miao lun” 素王妙論 attributed to Sima Qian 司馬遷, the author of the *Shiji*.<sup>32</sup> It is thus possible that in using the label “*Shiji*” Xu Lingfu was referring to Sima Qian by the title of his most famous work. In any case, considering that he put all of it in an additional commentary line, Xu Lingfu clearly wanted to treat the Jiran-related information with a sense of objective distance. For him, Master Wen was primarily a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou. The account in question therefore seems to be based on two unrelated strains of information. Still, it is entirely possible that, allowing for some variation, the account of Master Wen presented by Xu Lingfu was in fact extant even earlier. After all, there are references to Jiran (sometimes implicit)<sup>33</sup> in all the biographies of Master Wen featuring King Ping of Zhou.<sup>34</sup>

31 Compare the translation in van Els 2006, 206.

32 *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 404.8a [1871]. While – according to *Yuhan shanfang ji yishu* 玉函山房輯佚書, Vol. 5, 2883 – Ma Guohan 馬國翰 (1794–1857) regarded the “Suwang miao lun” as authentic, for Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) – as expressed in *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林, Vol. 1, 528 – it was a forgery from the Wei-Jin era (220–420 CE).

33 *Xianyuan bianzhu* 仙苑編珠 (Paired Pearls from the Garden of Immortals, completed 960)

1.1.1 King Ping of Zhou and the *Wenzi*: A Virtuous Ruler (or Was He?)

While the identity of Master Wen was subject to various interpretations in the sources from this period, his royal counterpart was unanimously recognized, to the extent that he was mentioned, as King Ping of Zhou. As already shown, Xu Lingfu credited this monarch with establishing order in the world (*shi tianxia zhi* 時天下治). In the following passage, Xu indicates further reasons why King Ping and his adviser are featured as positive characters in the *Wenzi*:

平王，周之賢王，傷時道衰，故問文子，求於治道。文子云：要在一人，匪由於他。故平王修政，周道復興，而春秋美之，後諡為平王。<sup>35</sup>

King Ping was an able king of the Zhou (ruling house). He was greatly concerned about the decline of the Way during his time and thus consulted Master Wen, wishing to obtain the Way of Order (from him). Master Wen said: ‘The quintessential (for establishing the order) lies in the ruler and does not proceed from any other source.’ Therefore, King Ping dedicated himself to governing matters, the Way of the Zhou was restored, and the *Chunqiu* praised him. (For this) he was later given the posthumous title “Ping” (The Pacifier).

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3.264: 文子者，周平王時人，老君弟子也。著書十二篇，泛三江五湖，號漁父，受號通玄真人。“Master Wen was a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou and a disciple of Lord Lao. He wrote a book in twelve chapters. Floating on the ‘three rivers and five lakes,’ he was called ‘fisher’ and received the (honorary) title of the ‘true man that communicates with mystery.’” Both the place of Master Wen’s alleged travels – “three rivers and five lakes” commonly referred to the area around Lake Taihu 太湖 in Eastern China that belonged to Wu and later to Yue – and his designation “fisher” evoke an association with Jiran, who acted as political adviser in Yue and was called the “fisher” in the *Yilin*, 1.22.

- 34 *Hunyuan shengji* 混元聖紀 6.66–68: 老子之門人辛鉞，一名計然，範蠡之師也。道號文子，其著書號《通玄真經》。其先晉公子也。[...] 文子再拜受教。周平王問於文子曰：聞子得道於老聃 [...]。文子對曰：[...] 堯舜以是昌，桀紂以是亡。平王用其言而天下治。文子復從老君授神丹之方，遂證品仙階矣。“Laozi’s disciple Xin Jian, with the additional given name of Jiran, was teacher of Fan Li. Having the Dao-name of Master Wen, he wrote a book with the title *True Scripture of Communication with Mystery*. The lords of Jin were his ancestors... Master Wen bowed repeatedly and received (Laozi’s) teaching. King Ping of Zhou asked Master Wen: “I have heard that you, Master, received the Way from Lao Dan...” Master Wen replied: “...This is why Yao and Shun prospered, while Jie and Zhou vanished.” King Ping made use of his words and the world became ordered. Master Wen followed Lord Lao once again, received [a] recipe of divine elixir and then acquired the state of an immortal.” The *Hunyuan shengji* is the first source to call Master Wen a Daoist immortal.

- 35 *Tongxuan zhenjing* 5.474a.

In mentioning the restoration of the Way of the Zhou through King Ping, Xu Lingfu is undoubtedly referring to the foundation of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (Dong Zhou 東周). This took place a number of years after 771 BCE, after the preceding Western Zhou Dynasty (Xi Zhou 西周) had fallen to the joint forces of the Rong 戎 tribes and the armies of the vassal states of Zeng 繒 and Shen 申, led by King Ping's maternal grandfather, Marquis of Shen.<sup>36</sup> As Xu Lingfu correctly points out, the designation "King Ping" was a posthumous title and as such reflected a positive judgment of the latter's political performance.<sup>37</sup> However, despite his "laudable" designation, the historical role of King Ping of Zhou was rather controversial in Chinese history. Indeed, it was seldom judged as unequivocally positive as it was by Xu Lingfu.

The early references to King Ping primarily address the political rise of the feudal lords.<sup>38</sup> The *Zuozhuan* 左傳, for instance, gives the following summary of the events surrounding his enthronement:

至于幽王，天不弔周，王昏不若，用愆厥位。攜王奸命，諸侯替之，而建王嗣，用遷邠，則是兄弟之能用力於王室也。<sup>39</sup>

When it came to the days of the King You, Heaven had no pity upon Zhou. The king blindly pursued an improper course, and lost his throne. Then King Xie illicitly appropriated the [Heavenly] Mandate, so that the princes set him aside, and raised king [You's] proper heir to the throne, who removed [the capital] to Jiaru:—thus were the brothers [of the king] able to employ their strength in support of the royal house.<sup>40</sup>

This passage certainly centers on the thought that the establishment of King Ping (mentioned here as "heir") was only made possible by the support of the feudal lords. At the same time, however, he is also regarded here as the proper claimant to the Zhou throne,

36 *Shiji* 4.149.

37 Regarding the qualifications for receiving this title, in *Yi Zhoushu* 逸周書 (concordance edition, 54/28/13–14) there are listed three different options: 治而清省曰平，執事有制曰平，布綱治紀曰平。"To create order and remain incorruptible and frugal is called Ping. To take actions in a controlled way is called Ping. To establish standards and bring into order the guidelines is called Ping."

38 It was King Ping of Zhou who gave the semi-barbarian tribe of Qin 秦 the status of a feudatory (*Shiji* 5.179), which eventually led to the establishment of the first imperial dynasty in Chinese history. The *Shangshu* 尚書 chapter "Wenhou zhi ming" 文侯之命 (56/51/20–52/6) contains an order of King Ping of Zhou rewarding Marquis Wen of Jin for his military support and showing great respect to him. For the translation, see Karlgren 1950, 78–80. For the arguments that the Zhou monarch in question was indeed King Ping of Zhou, see *Shangshu jiaoshi yilun* 尚書校釋譯論, Vol. 4, 2113.

39 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 B10.26.9/392/15–17.

40 Translation adapted from Legge 1872, 717.

unlike King Xie 攜, whose identity remained obscure. This is also the tenor of the related passages of the *Zhushu jinian* 竹書紀年,<sup>41</sup> which both recognize King Ping as heir apparent and point out that King Ping was supported by Marquis Wen of Jin 晉文侯 (805–746 BCE) in his rivalry with King Xie, identified as his brother Yuchen 余臣.<sup>42</sup>

Ban Gu, however, radically challenged this rather ambiguous depiction of the historical role of King Ping of Zhou, placing him in the lowest row of his “Gujin ren biao,” dedicated to the “dumb people” (*yu ren* 愚人).<sup>43</sup> When examining the “Daojia” 道家 section of the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi,” it becomes clear that most of the manuscripts listed there feature sovereigns belonging to the highest echelons of the table.<sup>44</sup> Apart from the *Wenzi*, the only other “Daoist” text possibly featuring a “dumb” ruler was the *Xin Jia* 辛甲. The ruler in question was none other than the infamous tyrant Zhou 紂.<sup>45</sup> As a result, it is questionable whether Xu Lingfu’s positive account of King Ping of Zhou was accurate.

