

The Craft of Oblivion

Forgetting and Memory in Ancient China



Edited by

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Chapter 9

Wang Bi and the Hermeneutics of Actualization

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A Theory on Understanding

I was unsure whether I should take on this new project—so I confided in a Spanish friend in a recent conversation. After reluctantly listening to my complaints about overloads and overwork, she settled the issue with the cutting saying, “Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente,” which literally translates into “A shrimp that sleeps gets carried by the tide,” and approximates the meaning of “You snooze, you lose.” Obviously, my friend had no interest in discussing shrimp, yet I effortlessly understood her position regarding my hesitation. Reflecting on the process of understanding, I had to forget the literal nonsense of her uttered words referring to sleeping shrimp and tides in order make room for her intention. Although she chose a proverb to caution me of the dangers of not actively making timely decisions and missing opportunities, she

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1 could have expressed her opinion in a variety of other ways. I was able
 2 to understand her meaning by virtue of her words, but only by letting
 3 the specific referents of her words go. Later that day, still not entirely
 4 persuaded that I should accept the new project, I decided to consult
 5 the *Zhouyi* 周易 (also known as *Yijing* 易經). I asked my question and
 6 got the following line in *Kun* 坤: “A sack tied up: no fault, no praise”
 7 (括囊; 无咎无譽).¹ This was a more conservative suggestion. I should
 8 probably be careful about how much work I can account for if I want
 9 to avoid disappointing myself and others. After all, one should never
 10 bite off more than one can chew. All these words and images—the
 11 shrimp, the sack, biting and chewing—are evocative signs that succeed
 12 in conveying meaning. And yet, without a doubt, the ideas that they
 13 convey can be illustrated through a multiplicity of different signs that do
 14 not necessarily involve tides, ties, and full mouths. Moreover, we could
 15 never understand the intentional meaning of these words were we to
 16 take them literally as opposed to pragmatically. That is, if we did not
 17 move beyond what the phrase says in an attempt to grasp the intention
 18 of the speaker in uttering it.²

19 This preoccupation lies at the core of “Clarifying the Images” (“Ming
 20 xiang” 明象), a concise and influential essay written by Wang Bi 王弼
 21 (226–249), which alerts us against being too literal in understanding
 22 what others have said.³ “Clarifying the Images” is part of Wang Bi’s
 23 longer commentary to the *Zhouyi* 周易 titled “General Remarks on the
 24 Changes of Zhou” (“Zhouyi lüeli” 周易略例). Its central preoccupation lies
 25 not with oral communication but with written one—more specifically,
 26 the recorded words (statements) and images (hexagrams) of the ancient
 27 sages who are traditionally believed to have authored the *Zhouyi*.
 28 After all, had I needed clarification, I could have asked my friend to
 29 reformulate her ideas. But when the oral context of utterance is lost
 30 and all we have left is a written record, a pragmatic reading in search
 31 of intentions becomes more complicated. Reacting against the symbolic
 32 closure of the Image-Number (*xiang shu* 象數) exegetical methods that
 33 had become popular during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–202 CE), Wang
 34 Bi came to challenge a centuries-long standing tradition of reading
 35 the *Zhouyi* through a closed self-referential system of images and their
 36 numbers.⁴

37 The mistake at the heart of these methods, Wang Bi diagnoses,
 38 consists in treating contingent and eventful correlations as relations
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of identity and necessity. As Zhu Xi said: “When the *Zhouyi* mentions something, it does not really refer to that thing; for example, when it mentions a dragon, it is not referring to a real dragon. This contrasts with other writings where what is mentioned is what is meant: filial piety is simply filial piety; humanity is simply humanity” (易說一個物非真是一個物, 如說龍非真龍。若他書則真是實物, 孝悌便是孝悌, 仁便是仁).⁵ Namely, the signs registered in the *Zhouyi*, such as “horse” or “ox,” are not identical to their direct referent, for they point not at physical horses and oxen but at other ideas. The sages’ intentions befall locally in contingent signs that are historically, culturally, and contextually constituted. Wang Bi explains that the relationship between the signs and the intentions is not one of identity, but one of equivalence or commonality between the valence of their elements: “Anything that touches upon its category can act as its image” (觸類可為其象).⁶ While the signs used to convey intentions are local and linked to particular events, times, and contexts, the Image-Number form of exegesis turned them into a closed system of necessity. The problem with these “overflowing artificial theories” (偽說滋漫) is that they exploit identity, making it explode into meaningless numerical profusion, with the result that the intentions are lost in the process (“they got horse and lost Qian” 有馬无乾). As T’ang has humorously commented, “Han scholars could not get concrete things out of their mind.”⁷

