

# ***"Meaning Grasped Imageries Forgotten" and "The Unity of Form and Function" —A Study on the Transformation of Wang Bi's View on Literature***

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**Abstract.** Confucian classics studies in the Han Dynasty took phraseology and exegesis as its core, regarded classics as closed carriers of sages' words, and followed the principle of "transmitting rather than innovating" in annotating classics. Nevertheless, excessive elaboration and the prevalence of divination and apocrypha pushed Confucian classics studies into a crisis. As the founder of Wei-Jin Xuanxue, Wang Bi discarded the old paradigm and established ontological hermeneutics centered on "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Images" and "Upholding the Root and Governing the Branches", which brought a fundamental breakthrough to the view of literature in Han Dynasty Confucian classics studies. His transformation of literary views manifested in three aspects. First, he shifted the focus from phraseology and exegesis to the interpretation of philosophical principles, advocating conciseness and lucidity. This turned classics from authoritative texts into carriers for expressing thoughts. Second, he reconstructed the relationship between Confucianism and Taoism through the distinction between "the internal" and "the external". He defined the Taoist concept of "Non-being" as the internal essence, and Confucian rituals, music and ethical norms as the external manifestations. He realized the fusion of Confucianism and Taoism via the unity of substance and function. On the one hand, he criticized the hypocrisy of ethical norms in the late Han Dynasty; on the other hand, he put forward a philosophical solution to resolve the tension between spontaneity and ethical norms. Third, viewed from a comparative perspective, Wang Bi stood in contrast with He Yan and Guo Xiang. His view on literature exerted a profound influence on the tradition of classic interpretation in later generations. In the Song Dynasty, scholars held both admiration and criticism towards his theories, which itself proves that his academic thoughts could never be ignored. Replacing phraseology and exegesis with ontological hermeneutics, Wang Bi transformed classic interpretation from a technical task into a creative activity, and opened up new possibilities for China's tradition of classic interpretation.

**Keywords:** Wang Bi, view on literature, Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Images, fusion of Confucianism and Taoism, ontological hermeneutics

## 1. Introduction

In the history of Chinese academia, few thinkers could achieve a fundamental subversion of Confucian classics studies of the Han Dynasty within a lifespan of merely over twenty years like Wang Bi, and his ideas have exerted far-reaching impacts on the interpretation of Confucian classics in later ages. Wang Bi (226-249), courtesy name Fusi, was a native of Gaoping in Shanyang (present-day Weishan, Shandong Province) during the Cao Wei period of the Three Kingdoms, and a core figure of Wei-Jin Xuanxue. He Shao recorded that Wang Bi "was intelligent from an early age. When he was over ten years old, he loved the teachings of Laozi and was eloquent and argumentative" [1]. *Records of the Three Kingdoms* also noted that he "was fond of discussing Confucianism and Taoism, possessed outstanding literary talent and debating skills. He compiled commentaries on *The I Ching* and *Laozi*, and served as a Palace Attendant. He passed away in his twenties" [2].

Wang Bi lived in the transitional period between the Han Dynasty and the Wei Dynasty, when Confucian classics studies of the two Han Dynasties fell into a profound crisis. For one thing, classics studies became flooded with divination, apocrypha and redundant explanations. "A single classic was expounded in more than a million words" [3], leaving scholars devoting their entire lives to studying classics yet failing to grasp the core ideas. For another, political corruption and warlord conflicts in the late Han Dynasty put the social order maintained by Confucian ethical norms in jeopardy. During the Jian'an reign, Cao Cao "adopted the legalist theories of Shen Buhai and Shang Yang" [2], and the dominant position of Confucianism existed in name only. Intellectuals were no longer satisfied with rigidly adhering to old doctrines. Instead, they began to explore the ontology of the universe, the meaning of life and the true intentions of sages, which gave birth to the Xuanxue trend of the Zhengshi reign.

It is worth noting that Wang Bi grew up in a culturally affluent environment. His family collected tens of thousands of books. He also inherited the concise academic style of the Jingzhou School, which "cut down redundant words and removed tedious elaborations" [4], as well as the literary charm and talent of the Jian'an literati<sup>1</sup>. These laid a solid textual foundation for him to delve into classics and historical works and put forward original theories in his later years.