## 1.2 References from the Late Southern Song Dynasty to the Publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* (1995)

The first evidence that the portrayal of the protagonists of the *Wenzi* began to change is found in the book catalogue of the scholar Zhou Bida 周必大 (1126–1204).<sup>46</sup> Here, the counterpart of Master Wen is identified as King Ping of Chu 楚平王 (r. 529–516 BCE). However, it was not until the end of the thirteenth century that we find this view presented in the first full-blown biography of Master Wen. A part of the *Xuanyuan shizi tu* 玄元十子圖 (Portraits of Ten Masters of the Mysterious Origin) and penned by the famous painter and scholar Zhao Mengfu 趙孟頫 (1254–1322) in 1286,<sup>47</sup> this biographical account states the following:

文子，姓辛，名鉞，一名計然，葵丘濮上人也。師事老子。楚平王問曰：聞子得道於老聃，可得聞乎？對曰：道德匡邪以為正，振亂以為治。醇德復生，天下安寧，要在一人。故積德成王，積怒成亡。堯舜以是昌，桀紂以是

41 This text was found in the grave of King Xiang of Wei 魏襄王 (?–296 BCE) as early as 281 CE, but it was later lost so it was reconstructed only on the basis of citations from early works. See *Guben Zhushu Jinian*, preface by Fang Shiming and Wang Xiuling, 1.

42 *Guben Zhushu Jinian*, 60 and 67. For the translation, see Li 2006, 350.

43 *Hanshu*, 20.903.

44 The Yellow Emperor 黃帝 (the *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經 and *Li Mu* 力牧), King Tang 湯 (the *Yi Yin* 伊尹), and the Zhou kings Wen 文 and Wu 武 (the *Yuzi* 鬻子 and *Tai Gong* 太公) all appear in the highest row of this table as “sages” (*sheng ren* 聖人).

45 *Hanshu*, 30.1729.

46 *Zhoushi shebi* 周氏涉筆, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, “Zibu”, “Daojia”, 695.

47 For Zhao Mengfu and his position at the Yuan court, see Rossabi 1994, 469.

殃。王曰：敬聞命矣。後南游吳越，范蠡師之。越欲伐吳，蠡諫曰：臣聞之師曰：兵，凶器。戰，逆德。爭者，事之末也。陰謀逆德，好用凶器，試身於所末，不可。勾踐不聽。敗於夫椒。後位以上大夫，弗就。隱吳興餘英禺山。相傳以為登雲而升。<sup>48</sup>

Master Wen had the family name of Xin, the given name of Jian, and yet another given name of Jiran. He was a native of Kuiqiu on the River Pu. He followed Laozi as a student. King Ping of Chu asked him: 'I have heard that you, Master, received the Way from Lao Dan. Can I hear about it?' (Master Wen) replied: 'The Way and the Virtue reform decadent customs and put them straight, settle chaos and establish order, transform debauchery and degeneration into simplicity. To bring about pure virtue again and to put All-under-Heaven into peace and tranquility, the quintessential is the ruler. Therefore, by gathering virtue one achieves kingly rule, by gathering resentment one vanishes. This is why Yao and Shun prospered, while Jie and Zhou vanished.' King Ping said: 'I shall reverently listen to your instructions.' After that, (Master Wen) moved south to Wu and Yue. Fan Li followed him as a student. When Yue wanted to attack Wu, (Fan) Li remonstrated: 'I have heard my teacher saying: 'Weapons are instruments of ill omen; war is reversed virtue; fighting is the last measure. To secretly seek to apply reversed virtue, to readily use instruments of ill omen, to try oneself in the last measure, is something that should not be done.' Goujian did not listen to this advice and (as a result) was defeated at Fujiao. Although (Master Wen) was later given the rank of a Senior Grand Master, he did not accept it. He retreated to the Yu Mountain in the Yuying district of the Wuxing prefecture. It has been transmitted to us that he ascended (to Heaven) on a cloud.

This biography can also be found, with some variations, in the *Lishi zhenxian tidaotongjian* 歷世真仙體道通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror of Immortals Who Embodied the Dao through the Ages) from 1294<sup>49</sup> and the *Xuanpin lu* 玄品錄 (Records of the Categories of the Mysterious) from 1335.<sup>50</sup>

48 *Xuanyuan shizi tu*, 156.

49 While repeating verbatim the account created by Zhao Mengfu, the author of the *Lishi zhenxian tidaotongjian*, Zhao Daoyi 趙道一 (late 13th, early 14th cent.), disagreed (4.251) with the latter in respect to the identity of King Ping by naming him King Ping of Zhou. This demonstrates the reluctance of some scholars to adopt the new view of King Ping.

50 *Xuanpin lu* (1.445) begins the description of Master Wen with the following lines: 辛決，一名計然，葵丘濮上人也。師事老子，博學無所不通。"Xin Jue, with the additional given name of Jiran, was a native of Kuiqiu on the River Pu. He followed Laozi as a student. Thoroughly educated, there was nothing he could not comprehend." The given name Jue as well as the information about the comprehensive education is new in the given context.

In addition to offering a new perspective on King Ping that quickly gained prominence and supplanted the former version,<sup>51</sup> the *Xuanyuan shizi tu* also dispensed with any references to Master Wen as an adviser to the Zhou ruler, focusing instead exclusively on his connection to Xin Jiran. Significant attention is consequently paid to his alleged activities during a stay in the south. First, in a passage that appears almost verbatim in the *Shiji*, the *Xuanyuan shizi tu* elaborates on his relationship with Fan Li, who is told here to quote Master Wen's words when admonishing Goujian.<sup>52</sup> Then, it portrays Master Wen as declining a high official position and retreating to Yu Mountain. While Jiran's close association with this mountain was widely acknowledged during the time of Zhao Mengfu,<sup>53</sup> his description as a hermit may be a reflection of the historical situation at the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty, when many renowned officials and literati preferred retirement to official engagement.<sup>54</sup> And, finally, with its report about Master Wen's ascension to Heaven (becoming an immortal), the *Xuanyuan shizi tu* echoes the above-mentioned *Hunyuan shengji* 混元聖紀 (Annals of the Sage of Undifferentiated Beginning), finished 1191 CE.<sup>55</sup>

Further changes in Master Wen's biographical data were made by the *Wenzi* commentator Du Daojian 杜道堅 (1237–1318). They seem to have had the goal of creating a more coherent biographical account, as seen in the following lines from Du Daojian's preface to the *Wenzi*:

文子，晉之公孫，姓辛氏，名鉞，字計然，文子其號。家睢之葵丘，屬宋地，一稱宋鉞，師老子學，早聞大道，著書十有二篇，[...]。<sup>56</sup>

51 After Zhao Mengfu, the appearance of King Ping of Chu in the *Wenzi* was advocated by Mou Yan 牟巖 (1227–1311) in his preface ("yuanxu" 原序, 1a) to Du Daojian's 杜道堅 (1237–1318) *Wenzi zuanyi* 文子續意. See also Liang Yusheng, in *Hanshu gujin renbiao shuzheng*, 370, and Sun Xingyan, in *Wenzi-tang ji* 4.87 ("Wenzi xu"). For the French translation of Sun Xingyan's arguments, see Le Blanc 2000, 106.

52 *Shiji* 41.1740. See also *Guoyu* (concordance edition) 8.2/121/29–31. In the *Shiji*, however, Fan Li refers to the military lore (*bingzhe* 兵者) instead of his teacher.

53 As demonstrated in Tan Yao's 談鑰 *Wuxing zhi* 吳興志 (completed in 1201), 4.9a–9b: 計籌山，昔越大夫計然多才智籌算於此山。“Mount Jichou: in antiquity, the Grand Master of Yue, Jiran, a multi-talented and wise person, made calculations using counting sticks (*chou*) at this mountain.”

54 Mote 1960, 202–206. Although Zhao Mengfu eventually took up a position at the Mongol court in 1286, he also spent the first years after the fall of the Song Dynasty in reclusion, dedicating himself to “intense study and self-cultivation.” See Mote 1960, 236.

55 See footnote 34.

56 *Tongxuan zhenjing zuanyi*, “xu”, 588c.

Master Wen was a princely grandson of Jin and had the family name of Xin, given name of Jian, and style name of Jiran, with Master Wen being his literary name. He was a native of Kuiqiu on the Sui River. Since (Kuiqiu) belonged to the state of Song, he was also called Song Jian. He pursued learning with Laozi as his teacher and early on heard about the Great Way. He wrote a book in 12 chapters [...].

Whereas previously the designation “Jiran” had often confusingly been called “another given name” (*yi ming* 一名) of Master Wen, Du Daojian construed it as representing the latter’s style name (*zi* 字). “Master Wen” was understood as his literary name (*hao* 號). Du Daojian was thus the first Chinese scholar to bring the name of Master Wen into accord with existing standards. By presenting Master Wen as a princely grandson of Jin, Du Daojian also revised the vague statements according to which Master Wen had descended from the lords of Jin. As a result, he significantly enhanced Master Wen’s social status. Completely new, however, is the remark about Master Wen’s supposed early mastery of the Way. In making this point, Du Daojian seems to express his awareness of the fact that in order to serve both King Ping of Chu and King Goujian of Yue, Master Wen had to obtain wisdom early in his life.