Wang Bi offers a theory for interpreting the *Zhouyi* and, more generally, a semiotic analysis with implications for the act of understanding. This theory revolves around the concept of forgetting (*wang* 忘). There is a general agreement that Wang Bi’s hermeneutics can be summarized in a call to forget (i.e., dismiss) the words after getting their meaning, which points at the insufficiency of words and other signs as tools for expression. I propose a reading of Wang Bi’s hermeneutic theory wherein language and other signs are *not* insufficient and *must not* be dismissed, despite Wang Bi’s urge to forget them. I also propose a reading of Wang Bi’s essay that prevents a Barthesian death-of-the-author approach to interpretation, because in Wang Bi the ultimate act of understanding consists in recovering (a sort of remembering) the original authorial intentions.⁸ If forgetting does not consist in abandoning signs and liberating the reader from the tyranny of the author, what is the role of forgetting words and images in getting their intentional meaning? This is the question that I take on in the next few pages.

1 Hermeneutics of Actualization

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3 “Clarifying the Images” puts forward a theory of interpretation for
4 the *Zhouyi*, where the guiding problem is how to read a text that is
5 extremely subtle and has an immense sociopolitical and ethical guiding
6 value in a way that (1) is meaningful and relevant for current readers
7 in their shifting contexts, hence the system of signs cannot be purely
8 self-referential, fixed, and closed; and that simultaneously (2) preserves
9 and actualizes the intentions of the sages who created the text, hence
10 the interpretation cannot be fully free, unbound, and open. Against the
11 self-referential closure of Image-Number exegeses, Wang Bi advocates
12 for the openness of the text. Yet the openness and flexibility of the
13 sign does not lead him to the opposite extreme—a death-of-the-author
14 reader-oriented radical hermeneutic freedom where any interpretation
15 is possible and valid. In reading a text such as the *Zhouyi*, there is an
16 interpretive constraint that cannot be overcome: the intentions of the
17 authors-sages. Hence, Wang Bi’s method is neither purely author-oriented
18 nor reader-oriented. He proposes something more sophisticated: reading
19 is always an exercise of actualizing meaning with different enabling and
20 constraining aspects at play.

21 In this way, “Clarifying the Images” is a self-aware, complete, and
22 systematic exposition of an interpretive trend in reception theory that
23 I call the *hermeneutics of actualization*. As a theory on how to receive
24 texts, the hermeneutics of actualization deal with the reader’s method
25 to properly understand the meaning of a text that has been inherited
26 from the authoritative past. As a poetics, the reader’s method will be
27 an intimate response to the author’s strategies to construct meaning
28 and the semiotic relation between signs, signifiers, and intentions. From
29 this perspective, and strictly speaking, Wang Bi’s essay “clarifies” not
30 the *Zhouyi*’s images per se, but their role in expressing and helping the
31 reader grasp the sages’ intentions: the nature of the relation between
32 intentions, images, and words, and the implications of this relation for
33 properly understanding the text.

34 A word on “images” is necessary. Traditionally, the authors of the
35 *Zhouyi* are the sages whose intentions reflect a privileged understanding
36 of cosmic and world order. According to the literature on the origins of
37 the *Zhouyi*, such as the well-known section in the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi”
38 漢書藝文志, the sages achieved this understanding by looking up to the
39 sky and down to the earth, that is, by observing the figures of natural
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entities and comprehending their shared patterns of order and disorder, 1
 movement and stillness, growth and decay.⁹ The attached commentary 2
 that transformed the divination manual into a foundational philosophical 3
 text, the *Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳, also presents the *Zhouyi* as a visual system of 4
 representation. In the narrative, Fuxi 伏羲 extrapolated the trigrams to be 5
 a transcription of the relational and mobile structure of the world in its 6
 multiple configurations, thereby transferring for humankind's benefit the 7
 knowledge he had acquired through observation.¹⁰ A world comprehended 8
 through the visual observation of figures—including the shapes of celestial 9
 bodies (*tian xiang* 天/象), the patterns of earth (*di fa* 地/法), and adaptive 10
 designs of animals in correspondence with the patterns of earth (*wen yi* 11
 文/宜)—is first translated into symbolic visual signs or images for human 12
 use, only adding words at later stages for further elaboration.¹¹ Images and 13
 words are the material means of transmission of the intentions generated 14
 in the sages by visually comprehending the world. As a result, it is by 15
 means of observing these images and words that readers can reach the 16
 immaterial and invisible intentions therein stored. We find the criterion 17
 to judge the validity of an interpretation in the authorial intention 18
 contained in the material means of transmission.¹² If in the absence of 19
 the authors we can still make sense of their intentions via the “traces” 20
 they have left behind, it must be because there is something in their 21
 words and images worth keeping, capable of communicating meaning 22
 despite time and context.¹³ A good reading is the one that recovers this 23
 initial intention in the act of communication through interacting with 24
 words and images. But the act of recovery is not a passive task: in being 25
 recovered, intentions become actualized. 26