Gang Cheng, associate professor at the College of Liberal Arts of Jinan University, pointed out: "Wang Bi rationalized the study of *The I Ching* by interpreting it through philosophical principles, casting off its theological trappings and guiding it toward rationality" [5]. He abandoned the interpretive paradigm of Han Dynasty classics studies that emphasized image-number deduction, phraseology and exegesis, and established ontological hermeneutics based on "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Images" and "Upholding the Root and Governing the Branches". This transformation was not merely an update of interpretive methods, but a fundamental change in the perception of literature.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the record quoted from *Records of Strange Things in the annotation of Biography of Zhong Hui in Book of Wei · Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Wang Bi's grandfather Wang Kai and his clansman Wang Can fled to Jingzhou to escape wars and took refuge under Liu Biao, Governor of Jingzhou. Liu Biao was a great master of Confucian classics in the late Han Dynasty. He established official academic institutions in Jingzhou and compiled phraseological explanations for the Five Classics, forming the so called Jingzhou School. Wang Kai married Liu Biao's daughter. Wang Can, one of the Seven Scholars of the Jian'an Period, inherited tens of thousands of books collected by Cai Yong, and all these books were later passed down to Wang Ye, Wang Bi's father.

Endowed with outstanding speculative talent, Wang Bi was active among the intellectual circle in Luoyang. Together with He Yan and Xiahou Xuan, he advocated Xuanxue and free philosophical discussions. However, he "often ridiculed others with his own strengths, which made many scholars and gentlemen resent him" [2]. In the tenth year of the Zhengshi reign (249), Wang Bi was implicated in the Gaopingling Incident and dismissed from office. He died of an epidemic in the autumn of the same year, at the age of twenty-four. Even so, his academic achievements were never forgotten due to his early death.

In terms of the interpretation of *Laozi*, *Commentaries on the Laozi* is the earliest complete extant commentary on *Tao Te Ching*, and *General Outline of the Laozi* summarizes the core tenets of the book. He Shao commented that his works "followed a rigorous logical framework" [2]. For the interpretation of *The I Ching*, *Commentaries on the I Ching* discarded image-number theories and focused exclusively on elaborating philosophical principles. *General Remarks on the I Ching* systematically expounded interpretive rules such as "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Images" and "Taking one line as the main theme". Xing Xu commented on this work: "It summarizes the general purport of the whole book in broad strokes, and clarifies the gains and losses of the six lines in detail". In addition, *Explanations of Doubts on the Analects* reconstructed Confucian classics by quoting original texts and concepts from *Laozi*, "striving to find the ideological similarities between Confucianism and Taoism, and connecting Taoist thoughts on the basis of Confucius' ideas" [6].

In the twenty-first year of the Zhenguan reign of the Tang Dynasty (647), Emperor Taizong ordered twenty-two ancient virtuous scholars and Confucian masters to share sacrifices at the Confucian Temple, and Wang Bi was among them. This fully demonstrates that his academic status was recognized by orthodox academia in later ages.

Wang Bi did not simply explain texts word for word when annotating classics; he had clear research purposes. What exactly were the sages' intentions conveyed by classics? How could people transcend the tedious exegesis of Han scholars to explore the true essence? Such reflections were embodied in his profound thinking on the relationship between "language, images and meaning", as well as his view of unifying classics by integrating the Taoist concept of "Non-being" with Confucian thoughts. Through a close reading of the above-mentioned works, this paper explores how Wang Bi discarded and surpassed the view of literature in Han Dynasty Confucian classics studies in his practical interpretation of classics.

## 2. From phraseology and exegesis to philosophical principles: the view of literature in Han Dynasty confucian classics studies and its evolution in the Wei-Jin period

Confucian classics studies of the Han Dynasty formed the first systematic paradigm for classic interpretation in the history of Chinese academia, whose core lay in the sanctification of sages' words. Han scholars regarded the Six Classics as sacred texts compiled or written by Confucius, which carried unalterable truths. Dong Zhongshu, a representative of the New Text School, held that Confucius composed *The Spring and Autumn Annals* to formulate laws for the Han Dynasty. Zheng Xuan, a master of the Old Text School, stressed that Confucius sorted out documents and passed down the doctrines of ancient kings. Although the two schools differed on whether Confucius "created" or "transmitted" classics, both confirmed that classics were carriers of sages' words with fixed and closed meanings. Interpreters were duty-bound to faithfully convey the original intentions of sages.