Du Daojian also introduces a new perspective on Master Wen’s supposed origin when he refers to the Sui 睢 River instead of the Pu 濮 River, which had been common:

文子家睢，與亳為鄰，久師老子，聞道故博。

Master Wen was from (a place on) the River Sui that was in the vicinity of (the town of) Bo. He followed Laozi as a student for a long time, learned the Way, and became widely knowledgeable in the matters of the past.

This modification was made not so much for the sake of geographical accuracy – Kuiqiu was indeed situated much closer to the Sui River than to the Pu River<sup>57</sup> – but rather to stress the proximity between the birthplaces of Master Wen and Laozi (Bo 亳).<sup>58</sup> In this way, Du Daojian attempted to bring the Jiran-related part of Master Wen’s biography in line with his relationship to Laozi. For all these revisions, however, the identification of Master Wen as Song Jian 宋鉞 – who was a member of the famous Jixia Academy (*Jixia xuegong* 稷下學宮) founded in the fourth century BCE<sup>59</sup> and lived around two centuries after King Ping of Chu – shows that, in the end, Du Daojian was still uncertain about his real identity.

57 Tan Qixiang 1982, 24–25.

58 Ibid, 24–25. This marks a big contrast to the *Shiji* 63.2139, where the village Li 厲 in Hu 苦 County is identified as Laozi’s place of origin.

59 For a discussion on the founding year of the Jixia Academy, see Bai Xi 1998, 41–44; Harnett 2011, 65–70.

With regard to the royal protagonist, the most obvious advantage of introducing King Ping of Chu was the temporal proximity of all the characters. With this change, the anachronisms in the *Wenzi*, which were increasingly perceived as problematic at that time,<sup>60</sup> finally seemed to find a persuasive resolution.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, as a disciple of Laozi, who was depicted as a native of Chu and an older contemporary of Confucius in the *Shiji*,<sup>62</sup> Master Wen could also be a subject of King Ping of Chu. Dialogue of the kind contained in the received *Wenzi*, therefore, was certainly possible.<sup>63</sup> As for the wide acceptance of the “King Ping of Zhou” alternative during the first millennium of the *Wenzi*’s transmission, this was mostly explained with the claim that the appearance of the character Zhou 周 in connection with the royal protagonist of the *Wenzi* was due to an erroneous interpretation on the part of Ban Gu.<sup>64</sup>

### 1.2.1 King Ping of Chu and the *Wenzi*: The Villain

As to how the introduction of King Ping of Chu influenced the character of the *Wenzi*, it is important to note that, unlike earlier accounts, the biographical reports associated with this ruler do not contain the sentence about the establishment of the order. Instead a line is added from the received text, in which King Ping acknowledges his respect for Master Wen (*gua ren jing wen ming* 寡人敬聞命). In all probability, the reason for this revision is

60 Huang Zhen’s 黃震 (1213–1281) scathing critique of the *Wenzi* (in *Huangshi richao* 黃氏日抄, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, “Zibu”, “Daojia”, 695–696) was mainly based on the anachronism between King Ping of Zhou and Master Wen identified as Jiran.

61 The example of Wen Zhong 文種 (?–472 BCE), who supposedly (*Shiji*, 41.1741–1742, n6) was in service to King Ping of Chu (r. 529–516 BCE) before gaining fame as a minister of King Goujian (r. 496–464 BCE), shows that it was indeed deemed possible to serve both mentioned kings.

62 *Shiji* 63.2139–2140.

63 This is the position of Sun Xingyan, as recorded in *Wenzi-tang ji* 4.87 (“*Wenzi xu*”). According to the *Laozi bianhua jing* 老子變化經, dated mostly to the second century CE (Seidel 1969, 226; Kohn 2008, 618), Laozi, among other manifestations, was also a political adviser to King Ping. While Seidel (223–224) and Kohn (618) both identified this King Ping as the previously discussed Zhou monarch, I find that the ruler in question was undoubtedly King Ping of Chu. I have come to this conclusion in view of the fact that, according to this text, Laozi was in the state of Chu when advising King Ping. Moreover, their alleged encounter took place 700 hundred years after Laozi assumed the position of a “scribe under the pillar” (*zhuxia li* 柱下吏) under King Wen of Zhou (b. twelfth century BCE), which is in line with the lifetime of King Ping of Chu. Thus, the association between Laozi and King Ping of Chu seems to be of a fairly early origin.

64 Liang Yusheng, in *Hanshu gujin renbiao shuzheng*, 370, and Sun Xingyan, in *Wenzi-tang ji* 4.87 (“*Wenzi xu*”).

that King Ping of Chu was not traditionally associated with successful governance. In fact, he was generally depicted as decadent<sup>65</sup> and deceitful.<sup>66</sup> Most significantly, he was portrayed as a ruler who, being unable to distinguish between upright and dishonest ministers,<sup>67</sup> not only brought the state of Chu to the brink of extinction. He also became an object of unparalleled humiliation when Wu Zixu 伍子胥 (?–484 BCE) whipped his grave<sup>68</sup> (and, according to some sources, even his disinterred corpse).<sup>69</sup> Given this perception, it is no wonder that this ruler was found in the “dumb people” row of Ban Gu’s table.

Among the proponents of this view, only Du Daojian elaborated on the alleged role of the Chu monarch as played in the *Wenzi*, which reads as follows:

平王聘而問道。文子對：以積德成王，積怨成亡。堯舜以是昌，桀紂以是亡。平王曰：寡人敬聞命矣。以是觀之，平王若有志於為治者也，何不能修德釋怨而乃信讒懷疑，輒誅伍氏？此文子所以去楚而適越也。子胥勸吳伐楚，遂致鞭尸之辱，甚矣。有國者怨其不可釋乎？<sup>70</sup>

King Ping (of Chu) engaged him and asked him about the Way. Master Wen replied: ‘By gathering virtue one achieves kingly rule, by gathering resentment one vanishes. This is why Yao and Shun prospered, while Jie and Zhou vanished.’ King Ping said: ‘I shall reverently listen to your instructions.’ Seen from this perspective, the question arises as to why King Ping, if he really was aiming to restore order, was unable to cultivate virtue (*de*) and resolve resentment (*yuan*), but instead bestowed faith to flatterers, entertained (unwarranted) suspicions, and arbitrarily executed Wu. This was the reason why Master Wen left Chu and went to Yue. When (Wu) Zixu (for his part) persuaded Wu to attack Chu and humiliated (King Ping of Chu) by whipping his corpse, resentment had reached its extreme! Are the rulers really unable to resolve resentment (*yuan*)?

65 *Xinyu* 新語 (concordance edition) 4/7/9–10: 楚平王奢侈縱恣，不能制下。“King Ping of Chu was excessive, extravagant, unrestrained, and self-indulgent. He could not bring his subjects under control.”

66 *Xinshu* 新書 (concordance edition) 7.2/50/8: 故楚平王懷陰賊，殺無罪，殃既至此矣。“Thus, as a result of King Ping of Chu harboring deceit and ill will, and killing the innocent, the disaster assumed such proportions.”

67 *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan* B.10.27.6/396/16–19. For the translation, see Legge 1872, 723. See also the *Laozi bianhua jing*, 181: 平王喬蹇不從諫，道德不流，則去楚。“Being arrogant and contemptuous, King Ping (of Chu) did not follow the admonitions. The Way and Virtue did not spread in the world; therefore (Laozi) left Chu.”

68 *Lüshi chunqiu* 14.324. For the translation, see Knoblock and Riegel 2000, 14/3.2, 312–313.

69 *Shiji* 66.2176.

70 *Tongxuan zhenjing zanyi* 6.619ab.

As this passage shows, Du Daojian interprets the respectful words of King Ping toward Master Wen as mere lip service. In reality, by unjustly executing the minister Wu She 伍奢 (?–522 BCE) and his son Wu Shang 伍尚 (?–522 BCE), this monarch evoked the resentment (*yuan* 怨) of Wu Zixu and thus acted in direct opposition to the precepts of Master Wen, who claimed that in order to secure his position a ruler needs to gather virtue (*de* 德). The interpretation of “King Ping” as the epitome of an unjust and impotent ruler, which we find here, marks a significant paradigm shift in the discussion on the *Wenzi*’s protagonists. Thus, while in Xu Lingfu’s eyes the validity of Master Wen’s teaching was proven by the success of King Ping (of Zhou), for Du Daojian the teaching’s efficacy was rather proven by the ignominious insult directed at King Ping (of Chu).