We are to understand actualization in its two senses of bringing 27
 to the present and realizing what remains in potency. In order for signs 28
 to be correctly interpreted, the reader must deny a relation of identity 29
 where the sign is equal to itself, and hence welcome the gap onto which 30
 a new actualization of meaning can be grounded into the present. The 31
 hermeneutics of actualization will celebrate the gap as the condition 32
 of possibility of true understanding. It is the gap that allows for the 33
 sign to manifest its guiding force regardless of shifting contexts and the 34
 passage of time, and hence it is the gap that creates the classic—the 35
 text whose lasting relevance and universality invites rereading and 36
 reinterpreting. The classic has an abstract quality, where the abstract 37
 is to be understood as an unfinished potentiality that simultaneously 38
 permits and demands new concrete actualizations. Nevertheless, these 39

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1 actualizations of meaning are not fully dependent on the reader. While
 2 the gap allows and demands for the reader to complete its meaning,
 3 the completion must not be arbitrary. The works of the sages—the
 4 classics—contain normative guiding principles that ensure sociopolitical
 5 peace and order. Actualizing their meaning into the present must follow
 6 a criterion for proper understanding found in the correct contextualization
 7 of the speech acts that reveal the original intentions embodied in local
 8 and historical tools of meaning construction. In this way, each proper
 9 understanding of the classic is an act of remembrance: the recovery of
 10 a memory that one individually never had. This act of remembrance
 11 necessitates an exercise of forgetting, where forgetting is not mere
 12 lapse of the recollecting capacity of the mind but an active exercise of
 13 displacement and gap-opening. Actualization is hence to be defined as
 14 an exercise of forgetting for the sake of remembering.

16 The Fishnet Allegory

19 Wang Bi found some keys to formulate his hermeneutic theory in the
 20 *Zhuangzi*'s fishnet allegory and concept of forgetting. "Clarifying the
 21 Images" uses a couple of lines from "External Entities" ("Wai wu" 外物),
 22 which are part of what has come to be known as the fishnet allegory, here
 23 transcribed in full (Wang Bi uses lines 2 and 1, which is a significant
 24 choice, as we will see).

26 (1) 荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃

28 (2) 蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄

30 (3) 言者所以在意，得意而忘言

32 (4) 吾安得忘言之人而與之言哉¹⁴

34 As it happens with other *Zhuangzi* passages that have enjoyed popular-
 35 ity among contemporary readers, different interpretations of the fishnet
 36 allegory have produced radically different translations. By taking a look
 37 at some of the most prominent interpretations by ancient and modern
 38 scholars, we will be better equipped to appreciate Wang Bi's originality
 39 and creativity, even his intentions, in using this passage.

The standard interpretation, to which readers of English are accustomed by the translations of Burton Watson and James Legge, emphasizes the elusiveness of meaning and ideas, and the inadequacy of language to fully capture reality, inaugurating an interpretational framework where “the signified outplays the signifier.”¹⁵ Just as the tools for fishing and hunting rabbits are mere instruments to reach a goal and cease to be relevant once we have caught our prey, the tools that we use to catch meaning (words) should also be left behind once communication has been accomplished. The standard interpretation introduces a logic of subordination of instruments to goals: “The purpose of nets is catching fish; get the fish and forget the net. . . . The purpose of words is catching ideas; get the meaning and forget the words.”