The core interpretive method of Han Dynasty classics studies was phraseology and exegesis. Phraseology refers to dividing texts into chapters and sentences, while exegesis means explaining

individual words and phrases. Xu Shen wrote in *Explaining Simple and Analyzing Compound Characters*: "Characters are the foundation of classical learning" [7]. Guo Pu also stated that *Erya* "reveals the general rules of exegesis" [8]. These remarks indicate that sages' intentions were embedded in written words, and only accurate explanations could help people comprehend the true meaning. However, phraseology and exegesis gradually became overly complicated in the course of development. Huan Tan pointed out in *New Discourses* that Qin Jinjun spent thirty thousand words merely explaining four characters: "Yu Ruo Ji Gu" [3]. *Book of Han · Biographies of Confucian Scholars* recorded that the explanation of a single classic expanded to over a million words [3]. Despite such tedious elaborations, scholars still failed to truly understand the great ideas of sages.

The guiding principle for annotating classics in the Han Dynasty was "transmitting rather than innovating". Zheng Xuan noted in his commentary on *The Book of Rites*: "Annotations are explanations attached to classics, just as water flows onto objects" [9]. Annotations were subordinate to original classics and could not alter the original meanings. Scholars of the Old Text School particularly upheld this stance and opposed "quoting irrelevant theories to refute the original texts" [3]. This attitude was closely related to how Han classical scholars perceived their own roles. Since sages had passed away, later scholars were obliged to restore the original ideas of sages rather than adding their own opinions.

Internal tensions within the Han view of literature became increasingly prominent as explanations grew more redundant. Strict inheritance of academic traditions of masters and schools ensured the continuity and standardization of classical theories, yet it also stifled intellectual vitality. After the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty, an increasing number of scholars turned away from phraseology and devoted themselves to ancient learning<sup>2</sup>. The so-called ancient learning refers to the concise academic style popular from the Warring States Period to the early Han Dynasty, which focused on grasping general ideas through basic exegesis. Wang Chong was an important pioneer of this academic transformation. He praised erudite scholars who could "express their own thoughts and discuss worldly affairs" [10], standing in sharp contrast to the mainstream classics studies that advocated "transmitting rather than innovating". This trend foreshadowed new possibilities for the perception of literature.

By the late Eastern Han Dynasty, the decline of Confucian classics studies was an established fact. Political darkness undermined the social order maintained by Confucian ethical norms, and the redundant drawbacks within academia aroused widespread dissatisfaction. During the Jian'an reign, Cao Cao issued three imperial edicts to select talents regardless of their moral background, breaking the tradition of recruiting officials based on mastery of Confucian classics. Cao Pi implemented the Nine-Rank System for official selection, which further transformed the academic atmosphere. Meanwhile, the study of names and principles emerged. *Records of Personages* by Liu Shao explored the principles of talent identification, aiming to "establish proper governance for monarchs and proper duties for ministers" [11], which encouraged intellectuals to attach importance to individual intelligence and competence. Against this background, Wang Bi put the methodology of annotation at the center of academic discussion and established an attitude of "individuals facing classics directly". He "removed the ideological barrier between interpreters and classics that had existed in Han Dynasty interpretation" [12].

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<sup>2</sup> Annotation to *Book of the Later Han*, Volume Twenty-eight, Upper Part of the Eighteenth Biography of Huan Tan and Feng Yan, compiled by Li Xian in the Tang Dynasty, Ming block-printed edition, Page 1: "He did not devote himself to phraseology, excelled at writing articles, and was particularly fond of ancient learning".