### 1.2.2 Later Developments

In parallel to the attempts to consistently integrate the Jiran-related information into the biographies of Master Wen (as already demonstrated), doubt was also cast on their identity, mainly on account of the obvious differences in their philosophical doctrines.<sup>71</sup> These doubts, which were initially raised as early as the middle of the twelfth century CE,<sup>72</sup> eventually led to the emergence of new points of view that actually separated Master Wen and Xin Jiran. Here, Master Wen came to be regarded, first of all, as the above-mentioned statesman Wen Zhong 文鍾 (?–472 BCE)<sup>73</sup> and, later, as the philosopher Yin Wen 尹文 (360–280 BCE).<sup>74</sup> Just as in the case of Song Jian, identifying Master Wen as Yin Wen entailed his complete disassociation from either of the two traditional King Ping alternatives.<sup>75</sup> Among the critical approaches, the position of the Yuan Dynasty scholar Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381) deserves a special mention. Song Lian proposed that the figure “Master Wen” was connected to the otherwise unknown author, who indicated his authorship of the *Wenzi* by naming its main protagonist after his own family name (Wen).<sup>76</sup>

71 Song Lian 宋濂 (1310–1381), *Zhuji bian* 諸子辨, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, “Zibu”, “Daojia”, 697; Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602), *Sibu zhengwei* 四部正偽, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, 698–699; Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805), *Siku tiyao* 四庫提要, i, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, 698–699.

72 Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1203), *Rongzhai suibi* 容齋隨筆, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, 695.

73 Jiang Quan 江璩 (1888–1917), in Li Dingsheng 1994, 439.

74 Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990) 1956, 219–220.

75 This view also implied that the character *wen* 文 signified the given name of Master Wen, which was new in the *Wenzi* discussion.

76 Song Lian, *Zhuji bian*, cited in *Weishu tongkao*, 697.

1.3 From the Publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* to Today

When the discovery of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* was announced in 1981,<sup>77</sup> it seemed that clear answers to the questions about the identities of its protagonists were just on the horizon. The full publication of the *Wenzi*-related material in 1995,<sup>78</sup> however, showed that such hopes were premature. Although the Bamboo-*Wenzi* was almost entirely (as far as its piecemeal character allows for such generalizations) constructed from a dialogue between Master Wen and King Ping (thus being much more in keeping with the *Hanshu* “Yiwen-zhi” than the received text), it at no point specified their identities, referring to them simply as “Master Wen” and “King Ping.” Even Master Wen’s affiliation with Laozi, explicitly suggested in the received text, cannot be found in the bamboo manuscript,<sup>79</sup> as a comparison of both *Wenzi* versions demonstrates:

平<sup>0880</sup> 王問文子曰：吾聞子得道於老聃，今賢人雖有道，而遭淫亂之世，以  
 一人<sup>0837</sup> 之權，而欲化久亂之民，其庸能乎？<sup>80</sup>  
 King Ping asked Master Wen: ‘I have heard that you, Master, received the Way from Lao Dan. Now you, a worthy man, are in possession of the Way, yet are encountering a decadent and chaotic world. If you had the power of a ruler and had the wish to transform the people having been long accustomed to chaos, how could that be accomplished?’

The following two bamboo strips have parallels to the passage in the received *Wenzi*:

0880 王曰。人主唯（雖）賢，而曹（遭）淫暴之世，以一  
 King {Ping} said: ‘When a ruler, even if possessing superior abilities, encounters a decadent and violent world, with one ...  
 0837 [之權]，欲化久亂之民，其庸能  
 ... power, wishing to transform people long accustomed to chaos, how is it possible?’

As shown above, the line of the received text in which King Ping talks about Master Wen receiving the Way from Laozi is not contained in the bamboo manuscript. In addition, in contrast to the *textus receptus*, the initial subject of King Ping’s question was a ruler (*ren zhu* 人主), not Master Wen.<sup>81</sup>

77 Hebei Sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 1981, 12.

78 Hebei Sheng wenwu yanjiusuo 1995.

79 Still, the Bamboo-*Wenzi*’s connection to the *Laozi* is extraordinarily close, with around twenty of its fragments having clear parallels to the latter text. See Mukai Tetsuo 2001.

80 *Wenzi* (concordance edition) 5/29/5–7.

81 This contradicts Xu Lingfu, who interpreted this passage as dealing with the importance of wise ministers.

Given this ambiguity, it is hardly surprising that after the publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* the situation became more confusing than ever. Indeed, new suggestions were being proposed alongside those that were already known. This is especially true for the protagonist Master Wen. While traditional views of Master Wen as an (unknown) adviser to King Ping of Zhou<sup>82</sup> and Xin Jiran<sup>83</sup> were still advocated by the majority of the scholars, Master Wen also came to be regarded as a member of a historiographer's family with the surname Xin 辛,<sup>84</sup> an unknown adviser to King Ping of Chu<sup>85</sup> and the famous statesman Tian Wen 田文 (?–279 BCE).<sup>86</sup> The hypothesis put forth by van Els that Master Wen most likely should be regarded as a fictional figure, deserves to be highlighted. Van Els arrived at this conclusion when considering the high authority of the notion *wen* 文 (meaning “refined,” “cultivated”) in Chinese intellectual history and the historical background of the supposed time of the *Wenzi*'s creation.<sup>87</sup>

As for the royal protagonist, shortly before the full publication of the Bamboo-*Wenzi*, Li Dingsheng proposed the alternative of Duke Ping of Qi 齊平公 (r. 480–456 BCE).<sup>88</sup> However, as Zhang Fengqian has persuasively refuted this hypothesis, it will not be mentioned here in detail.<sup>89</sup> New proponents of the alternative “King Ping of Zhou” usually substantiate their position, on the one hand, by pointing out that the terms “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi* 天子) and “Heavenly King” (*tianwang* 天王) in the bamboo manuscript reflected the prerogatives of the Zhou ruling house.<sup>90</sup> On the other hand, they also note that the excavated fragments contain warnings about the “betrayal of the feudal lords” (*zhuhou beipan* 諸侯背叛), which seems to make “sense only if addressed to an overlord, a Son of Heaven,” that is, the Zhou monarch.<sup>91</sup> As compelling as these arguments may appear, a more cautious stance seems advisable for the following

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82 Wang Bo 1996; Ge Gangyan 2005, 24; Zhao Kuifu 2006.

83 Fukuda Kazuya 2002, 236; Wang Zhenchuan 2004, 126–127; Gao Xinhua 2012.

84 While rejecting the identification between Jiran and Master Wen, Wei Qipeng (1996, 2022) still regarded the latter as belonging to the family of Xin 辛 that was entrusted with historiographical tasks at the court of the Zhou kings. Allegedly a scion of the chronicler Xin You 辛有, a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou, Master Wen could not have been an adviser to this Zhou monarch. His dialogue with King Ping in the *Wenzi* was “staged” by his disciples, who thus tried to enhance the authority of his teaching.

85 Li Xueqin 1996, 39.

86 Zhang Fengqian 2007, 216–219.

87 Van Els 2006, 56–57.

88 Li Dingsheng 1994, 440.

89 Zhang Fengqian 1999.

90 Wang Bo 1996, 1909; Wei Qipeng 1996, 2021.

91 Van Els 2006, 48.

reasons. First, there is no evidence that the terms “Son of Heaven” and “Heavenly King” actually referred to King Ping.<sup>92</sup> Thus, it cannot be ruled out that they were simply brought up in the course of a general discussion about the political situation of those times. Indeed, such discussions were fairly common in early Chinese philosophical literature.<sup>93</sup> Second, in regard to the issue of betrayal, it can be objected that while the breach of loyalty to the Zhou kings was in fact often addressed, in some cases it was also brought up by feudal rulers when discussing the relation with their peers. Interestingly, in one such instance we encounter King Ping of Chu, who is said in the *Shiji* to have feared the betrayal of the feudal lords (*kong zhuhou pan zhi* 恐諸侯叛之).<sup>94</sup> Thus, even though these features of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* seem to hint at the alternative of King Ping of Zhou when taken together, they cannot be said to definitively prove it. It is therefore understandable that some scholars, after having scrutinized the bamboo manuscript, either abstained from a definitive judgment altogether, like Zheng Guorui,<sup>95</sup> or opted for other alternatives, like Zhang Fengqian. The latter concluded that the given royal figure most likely represented any ruler who “encounter(ed) a decadent and chaotic world,”<sup>96</sup> which is currently the fourth and last view of King Ping.<sup>97</sup>

New proponents of the “Chu Pingwang” alternative seldom attempt to defend their position other than by pointing to the “official” Laozi biography from the *Shiji*. As shown earlier, this account implies that, as a disciple of the latter, Master Wen must have been a contemporary of Confucius and thus also of King Ping of Chu. It is also due to this biography that this view remains very influential and is in fact probably the most popular today.<sup>98</sup> In light of this ongoing disagreement, it is instructive to conclude

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92 As the example of the *Guoyu* shows, the term “Heavenly King” was sometimes used simply a flattery formulation among the rulers of the feudal states. See *Guoyu* 8.1/119/32.