Principal *Zhuangzi* editor and commentator Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) offers the following comments on this passage: “When it comes to two sages having no intentions, they will have nothing to talk about” (至於兩聖無意，奶都無所言也).¹⁶ Hans-Georg Möller takes a renewed interest in Guo Xiang’s interpretation of the fishnet allegory by reading *de yi* 得意 as a play on words that breaks with the structure of the previous two parallel lines. *De yi* would depart from its ordinary meaning of getting intentions to mean “satisfied,” a state that would indicate complete lack of intentional activity. This reading suggests that the Daoist sage forgets both words and intentions: “Words are the means to get hold of intentions. [Only] by getting what is intended (that is, by being content and thus having no intentions anymore), [can] you forget the words.”¹⁷

Jane Geaney takes the fishnet allegory’s image of the hunting trap literally and looks at spoken words (*yan* 言) as traps for speakers in sociopolitical contexts. Those who speak alternatively snare themselves by showing their true colors (the intentions-*yi* 意 in their heart-minds-*xin* 心), or have the capacity to ensnare others, particularly rulers, by uttering deceiving and manipulative words. The allegory’s last sentence refers alternatively to speakers who do not trap themselves by speech, hence, they are still free rabbits, or to rulers who “should cease being impressed by the rhetoric of dispute” and by the cleverness of the ministers (*wang yan* 忘言): “Where can I get someone who has forgotten the speaking and speak with him?”¹⁸

Wim De Reu contextualizes the fishnet allegory within the “External Entities” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, looking for connections between key terms. In the chapter, De Reu remarks, *yi* does not refer to thoughts in general but to commonly held opinions, whereas *yan* does not refer to

1 speaking in general but to the use of fixed evaluative terms. Thus, the
 2 allegory would argue that speaking in the *yan* evaluative mode (De Reu
 3 also calls it “divinatory”) needs to be abandoned, for it creates patterned
 4 habits of thinking and acting that do not allow the necessary flexibility
 5 and awareness to respond adaptively to each situation as it arises. By
 6 abandoning this mode of speaking through fixed value judgments people
 7 can *really talk* (in a different mode): “[Divinatory-style] term-words are
 8 that by which [those who strain themselves] get a hold on opinions.
 9 [Alternatively,] in winning over opinions, disregard [divinatory-style]
 10 term-words!”¹⁹

11 As different as they are, all these interpretations of the fishnet
 12 allegory have one feature in common. They all portray the forgotten
 13 entities (tools, words, intentions, speech, fixed evaluative terms) as
 14 unidimensional and negative: something that needs to be overcome in
 15 order to achieve the ultimate goal (true understanding, sagely satisfac-
 16 tion, communication without self-entrapment, situational awareness, and
 17 expressive flexibility). Furthermore, all of these interpretations but De
 18 Reu’s assume a logical prioritization of getting over forgetting (get *and*
 19 *then* forget). De Reu, in turn, understands forgetting as pragmatically
 20 significant for the activity of getting, thereby anticipating the relation
 21 of simultaneity between forgetting and getting that Wang Bi will make
 22 explicit in his hermeneutic theory.²⁰

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Wang Bi’s Sampling

27 Many consider Wang Bi’s essay on “Clarifying the Images” the source
 28 of the standard interpretation of the fishnet allegory, the one that most
 29 strongly showcases the insufficiency of language to convey reality. In this
 30 reading, the trap-net images that Wang Bi samples from the allegory are
 31 taken to represent the entirety of Wang Bi’s hermeneutic theory, and
 32 then they are read back into the *Zhuangzi* as manifesting a suspicious and
 33 negative attitude toward language where words must ultimately be rejected
 34 or abandoned (i.e., forgotten). To obtain this reading of both Wang Bi’s
 35 hermeneutic theory and the *Zhuangzi*’s fishnet allegory, two assumptions
 36 must be at work. One is that Wang Bi’s essay offers an interpretation
 37 of the fishnet allegory. Another is that the trap-net images that Wang
 38 Bi takes from the allegory encapsulate the essence of his approach to
 39 reading and interpreting.

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None of these assumptions stand. The first assumption has been 1
 challenged by Möller and others when they point out that Wang Bi is 2
 not interested in clarifying, reading, or interpreting the allegory; rather, 3
 he instrumentalizes the *Zhuangzi* lines that he cherry-picks to illustrate his 4
 own theory on how to read the *Zhouyi*.²¹ Here, Mattice's notion of *sampling* 5
 as a specific form of intertextual practice with the potential to act as a 6
 model for textual composition and hermeneutic paradigm proves useful. 7
 In music, sampling is the practice to use a portion (sample) of someone 8
 else's song/composition in a different song/composition, recontextualizing 9
 it in a new setting.²² Translated into a means of intertextual composition, 10
 sampling becomes a creative way to use a passage that departs from the 11
 source text by providing a new framework and conveying new meaning 12
 with a new textual goal. The sampled lines from the allegory in Wang 13
 Bi's essay introduce a creative element that plays a meaningful role in 14
 his new composition. They do not look back to the *Zhuangzi* in order to 15
 explicate the source text. Rather, they use the preexisting text in order 16
 to illustrate, expose, and explicate the text that the sampling author is 17
 writing and/or a third target text (such as the *Zhouyi*). Sampling does not 18
 give primacy to the sampled passage, but to a different text, whether this 19
 is the text that samples or yet another text that is discussed through the 20
 sampling. Likewise, the weight is put on the sampling author's thinking, 21
 not the sampled author's one, and hence sampling does not involve the 22
 interpretation of the source text in and of itself. 23