In the middle and late Eastern Han Dynasty, the style of annotating classics gradually shifted from redundancy to conciseness. Zheng Xuan compiled commentaries on a wide range of classics, which were far more succinct than the phraseological works of the Western Han Dynasty. Entering the Wei-Jin period, *Collected Explanations of the Analects* by He Yan separated *The Analects* from the interconnected system of various classics and interpreted the work based on its own content [13], allowing the image of Confucius recorded in *The Analects* to stand independently. Wang Bi's commentaries on *The I Ching* and *Laozi* carried conciseness to an extreme. His writings were concise in language yet profound in implication. He paid little attention to literal words, institutions and objects at the factual level, but focused on constructing his own theoretical system. "Confucian classics studies broke free from the constraints of traditional phraseology and scholarly lineages, and expanded new space for interpreting philosophical principles" [14].

The underlying reason for this transformation lies in people's changed understanding of the meaning of classics. Han classical scholars believed that the meaning of classics was fixed and closed, and interpreters could only passively accept and convey it. In contrast, Wei-Jin intellectuals realized that the meaning of classics took shape in the process of interpretation, and the relationship between interpreters and classics was one of dialogue. For instance, when annotating *Laozi*, Wang Bi ran his core theory of "valuing Non-being" through the whole work, turning classics from authoritative records of sages' words into carriers for interpreters to express their own thoughts.

From the perspective of textual form, the texts of Han Dynasty Confucian classics evolved from separate classics and commentaries to integrated ones. Based on textual research on *Bibliography of the Han Dynasty* and fragmentary stone classics of the Han Dynasty, Wanli Yu confirmed that separating classics from commentaries was a common practice in the Qin and Han dynasties [15]. It was not until the Eastern Han Dynasty that Ma Rong combined classics and commentaries into one volume "to save readers the trouble of reading two separate texts" [16]. This evolution of textual form laid an important foundation for the mature annotation style in the Wei-Jin period.

### **3. Integration of the internal and the external, governing the external by the internal: Wang Bi's fusion of Confucianism and Taoism based on the unity of substance and function**

Wang Bi's breakthrough against Han Dynasty classics studies did not mean simply abandoning traditions. Instead, he reconstructed the relationship between Confucianism and Taoism centered on the distinction between "the internal" and "the external". The so-called internal, also referred to as the root, stands for inner moral sentiments, the true intentions of sages, spontaneity, and the sage personality characterized by non-action and perfect virtue. The external, also known as the branch, refers to external manifestations, the language and images in classics, rituals and ethical norms, as well as the personality of actual monarchs who took actions and held official positions. Scholar Cai Luo argued that Wang Bi showed a tendency to respect Confucius and hold that "Laozi and Zhuangzi were inferior to Confucius" [17], while Yingling Fang believed that Wang Bi's interpretation of the Dao was more faithful to Laozi's original ideas [18]. In my opinion, Wang Bi's greatest innovation was not replacing Confucianism with Taoism or supplementing Confucianism with Taoism. Instead, he transformed the core values of Confucian rituals and ethical norms into the inevitable external manifestation of the Taoist ontological Dao, and realized the fusion of Confucianism and Taoism under the framework of the unity of substance and function. On the one hand, this corrected the drawback of Han Dynasty classics studies that "chased the external and neglected the internal" [19]; on the other hand, it provided a philosophical solution for Wei-Jin intellectuals to resolve the conflicts between spontaneity and ethical norms.

Wang Bi's framework of the internal and the external was first reflected in his systematic reflection on the relationship between language, images and meaning. He wrote in *General Remarks on the I Ching · Explaining Images*: "Images are created to convey meaning, and language is used to clarify images. Nothing works better than images to fully express meaning, and nothing works better than language to fully present images" [20]. Language and images belong to the external, while meaning belongs to the internal. Language and images are indispensable because the internal essence needs external forms to manifest itself; yet they can be discarded after understanding the essence, for the internal meaning is the ultimate pursuit. Using the metaphors of rabbit traps and fish baskets from ancient texts [20], Wang Bi criticized Han scholars for "losing the fundamental origin and indulging in increasingly elaborate trivialities" [20]. His intention was not to abolish image-number theories, but to restore the priority of meaning as the internal ontology. Drawing on Zhuangzi's idea of "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Language" and *The I Ching's* viewpoint of "Establishing Images to Fully Express Meaning" [21], he established an interpretive path of approaching the internal through the external and abandoning the external after comprehending the internal.