93 Even greater reservation seems appropriate in regard to the term “All-under-Heaven” (*tianxia* 天下). For if we take its mere appearance in the Bamboo-*Wenzi* as proof for the affiliation of King Ping with the ruling house of Zhou, how would we then account for the textual situations in which the rulers of the (at times very insignificant) feudal states were told to “issue orders to All-under-Heaven” (*Shiji* 40.1701) or to show concern for the stability of All-under-Heaven (*Mengzi* 孟子 1.6/3/4–5)?

94 *Shiji* 40.1709. For the translation, see Nienhauser 2006, 407.

95 Zheng Guorui 2010, 53.

96 Zhang Fengqian 2007, 221.

97 This explanation, however, seems improbable, because none of the numerous excavated manuscripts is ambiguous in regard to the identity of their royal protagonists, even when featuring legendary monarchs from the earliest periods of Chinese history.

98 The following scholars have supported this point of view in recent years: Fukuda Kazuya 福田一也 (2002, 234); Li Deshan 李德山 (2002, 143); Sun Yikai 孙以楷 (2005, 21); Wang

this overview of the contemporary discussion on the *Wenzi* protagonists with a reference to a line from the latest commentary on the text, the *Wenzi shiyi* 文子釋譯, dated 2012. Obviously on the basis of a (telling) oversight, it roughly states the following: “This passage depicts a dialogue between King Ping of Zhou and Master Wen. In it, King Ping of Chu asked Master Wen [...]”<sup>99</sup>

## 2 New Evidence

Any additional evidence on this topic would be welcome. And, indeed, some new information has been discovered in recent years. First, I will introduce the data that concern the suggested royal interlocutors of Master Wen. I will then discuss the new sources discussing Master Wen’s actual identity.

### 2.1 King Ping of Chu

The figure of King Ping of Chu appears in several newly discovered manuscripts. The texts *Xinian* (*Qinghua jian*)<sup>100</sup> and *Pingwang yu wangzi Mu* (*Shangbo jian*)<sup>101</sup> both mention him in the context of the narrative of Wu Zixu,<sup>102</sup> in which he (as is well known) played an infamous role. This confirms once more that the negative view that Du Daojain presents of King Ping of Chu was consistent with the early sources. Even more relevant for this discussion is the manuscript *Pingwang wen Zheng Shou* (*Shangbo jian*), which depicts this ruler as seeking advice from a certain Zheng Shou.<sup>103</sup> A similar set of circumstances (i.e. a sovereign seeking advice) makes the difference between this ruler and King Ping as depicted in the *Wenzi* all the more obvious. By neglecting and even ridiculing the

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Zhenchuan 王振川 (2004, 117); Chen Guying 陳鼓應 (2005, 115); Zhang Songhui 張松輝 (2006, 276); Luo Zhongxiang 羅仲祥 (2009), and the co-authors Tang Tusheng 唐突生 and Teng Mi 滕蜜 (2012, 1).

99 In the book, the given passage reads as follows (Tang Tusheng and Teng Mi 2012, 117): 这是本卷的末段，记述了周平王与文子的对话，可视为道德卷的小结。楚平王问文子说 [...]。 “This is the last passage of the present chapter. It depicts the dialogue between King Ping of Zhou and Master Wen and can be regarded as the summary of the ‘Daode’ chapter. King Ping of Chu asked Master Wen.”

100 Li Xueqin 2011, 170.

101 Chen Peifen 2007a.

102 Li Xueqin 2011, 170. As for the *Pingwang yu wangzi Mu*, its story about King Ping banishing his heir apparent from the capital plays an important role in Wu Zixu’s biography in the *Shiji* ch. 66.

103 Chen Peifen 2007.

counsel of his adviser,<sup>104</sup> King Ping of Chu seems to represent another type of ruler than the respectful and inquisitive interlocutor of Master Wen.<sup>105</sup>

## 2.2 King Ping of Zhou

The previously mentioned *Xinian* contains a lengthy passage about King Ping of Zhou,<sup>106</sup> shedding significantly more light than any other source on the events surrounding his enthronement. It reads as follows:

周幽王取妻于西申，生平王，王或（又）取褒人之女，是褒姒，生伯盤。褒姒嬖于王，王與伯盤逐平王，平王走西申。幽王起師，回（圍）平王于西申，申人弗畀。曾（繒）人乃降西戎，以攻幽王，幽王及伯盤乃滅，周乃亡。邦君諸正乃立幽王之弟余臣于虢，是攜惠王。立廿又一年，晉文侯仇乃殺惠王于虢。周亡（無）王九年，邦君諸侯焉始不朝于周，晉文侯乃逆平王于少鄂，立之于京師。三年，乃東徙，止于成周，晉人焉始啓于京師，鄭武公亦正東方之諸侯。<sup>107</sup>

King You of Zhou took a wife from the Western Shen. She gave birth to King Ping. Then King (You) took a woman from the Bao. Her name was Bao Si and she gave birth to Bo Pan. Bao Si became a favorite of King (You). Because of Bo Pan King (You) expelled King Ping. King Ping went to the Western Shen. King You raised an army and surrounded King Ping in the Western Shen, but the people of Shen did not hand (King Ping) over. Then the people of Zeng made Western Rong surrender and (with their help) launched an attack at King You. As a result, King You and Bo Pan were extinguished and the Zhou vanished. Thereupon the leaders of the feudal states enthroned Yuchen, the younger brother of King You, in Guo. This was King Hui of Xie. Twenty-one years after (his) enthronement, Marquis Wen of Jin killed King Hui in Guo. During the nine years that Zhou had no king [after King You died], the feudal lords began not appearing at the audiences of the Zhou. Therefore, Marquis Wen of Jin went to meet King Ping in Shao'e and enthroned him in the capital [Zongzhou].<sup>108</sup> Three years later (King Ping) moved eastwards until he reached Chengzhou; the people (from the state) of Jin started to cultivate the area around the (new) capital and Duke Wu of Zheng became the head of the Eastern feudal lords.<sup>109</sup>

104 Chen Peifen 2007, 259–261.

105 Examine, for example, the strip number 0976: 平王曰：「〔善。好乎道，吾未嘗聞道也。〕“King Ping said: ‘Excellent! Although fond of the Way, I have not yet been advised about it.’”

106 Li Xueqin 2011, 135.

107 Li Xueqin 2011, 138.

108 Zongzhou 宗周, cf. Li Xueqin 2011, 139, n11.

109 As for the chronological order of the events in question, the *Xinian* suggests that Yuchen – a

Similar to the *Zhushu jinian*, the driving force behind King Ping's enthronement is identified here as Marquis Wen of Jin. However, *Xinian's* most important statement regarding King Ping is that his enthronement aimed to restore the fading authority of the Zhou ruling house among the feudal lords. Therefore, even here in an account that depicts him as completely dependent on the support of feudal lords, he is regarded as the ruler most suited and worthy of continuing the Zhou tradition. It thus seems that Xu Lingfu's positive view of King Ping of Zhou can be reconciled with the early historical evidence.<sup>110</sup> By restoring the collapsed Zhou Dynasty after a prolonged period of disorder and schism, this monarch created conditions for his heirs to be called "Sons of Heaven" for nearly another 500 years until the dynasty's ultimate demise in 256 BCE<sup>111</sup>

Ban Gu's devastating assessment of this monarch as a "dumb person" still demands an explanation, however. It is possible that his denigration was prompted by Ban Gu's wish to stress the superiority of the Eastern Han Dynasty founded by Guangwudi 光武帝 (5 BCE–57 CE). Just like King Ping of Zhou several centuries earlier, Guangwudi also saw himself as a restorer of the preceding dynasty. Moreover, he moved the capital of the empire to Luoyang. Aware of the political impotence of the Eastern Zhou rulers, Ban Gu's degradation of King Ping of Zhou may have been an attempt to show that, despite similar circumstances, Guangwudi's restoration of the dynasty was much more successful than King Ping's.<sup>112</sup>

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younger brother and not a son of King You – was installed by some feudal lords soon after the death of King You and Bo Pan. King Ping, for his part, had to wait for nine years until Marquis Wen of Jin enthroned him in Zongzhou (Jingshi). Since Yuchen, or King Hui of Xie, is said to have been killed in the twenty-first year of his rule, the schism in the ruling house of Zhou appears to have lasted for thirteen years. As for the relocation of the court to Luoyi (Chengzhou), it seems to have not taken place immediately after the death of King You but twelve years later, presumably in 759.

110 According to Li Feng (2006, 194–198), two factors were made responsible for the collapse of the "Western Zhou" in the early sources: the deplorable government of King Ping's father, King You of Zhou 周幽王 (r. 781–771 BCE), and, moreover, the detrimental influence of Bao Si 褒姒, who, originally not a main consort of King You, eventually asserted herself against King Ping's mother and was made a new queen with her royal son, Bo Fu 伯服, replacing prince Yijiu 宜臼, the future King Ping, as heir apparent.

111 *Shiji* 14.747. As weakened and humiliated as the Zhou house was after the events of 771 BCE, it had not lost its symbolic significance altogether and the "Zhou Sons of Heaven remained the ritual leaders of 'All-under-Heaven' well into the Zhanguo age." Pines 2006, 18 and 23.

112 See Knechtges 1990.

### 2.3 Master Wen

The most recent evidence concerning Master Wen is found in a *Wenzi*-related quotation from the *Bielu* 別錄.<sup>113</sup> Part of the now lost “Chao” 鈔 commentary on the *Wenxuan* 文選,<sup>114</sup> this quotation reads as follows:

文子，老子弟子。魯哀、定時人，姓辛，名計然，著《文子》書。<sup>115</sup>

Master Wen was a disciple of Laozi. He was a contemporary of (Dukes) Ai and Ding of Lu and had the family name of Xin and the given name of Jiran. He wrote the book *Wenzi*.

There is no convincing reason to doubt the authenticity of this line, especially since the *Wenxuan chao* always painstakingly identified the provenance of its (several hundred) quotes.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, almost all of its quotes coming from the transmitted works can be verified, despite the occasional differences in reading.<sup>117</sup> Finally, the format of the present line is also in agreement with the extant examples from the *Bielu*.<sup>118</sup> It would thus seem that the *Bielu* account can, with some degree of certainty, be regarded as authentic. Master Wen’s identification as Xin Jiran thus appears to be much older than previously assumed, having existed already in the first century BCE at the time of the *Bielu*’s compilation. This leads to the next step, namely a close examination of all available biographical data about Jiran to see how it can improve our understanding of Master Wen.

### The Biographical Accounts of Jiran

A number of works contain information on Xin Jiran.<sup>119</sup> Among them are the *Yue jueshu* chapters “Jinizi neizhuan” 計倪子內傳 and “Jinizi waizhuan” 計倪子外傳, some recon-

113 To my knowledge, this quotation and its implication for the *Wenzi* discussion was first discussed by Xiong Liangzhi 2009, 19–32.

114 This commentary was in all likelihood written by Gongsun Luo 公孫羅, a younger peer of the first *Wenxuan* commentator Li Shan 李善 (630–689). Although it was lost in China some time after its completion, a copy of it came to Japan, where it remained undiscovered until the nineteenth century. For more information on the *Wenxuan chao* and the edition *Wenxuan jizhu* 文選集註 of which, together with four other commentaries, it was a part, see Zhou Xunchu 2000, Vol. 1, 2–4, and Knechtges et al. 2014, Vol. 2, 1328–1329.

115 Zhou Xunchu 2000, Vol. 2, 349.

116 Hasegawa Shigenari 1981.

117 Hasegawa Shigenari 2011.

118 See, for example, the *Xunzi* entry from this bibliography in Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解, 557.

119 The encyclopedic work *Wanwu lu* 萬物錄, attributed to Jiran, does not contain any refer-

structed fragments of the *Fanzi Jiran* 范子計然, and certain passages of the *Wu Yue chunqiu*, *Shiji*, and *Hanshu*. I will start with the two latter histories because of their status as official historical records. In the *Shiji*<sup>120</sup> and *Hanshu*,<sup>121</sup> Jiran, who appears in both instances in the economic chapters, is depicted as a specialist in financial matters whose wise advice to both King Goujian of Yue and Fan Li resulted in their great success. Given the strong doubts about the authenticity of the *Shiji* chapters with parallels in the *Hanshu*,<sup>122</sup> one can at least observe that Ban Gu adhered to this view of Jiran. This assumption is corroborated by Ban Gu's rhapsody *Da bin xi* 答賓戲, which concludes with the following line:

蘇、鵲發精於鍼石，研、桑心計於無垠。<sup>123</sup>

(The physicians) (Yi) He and (Bian) Que developed extraordinary skills with needles and stones; (the economists) (Ji) Yan and Sang (Hongyang) made mental calculations with the infinite (big numbers).

The commentators on this passage were mostly in agreement that the person named Yan 研 should be identified as Jiran.<sup>124</sup> The reference to Jiran alongside Sang Hongyang 桑弘羊 (152–80 BCE) – who “of all Han officials [...] may be singled out for his comprehension of the economic issues that faced officials and for his initiative in suggesting the means of solving current problems”<sup>125</sup> – is an additional indicator that, for Ban Gu, Jiran was a public figure with considerable financial ability. Ban Gu's linking of Jiran and Sang Hongyang was by no means random. According to Olivia Milburn, the protagonist Dafu 大夫 (Grand Master) of the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論, whose statements are generally assumed to represent the position of Sang Hongyang,<sup>126</sup> made use of some of Jiran's economic theories.<sup>127</sup> As for the “mental calculation” abilities that both thinkers supposedly pos-

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ences to him.

120 *Shiji* 129.3257. For the translation, see Watson 1961, 436–437.

121 *Hanshu* 91.3683. For the translation, see Swann 1950, 424–425.

122 Loewe 1993, 406.

123 *Hanshu* 100.4231.

124 Wei Zhao 韋昭 (204–273) noted (in *Wenxuan* 45.26a [851], comm.): 研，范蠡之師，計然之名也。“Yan is the given name of the Fan Li's teacher Jiran.” Also, Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) held that (*Hanshu* 100.4233): 研，計研也，一號計倪也，曰計然。“Yan stands for Jiyan, with the additional designation of Jini, called Jiran.”

125 Loewe 2000, 463.

126 Loewe 1993, 477 (“Yen t'ieh lun”).

127 Milburn 2010, 159.

sessed, Sang was recognized for having such a keen mind in a number of texts, including the *Yantie lun*<sup>128</sup> and the *Hanshu*. The latter source, for instance, notes the following:

弘羊，洛陽賈人之子。以心計，年十三侍中。<sup>129</sup>

(Sang) Hongyang was a son of a merchant of Luoyang. Because he was able to make mental calculations (without using the ‘counting sticks’), he became shizhong (that is, a palace attendant) when he was thirteen years old (140 BCE).<sup>130</sup>

Interestingly, Sang is reported here to have become an official at a very young age. This appears to underscore his affinity with Jiran, who (as will be shown below) was depicted as a very young official by several sources.

As for the remaining sources depicting Jiran, I suggest that they can be separated into two different traditions: one associating Jiran primarily with Fan Li, and the other, above all stressing his connection with King Goujian of Yue. The main text representing the former tradition was the *Fanzi Jiran* 范子計然. Quoted by Wang Chong<sup>131</sup> and mentioned in the bibliography of *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書,<sup>132</sup> this text was lost but then partially reconstructed during the Qing Dynasty. There are good reasons to conclude that the now missing *Fanzi* 范子,<sup>133</sup> which contained dialogues between Jiran and Fan Li,<sup>134</sup> also belonged to this tradition. Indeed, it is even possible that the texts were in fact identical. The second tradition is represented by the chapters of the *Yuejue shu* and *Wu Yue chunqiu*, in which Jiran (referred to as Jini 計倪 and Jiyan 計畝, respectively) is depicted as an adviser to King Goujian of Yue.

The texts associated with these traditions offer different types of information concerning Jiran. According to the *Yuejue shu* and *Wu Yue chunqiu*, Jiran was a very young but able and honest official of low rank,<sup>135</sup> whom Goujian came value highly for his

128 *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 3.2/18/22–24: 大夫君以心計策國用，構諸侯，參以酒榷。 “His Excellency, the Lord Grand Secretary, having calculated all the state revenue in his head, has already incurred the denunciations of the feudal lords, on account of his liquor excise.” Gale 1967, 86–87.

129 *Hanshu* 24.1164.

130 Translation adapted from Swann 1950, 272.

131 *Lunheng* 45/204/26–27.

132 *Jiu Tangshu*, 47.2043: 范子問計然十五卷范蠡問，計然答。 “*Fanzi wen Jiran*: fifteen chapters. (In this work) Fan Li asks questions and Jiran answers.”

133 Not to be confused with the *Fan Li* 范蠡 that is mentioned in the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi” (*Hanshu* 30.1757).

134 *Yilin*, 1.22b.

135 *Yuejue shu* 越絕書 11/38/9; *Wu Yue chunqiu* 吳越春秋 9/38/5.

wisdom.<sup>136</sup> Moreover, in the *Wu Yue chungiu*, Jiran feigns madness in anticipation of Goujian's impending purge of officials.<sup>137</sup> This marks a parallel to the biography of Fan Li who, according to the *Yuejue shu*, pretended to be mad for the same reason.<sup>138</sup> By the same token, neither text provides significant biographical details about Jiran. The situation is quite different in the case of the *Fanzi* (and the *Fanzi Jiran*),<sup>139</sup> however, which seems to have contained a detailed biography of Jiran. For example, a citation of the *Fanzi* in the "Jijie" 集解 commentary on the *Shiji* notes the following:

計然者，蔡丘濮上人，姓辛氏，字文子，其先晉國亡公子也。嘗南游於越，范蠡師事之。<sup>140</sup>

Jiran was a native of Kuiqiu on the River Pu and had the family name of Xin and the style name of Wenzi. Among his ancestors was a wandering prince from the state of Jin. Once (Jiran) travelled south to Yue where Fan Li followed him as a student.