When extended to the philosophical level, this framework of internal and external became Wang Bi's proposition that "Sages embody Non-being". In *Biography of Wang Bi* by He Shao, Pei Hui asked: "Non-being is indeed the foundation of all things, yet sages never talk about it, while Laozi keeps elaborating on it endlessly. Why is that?" Wang Bi replied: "Sages fully embody Non-being, which cannot be explained in words, so they choose not to speak of it. Laozi still dwells in the realm of Being, so he constantly talks about Non-being to expound its essence" [2]. The difference between sages and Laozi lies in their different attitudes toward the internal and the external. As a sage, Confucius was completely integrated with Non-being and had no need to explain it with words, which represents the highest realm of the internal. Laozi, however, was still at the stage of talking about Non-being and remained on the external level. On the surface, this view elevates Confucius and depreciates Laozi, but the superiority of Confucius as a sage lies in his more thorough realization of the Taoist realm of Non-being. Wang Bi redefined the Confucian sage with the Taoist concept of the internal, and meanwhile honored Confucian sages as the highest moral models in value judgment, thus forming a structure of "Taoism as the internal essence and Confucianism as the external manifestation".

On the ethical level, Wang Bi further integrated spontaneity and ethical norms with the framework of internal and external. When annotating the sentence "Filial piety and fraternal respect are the root of benevolence", he wrote: "Natural affection for family is filial piety, and extending such affection to all people is benevolence" [22]. Natural affection belongs to the internal, while benevolence is its external extension. He also commented on "Cultivated by poetry, established by rituals, perfected by music": "Joy, fear, sorrow and delight are people's natural emotions. Stirred by external feelings, these emotions are expressed through songs and chants" [22]. These discussions indicate that filial piety, benevolence, rituals and music advocated by Confucianism are rooted in people's innate natural emotions. Therefore, Wang Bi "tried to interpret emotions and filial piety with the concept of spontaneity" [6]. Regarding the issue of "father and son shielding each other's faults", Confucius clearly held that "a father covers for his son, and a son covers for his father, for uprightness lies within this act". When inner kinship conflicts with external laws, choosing the internal over the external fully embodies the principle of governing the external by the internal. Wang Bi never denied the value of ethical norms themselves. Instead, he advocated taking innate spontaneity as the root and external ethical norms as the branches, and using the root to redeem the branches so as to prevent ethical norms from degenerating into hypocritical performances. Yingling

Fang pointed out that Wang Bi's idea of "Upholding the Root and Abandoning the Branches" is in essence "Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches", whose ultimate goal is to preserve rather than abandon benevolence, righteousness, sagacity and wisdom [18]. This logic of internal and external is particularly distinct in Wang Bi's evaluation of the lineage of sages. He highly praised the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors but depreciated the Three Kings. The Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors achieved a perfect unity of inner sageliness and outer kingship; they "governed the world in accordance with natural laws" [22], accomplished great merits without leaving ostentatious traces. After the Three Kings, external political achievements gradually broke away from the foundation of inner sageliness. Cai Luo pointed out that Wang Bi's evaluation was intended to "uphold the legitimacy of the Cao Wei regime, which explained political power inheritance through the theory of abdication" [17].

It is worthy of in-depth discussion that although Wang Bi summarized Laozi's thoughts as "Upholding the Root and Abandoning the Branches", the core of his own theories is actually "Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches"<sup>3</sup>. Laozi advocated "rejecting benevolence and righteousness" and "discarding sagacity and wisdom", aiming to eliminate the damage of artificial interference to the natural Dao. In contrast, Wang Bi's idea of "Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches" is a constructive line of thought that develops from the internal to the external. He first established spontaneity as the fundamental root, and then naturally manifested humanistic social norms as the branches based on this root. Yijiao Liu and Zhongjiang Wang noted that Wang Bi "stroved to absorb the strengths of Taoism, which emphasizes individual spontaneity, and Confucianism, which focuses on interpersonal ethics" [23]. He established a hierarchical structure of "Taoism as the internal and Confucianism as the external", which prevented Taoism from falling into nihilism and indulgence, and saved Confucianism from rigid dogma. Both schools found their proper positions within the relationship of root and branch, substance and function. Individual freedom and social norms became two sides of the same ontological Non-being, namely the internal and the external.