As already discussed, most biographical material in the accounts about Master Wen (his place of origin, family name, affiliation with the state of Jin, trip to Yue, and relationship with Fan Li) seems to stem from the *Fanzi*. In naming the royal ancestor of Jiran "a wandering prince," the *Fanzi* is possibly alluding to Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (697–628 BCE), the most illustrious of Jin's noble scions who had to leave his home and seek refuge abroad.

Another noteworthy citation of the *Fanzi* is found in the *Yilin* 意林 (Forest of Opinions). It states:

計然者，蔡丘濮上人，姓辛，名文子。其先晉國公子也，為人有內無外，形狀似不及人，少而明，學陰陽，見微而知著。其行浩浩，其志泛泛，不肯自顯諸侯，陰所利者七國，天下莫知，故稱曰計然。時遨遊海澤，號曰漁父，范蠡請見越王，計然曰：越王為人鳥喙，不可與同利也。<sup>141</sup>

136 *Yuejue shu* 5/19/1.

137 *Wu Yue chungiu* 10/48/28.

138 *Yuejue shu* 19/54/29; 19/55/12.

139 The Jiran biography in the *Fanzi Jiran* had some new elements as quoted in *Taiping yulan* 924.8a [4105]: 計然者，蔡丘濮上人，晉三公子，字文子，博學無所不通。范蠡知其賢，卑身事之，請受道，藏於石室，乃刑白鷓而盟焉。"Jiran was a native of Caiqiu on the River Pu and a son of a *sangong* from Jin. His family name was Xin and style name Wenzi. Being extensively educated, there was not a single thing that he could not comprehend. Fan Li recognized his abilities and humbly served him. (Fan Li) asked to instruct him in the Way; they hid in the stone chamber, where they sacrificed a white kingfisher and made a covenant."

140 *Shiji* 129.3256, n1.

141 *Yilin* 1.22ab.

Jiran was a native of Caiqiu on the River Pu and had the family name of Xin and the given name of Wenzhi. The lords of Jin were his ancestors. (Jiran) was the kind of man who had the inner, but not the outer; in his appearance he did not seem to equal the others. Being sagacious at [a] young age, he learned (the principles) of Yin and Yang, and already knew the outcome of events when seeing their beginning. His deeds were vast, and his objectives unlimited. He dared not to show himself to the feudal lords, and benefited the seven states secretly, of which no one in the world knew. Therefore he became the epithet 'Jiran.' Often floating on the sea and swamps he was called 'Fisher.' When Fan Li once asked about an audience with King of Yue, Jiran said: 'King of Yue is the kind of man who has a bird's beak; one cannot share gains with him.'

Unlike the previous *Fanzi* quotation, this reference is striking because of its mythical character. Identified as a Yin-Yang specialist in terms of philosophical affiliation, Jiran is depicted here as an *éminence grise* behind all the successes of the feudal lords of his time. Parallels to some records about Fan Li, who was also called "fisher"<sup>142</sup> and credited with the unusual description of King Goujian as a man with a beak, also stand out.<sup>143</sup> While it is entirely possible that legendary elements were interpolated in the *Fanzi* over time, examples from the *Hanshu*, *Yuejue shu*, and *Wu Yue chungqiu* show that parallels to the biographical accounts of Fan Li and Wen Zhong were already essential aspects of Jiran's legend during the early stages of its existence. As a result, some scholars have even doubted the historical existence of Jiran altogether.<sup>144</sup> Other scholars, such as Milburn, have concluded that "Ji Ran was an obscure historical figure, who later acquired a biography when deeds performed by more famous individuals were attributed to him."<sup>145</sup>

### 3.1 Jiran and Master Wen

None of the relevant sources associate Jiran with Laozi, King Ping, or the authorship of the *Wenzi*. Therefore, it would appear that we are already dealing with two unrelated strands of information in the biography of Master Wen as presented in the *Bielu*: the one associating Master Wen with his apprenticeship to Laozi (and advising King Ping) and the other depicting him as a teacher of Fan Li, as Xin Jiran. That these two strands were in fact unrelated also follows from the depiction of Xin Jiran as being very young in the tenth year of Goujian's rule (ca. 487 BCE)<sup>146</sup> and his sole geographical association with the

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142 Milburn 2010, 147.

143 *Shiji* 41.1746.

144 Cai Mo 蔡謨 (281–356), in *Hanshu* 91.3683, n1; Qian Mu 1956, 104.

145 Milburn 2010, 149.

146 *Wu Yue chungqiu* 9/37/28.

town of Kuiqiu and the state of Yue. This rules out the possibility that Master Wen's gave advice even to King Ping of Chu,<sup>147</sup> not to mention the earlier alternative.

While it is difficult to determine whether the association with Jiran was present in the account of Master Wen from the very beginning or introduced at some later stage, there are a number of plausible explanations as to why this association has been made in the first place. First, Jiran was perceived in a number of texts as having played a decisive role in the victory of Yue over Wu. Associating Master Wen with Jiran would thus enhance the authority of the doctrine of the *Wenzi*. Second, this identification would additionally prove the efficacy and superiority of the Daoist philosophy, because in this case the wise counsel of Jiran would for the most part be attributable to his teacher, Laozi. Third, Laozi and Fan Li, as the individuals most closely related to Master Wen and Jiran, were thought to be incarnations of the same historical person, the Western Han statesman Dongfang Shuo 東方朔 (154–93 BCE).<sup>148</sup> Thus, it is entirely possible that in some traditions Laozi and Fan Li were closely linked. Fourth, the unusual style names of Jiran may also have played a role in the given identification.

### 3.2 The Identity of King Ping and Master Wen

Since Laozi and King Ping are the two main references in the part of Master Wen's biography unrelated to Jiran, the question remains as to whether Master Wen's apprenticeship to Laozi necessarily implied the alternative of King Ping of Chu, as was so often insinuated (openly or tacitly) in the *Wenzi* discourse. In my view, this was not the case. It is well known that several different accounts about Laozi existed as early as the Western Han Dynasty.<sup>149</sup> Some even depicted him as living already at the end of the Shang 商 Dynasty (1600–1046 BCE),<sup>150</sup> that is, much earlier than his official *Shiji* biography suggested. Moreover, during the Eastern Han Dynasty,<sup>151</sup> and possibly even earlier,<sup>152</sup> Laozi came to

147 The *Fanzi* notes that Jiran's travel to Yue went in a southern direction. In the case of a journey from the residence of King Ping of Chu in Ying 郢 to the capital city of Yue, Kuajji 會稽, Jiran would have travelled eastward, because both cities were located at nearly the same latitude. See Tan Qixiang 1982, 45–46. Among other things, this geographical fact contradicts the biography of Master Wen as composed by Zhao Mengfu, Du Daojian, and others.

148 *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 2.7/17/9–10.

149 See, for instance, Seidel 1978; Graham 1998.

150 As a disciple of Shang Rong 商容 (*Huainanzi* 淮南子 10/90/25), Laozi was a contemporary of the last Shang king, Zhou 紂 (Zhang Shuangdi 1997, 1091, n1).

151 As proven by the *Laozi ming* 老子銘 (The Laozi Inscription), dated 165 CE. For an introduction and translation, see Csikszentmihalyi 2006, 105–112.

152 See, for example, *Shiji jijie* 史記集解 (annot.), Pei Yin 裴駟 (fifth century), in *Siku quanshu*, Vol. 245, 63.1a. However, the pertinent line was later criticized by another *Shiji* commenta-

be identified as Bo Yang 伯陽, the grand scribe at the court of King Ping of Zhou's father, King You, whose prophetic warnings about the impending demise of the Zhou Dynasty fell on deaf ears.<sup>153</sup> If the identification of Laozi as Bo Yang indeed already existed during the Western Han Dynasty, then Master Wen, as a disciple of Laozi, could very well have been an adviser to King Ping of Zhou. In light of these considerations, as well as the *Hanshu* entry on the *Wenzi*, the late appearance of the alternative King Ping of Chu, and the circumstantial evidence provided in the Bamboo-*Wenzi* and the newly discovered texts, I have concluded that the counterpart of Master Wen is King Ping of Zhou.