Academic circles hold three different views on Wang Bi's ideological orientation. Tang Yongtong believed that "his metaphysics belongs to Taoism, while his personal conduct follows the moral integrity of Confucianism" [24]. Feng Qi argued that Wang Bi put forward the idea of "Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches" to rescue the crisis of ethical norms [25]. Feng Dawen held the view that Wang Bi "kept belittling ethical norms by setting them against the Dao" [26]. From the perspective of the internal and the external, these three interpretations can be unified in Wang Bi's thoughts. Ontologically, he took the Taoist Non-being as the internal essence; in terms of value realization, he regarded Confucian sages and ethical norms as the external manifestation. The internal essence has to present itself through external forms, and external forms must rely on the internal essence to gain legitimate foundations.

It is noteworthy that Wang Bi's idea of "Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches" shares an in-depth connection with Confucius' doctrine of the Mean. The "Mean" in the doctrine of the Mean is not compromise. As Liu Shao put it, "The nature of harmony is plain and tasteless" [11], which is similar to Wang Bi's concept of Non-being — formless and nameless, yet containing

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<sup>3</sup> Liu Yijiao, Wang Zhongjiang. Rooted in Spontaneity and Conforming to Humanity — From Laozi to Wang Bi [J]. *Social Science Front*, 2024(10), Page 25: "Wang Bi summarized Laozi's thoughts as 'Upholding the Root and Abandoning the Branches', yet the core of his own ideas is 'Upholding the Root and Manifesting the Branches', namely advocating the transition from spontaneity to humanity".



infinite possibilities. The term "Yong" (constant application) refers to function, meaning the adaptation of the Mean to changing practical situations. Confucius was "gentle yet stern, dignified yet not fierce, respectful yet calm" [22], which is exactly the natural expression of the plain and harmonious Mean. The transformation from the Mean to its application, or from Non-being to Being, was described by Confucius as "not being a mere vessel". The principle that "a gentleman is not a mere vessel" requires a gentleman to first cultivate practical abilities, and then transcend the limitations of specific skills to reach a state of integrating all things. When annotating *Laozi*, Wang Bi wrote: "Only after abandoning superficial sagacity can true sagely achievements be fully realized; only after discarding artificial benevolence can genuine benevolence be profound" [27]. He expressed the same implication behind Confucius' idea of "a gentleman is not a mere vessel" with different language and images, all pointing to the true intentions of sages.

To sum up, Wang Bi's fusion of Confucianism and Taoism was not a random combination or compromise, but a philosophical synthesis completed under the framework of the internal and the external. He took the Taoist ontology as the internal essence and Confucian values as the external manifestation, and connected the two through the unity of substance and function. This line of thinking criticized the false external forms of ethical norms with the true spirit of the internal essence, responding to the social crisis caused by hypocritical ethical norms in the late Han Dynasty. It also endorsed the realistic political power of outer kingship with the ideal of inner sageliness and abdication. Furthermore, it pioneered a new philosophical paradigm that integrated axiology with ontology in the history of philosophy. This is precisely where Wang Bi's academic innovation lies.

#### 4. Wang Bi's View on literature in a comparative perspective and its reception in later ages

To understand the historical status of Wang Bi's view on literature, we need to examine it within the ideological lineage of his contemporaries and later scholars. He Yan, who jointly founded the Zhengshi Xuanxue school with Wang Bi, detached *The Analects* from the entire system of Confucian classics in *Collected Explanations of the Analects* and "stripped it of the restraints of traditional classics studies" [13]. He held the view that "Sages have no emotions", which was essentially a continuation of the Han tradition of deifying sages. In contrast, Wang Bi argued that "Sages possess emotions just like ordinary people". He stated that "What makes sages superior to ordinary people is their divine wisdom; what they share with ordinary people is the seven human emotions" [2]. This difference directly led to their different interpretive orientations. He Yan focused on conveying the literal words of sages, while Wang Bi aimed to reveal sages' true intentions and construct his own philosophical system.