Given the absence of records about a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou with the name of Master Wen in the extant historical sources, there seem to be only two plausible explanations for his appearance as an adviser to the Zhou monarch. First, records of his interactions with King Ping were lost over time; second, his character was essentially fictional. While I am not entirely willing to rule out the first possibility (for instance, we still do not know the identity of Wen Yang mentioned by Lu Xiuqing), I am nonetheless inclined to accept the second possibility for the following reasons. First, I agree with van Els that given the popularity of the name “Wenzi” a reader in those times “could easily imagine that a counselor named Wenzhi once conferred with King Ping of Zhou, even if the name does not refer to an actual historical person.”<sup>154</sup> Beyond this, there is the significant finding that “Wenzi” was also a posthumous title and as such granted to the most capable ministers and officials in early China.<sup>155</sup> Thus, the image this title would evoke among the readers of the text would be that of a wise and capable adviser.<sup>156</sup> Of course, this would imply that even if the first explanation were correct and Master Wen had actually existed, his real name would still remain unknown.<sup>157</sup> Second,

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tor, Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (c. 679–c. 732), as “not authentic” (*fei zheng* 非正). See *Shiji* 63.2140, n6, n4.

153 *Shiji* 4.145–147. Also, the *Laozi bianhua jing*, as shown above, mentions Laozi's service to King Ping of Chu and identifies one of his prior incarnations as Bo Yang.

154 Van Els 2006, 55.

155 Most persons appearing with this title in the *Zuozhuan*, such as Jisun Xingfu 季孫行父 (d. 568 BCE), Zhao Wu 趙武 (d. 541 BCE), Gou Yin 苟寅 (fifth century BCE), Sun Linfu 孫林父 (sixth century BCE), Gong Shufa 公叔發 (fifth century BCE), and Beigong Tuo 北宮佗 (sixth century BCE), were illustrious counselors. See Wang Shoukuan 汪受寬, *Shifa yanjiu* 謚法研究 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1995), 156–157.

156 In the “Gujin ren biao”, most of the people bearing this title are to be found in either the “shang xia” 上下 or the “zhong shang” 中上 rows. See *Hanshu*, ch. 20.

157 Of all the “Wenzi” mentioned in the “Gujin ren biao,” it is only in the case of Yin Wenzhi 尹文子 that the character Wen is related to the actual name of the person signified by it. See *Hanshu* 20.946.

the name “Master Wen” could have been chosen because *wen* 文 was an important philosophical concept in the Bamboo-*Wenzi*, epitomizing the complete realization of the four fundamental moral values of the text, namely “virtue” (*de* 德), “benevolence” (*ren* 仁), “righteousness” (*yi* 義), and “propriety” (*li* 禮).<sup>158</sup> Here, the name of the main protagonist would then signify the central doctrine of the text.<sup>159</sup>

In addition to providing a possible explanation for the identity of Master Wen, a reference to the philosophical content of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* could yield additional evidence for the appearance of King Ping of Zhou in this text. The eastern capital of Luoyi, where King Ping moved his court, was considered the center of the world by the ancient Chinese.<sup>160</sup> As for the main philosophical idea of the excavated *Wenzi*, it consisted of bringing one’s actions in alignment with the (natural) Way (*dao* 道) of the universe.<sup>161</sup> For a “Son of Heaven” this implied, among other things, the realization of the idea of taking up a position in the center of the cosmos.<sup>162</sup> Consequently, the plot of the *Wenzi* could perhaps be roughly outlined as follows: By moving to Luoyi (and adhering to other advice from Master Wen), King Ping took the course of action that was appropriate for him as a Zhou monarch and he was thus able to secure the (ritual) supremacy of the Zhou ruling house for several centuries thereafter.

### 3.3 The *Bielu*, the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi,” and “Gujin ren biao”

Against the backdrop of the *Bielu*, the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi”’s treatment of the *Wenzi* appears as an attempt to purge the Jiran-related data from the biographical account of Master Wen. Such an interpretation would imply that Ban Gu, assuming he was responsible for the change in question, regarded Master Wen and Jiran as independent figures. The “Gujin ren biao”, in which Master Wen and Jiran are mentioned as being separated from each other not only by several centuries but also by the scope of their abilities,<sup>163</sup>

158 Guo Lihua 2008, 140–142; Fech 2012, 247–249.

159 Having had no access to the early versions of the text, Jiang Quan rejected this possibility in view of the *Wenzi*’s affiliation with Daoism, which, in its most popular forms, criticizes any refinement (*wen*) as a way of destroying the intrinsic simplicity of things. See Zheng Guorui 2010, 51.

160 *Shiji* 4.133. See Knechtges 1982, 152, LL. 87–88n; Wang 2000, 65–67.

161 Fech 2012, 164–175.

162 The bamboo strip 2212 that is associated with the *Wenzi* states: 天子居中 [央] 者 “That the Son of Heaven places himself in the center [...]”.

163 While the former appears as the older contemporary of King Ping of Zhou, the latter is listed significantly later, after King Ping of Chu. As for their abilities, Master Wen was placed in the “zhong zhong” 中中 row, whereas Jiran was placed one row higher, in the “zhong shang” 中上 row. *Hanshu* 20.902 and 20.933.

indeed lends support to this assumption. In view of the stark differences in their respective doctrines, the decision to regard them as unrelated appears easy to justify.

If, however, Ban Gu really attempted to disassociate Master Wen from Jiran, then the question arises as to why he still characterized Master Wen as a contemporary of Confucius and not of King Ping of Zhou. In doing so, he not only preserved the Jiran-related anachronism of the *Wenzi*, but also contradicted his own view as expressed in the “Gujin ren biao”. Given Ban Gu’s status as a court historian and a distinguished Confucian scholar, his approach could have been largely motivated by his concern for the preservation of the supremacy of the Confucian teachings. For someone in his position, characterizing a disciple of Laozi as a contemporary of King Ping of Zhou was the same as officially recognizing Laozi’s exceptional longevity and influence, which would have significantly enhanced the authority of the Daoist doctrine. While such official “concessions” on Laozi had already been made a few decades after Ban Gu’s death,<sup>164</sup> when several severe uprisings erupted that were closely associated with the (by then deified) figure of Laozi,<sup>165</sup> Ban Gu could still take the liberty of viewing him as a younger contemporary of Confucius (of rather mediocre ability),<sup>166</sup> thus contradicting even the *Shiji*. Therefore, as far as Ban Gu was concerned, even if a disciple of Laozi had lived in the beginning of the eighth century BCE, he still could not possibly have been older than Confucius. It would therefore seem that just like the degradation of King Ping of Zhou as a “dumb person,” the characterization of the dialogue in the *Wenzi* as “fictitious” was similarly motivated by Ban Gu’s political considerations.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the royal protagonist of the *Wenzi* can, with some certainty, be identified as the King Ping of Zhou. By contrast, his interlocutor, Master Wen, is a character of dubious historicity. There is good reason to assume that he was a fictional character who was appropriated to highlight one of the main philosophical notions of the text that bore his name. This would, of course, imply that his interaction with King Ping, as well as his studies with Laozi (the extant fragments of the Bamboo-*Wenzi* provide only indirect evidence for the latter by showing numerous parallels to the *Laozi*) was first introduced only in the

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164 The so-called *Laozi Inscription* (165 CE) not only recognized Laozi as the adviser to King You of Zhou (as well as legendary rulers Fu Xi and Shen Nong), but also stated “that Laozi separates from and joins with the undifferentiated pneumas, and so he cycles through beginnings and endings along with the Three Brightnesses.” Translation adapted from Csikszentmihalyi 2006, 107.

165 Seidel 1978a, 149–151.

166 *Hanshu* 20.926.

*Wenzi*. At a certain point, possibly during the time when Sang Hongyang's policies were influential in the Han court (at the beginning of the first century BCE), Master Wen also came to be regarded as Xin Jiran, a supposed teacher of the illustrious statesman Fan Li and an adviser to King Guojian of Yue. This identification, which was intended to increase the authority of the *Wenzi*, resulted in the philosophical affiliation of Master Wen and his alleged lifetime becoming ambiguous. The earliest transmitted bibliographical entry on the *Wenzi* in the *Hanshu* can thus be understood as an attempt to refute this identification. However, in pursuing his own political agenda, Ban Gu caused further ambiguity by calling Master Wen a contemporary of Confucius. It was his account that eventually gave rise to the variety of views regarding the identities of Master Wen and King Ping that are so characteristic in the *Wenzi* discourse.

In regard to the formation of the Laozi legend, the *Wenzi* demonstrates that some parts of his biography may have existed much earlier than was previously assumed. Master Wen's engagement at the court of King Ping of Zhou shows, for instance, that Laozi's association with Bo Yang probably already existed during the Western Han Dynasty. This corroborates the view that Laozi had already appeared as a political adviser to illustrious rulers at that time, with King You of Zhou possibly exemplifying a reprehensible monarch. Moreover, Master Wen's political involvement deviates strikingly from the accounts about other disciples of Laozi, such as Yin Xi 尹喜 and Gengsang Chu 庚桑楚, who are both reported to have withdrawn from official engagements after their encounter with Laozi. While Master Wen's relation to other students of Laozi is worthy of further investigation, I will conclude the present paper with the hope of having shed some light on the intricate problem of the *Wenzi* protagonists.

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