A comparison between Wang Bi and Guo Xiang reveals more differences. Guo Xiang replaced Wang Bi's theory of "Taking Non-being as the fundamental root" with the theory of "Solitary Transformation", claiming that all things "come into being of their own accord" [28] and do not rely on a transcendent Non-being as the ontology. This stance of "valuing Being" made him abandon the division of Taoism as the internal and Confucianism as the external. Instead, he proposed that "ethical norms are identical to spontaneity". In terms of textual interpretation, although Wang Bi advocated "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Language and Images", he recognized the instrumental value of language and images and maintained the openness of classics. By contrast, Guo Xiang expanded and digressed freely in his commentaries, turning *Zhuangzi* entirely into a carrier for expressing his own thoughts.

Wang Bi's view on literature not only distinguished him from contemporary thinkers, but also exerted a profound influence on the tradition of classic interpretation in later ages. In *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, Xie Liu praised Wang Bi for "forming independent insights with



his own thinking, and presenting precise and sharp arguments", and took his concise and lucid annotation style as a model [29].

The reception of Wang Bi's view on literature in later generations presents complex tensions. Ouyang Xiu hailed him as the most important scholar of *The I Ching* after Confucius, stating that "Without Wang Bi's interpretations, the study of *The I Ching* would have fallen into heretical theories" [30]. Sima Guang, however, "always disapproved of Fusi (Wang Bi) for interpreting *The I Ching* with theories of Laozi and Zhuangzi, believing that this deviated from the original purport of *The I Ching*" [31]. Gang Cheng summarized this phenomenon as the disenchantment feature of Song Dynasty studies on *The I Ching*. Song scholars admired Wang Bi for his rationalist criticism against the theological study of *The I Ching*, yet worried that his theory of "Taking Non-being as the root" might lead to value nihilism. Thus they held mixed attitudes of admiration and criticism [5]. Nevertheless, fierce criticism against Wang Bi only proves how far-reaching his influence was. Fan Ning condemned him for committing "crimes even graver than Jie and Zhou", Sima Guang criticized him for interpreting *The I Ching* with Taoist theories, and Hui Dong blamed him for discarding all commentaries of Han scholars. All these accusations arose because his theories were powerful enough to challenge orthodox traditions and obscure ancient interpretations. Wang Bi completed an undeniable academic revolution. He replaced phraseology and exegesis with ontological hermeneutics, transforming classic interpretation from a technical work that merely "transmitted old ideas" into a creative activity of "expounding the Dao through writing". He turned interpretation itself into an object of philosophical reflection, and opened up new prospects for China's tradition of classic interpretation.

## 5. Conclusion

The transformation of Wang Bi's view on literature is essentially a fundamental revolution in the paradigm of classic interpretation. In his short lifetime, he systematically reflected on and surpassed the traditions of "transmitting rather than innovating" and phraseology-exegesis in Han Dynasty Confucian classics studies. From the perspective of textual form, he carried forward the trend of integrating classics and commentaries and maturing annotation styles since the Eastern Han Dynasty, shifting the focus of annotation from literal words and institutions to the construction of philosophical systems. In terms of interpretive methods, he reflected on the hierarchy of language, images and meaning, and established the principle of "Grasping the Meaning and Forgetting the Images". This transformed the one-way receptive relationship between interpreters and classics into a dialogic one. Ideologically, he integrated Confucianism and Taoism with the framework of internal and external, root and branch, substance and function. He re-established the foundation of Confucian ethical norms with the Taoist concept of Non-being, and meanwhile provided a value destination for the Taoist realm with Confucian sages, forming the unique ideological structure of "Taoism as the internal and Confucianism as the external".

Wang Bi's greatest creation was not simply replacing Confucianism with Taoism or supplementing one school with the other, but elevating classic interpretation itself to the level of philosophical reflection. What he explored was not what the texts literally say, but what the sages truly intended, and how to transcend language and images to reach the ultimate essence. Such reflections freed annotations from being appendages of original classics and turned them into independent intellectual activities of "expounding the Dao through writing". He led China's tradition of classic interpretation away from the technical commentaries of the Han Dynasty and toward the philosophical interpretation valued in the Wei-Jin, Song and Ming dynasties. In this sense, Wang Bi is not only the pioneer of Wei-Jin Xuanxue, but also a milestone figure in the history of Chinese

hermeneutics. The profound enlightenment of his view on literature lies in this: the meaning of classics is not sealed within written words, but constantly revitalized in every sincere act of interpretation.

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