The second assumption takes the sampled trap-net images as the 24
 core of Wang Bi's hermeneutic theory. In doing so, it denies the role of 25
 context and structure in the intentional composition of meaning. When 26
 ancient and current interpreters portray Wang Bi as an advocate for 27
 getting rid of language and/or purely relying on the reader's interpretive 28
 capacity to understand a text, they are taking his two sampled sentences 29
 too literally—precisely the heart of Wang Bi's critique against the pre- 30
 vious exegetical tradition—and losing the total intended meaning.²³ 31
 When contextualized within the full hermeneutic theory exposed in 32
 Wang Bi's essay, we see that the trap-net images serve only to illustrate 33
 one aspect of his semiotic analysis (the trapping aspect of the sign, as 34
 we discuss below). It is only by taking these lines in isolation and not 35
 contextualizing them within "Clarifying the Images" that we may read 36
 them as manifesting Wang Bi's overall suspicious attitude toward language. 37
 In order to understand Wang Bi's hermeneutic theory, let us follow his 38
 pragmatic method: do not take his words too literally and search instead 39
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1 for his intention in sampling from the fishnet allegory by locating those
 2 lines within the structure of the full essay. By doing so, we reach the
 3 conclusion that Wang Bi does not turn the forgotten entities (in this
 4 case, *Zhouyi* hexagrams and their attached verbalizations) into something
 5 inherently negative, and that he proposes a logic of simultaneity between
 6 forgetting and getting the intention (getting by forgetting).

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9 The Two Aspects of the Media: Enabling and Trapping

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11 In hermeneutical theory, Wang Bi's ontological concept of the *suoyi* 所以
 12 以 becomes a mediation notion that enables the communication and
 13 reception of ideas.²⁴ "Clarifying the Images" begins by introducing the
 14 semiotic relation between intentions (*yi* 意) and the material means by
 15 which these are made explicit and transmitted: images (*xiang* 象) and
 16 words (*yan* 言), to which I will alternatively refer as the media or the
 17 signs. Wang Bi's first exposition of the media is entirely positive, declaring
 18 its enabling aspect at both the levels of the author, as the producer and
 19 conveyor of meaning, and reader, as the receiver and interpreter of mean-
 20 ing. The enabling aspect of the media is such that authors can, thereby,
 21 fully express and transmit their intentions: "Images put forth intentions;
 22 words clarify images. To fully express intentions there is nothing like
 23 images; to fully express images there is nothing like words" (象者, 出意
 24 者也。言者, 明象者也。盡意莫若象, 盡象莫若言).²⁵ The enabling aspect
 25 also involves the reader's understanding, insofar as readers can grasp the
 26 intentions of the author by retracing the media's order of production
 27 (intentions-images-words): "The words are generated from the images,
 28 and thus it is possible to seek the words in order to comprehend the
 29 images. The images are generated from the intentions, and thus it is
 30 possible to seek the images in order to comprehend the intentions" (言
 31 生於象, 故可尋言以觀象; 象生於意, 故可尋象以觀意).

32 There are several points to notice in this opening passage. First,
 33 there is a logical and temporal sequence between intentions, images, and
 34 words. Intentions, as thoughts and ideas, are invisible and immaterial
 35 insofar as they are prelinguistic. Wang Bi differentiates between language
 36 and thought, establishing the basis that not all thought is linguistic.
 37 Language is presented as a sophisticated means to express our intentions
 38 and impressions on the world, but the world and our thoughts about it
 39 predate language.²⁶ Second, if words are generated from images in order
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to fully express them, and images are generated from intentions in order 1
 to fully express them, the media is necessary for intentions to shine forth 2
 beyond the thinker's mind and to be externally communicated, received, 3
 and interpreted. Notice that the verb used for "comprehending" images 4
 and intentions is *guan* 觀, which also means to visually observe—the 5
 same verb used in the *Xici zhuan* with regard to the sage's observation and 6
 comprehension of natural patterns. Immaterial hence invisible intentions 7
 become observable via images. Third, as a result, intentions become 8
 ultimately dependent on the media, despite their ontological priority, 9
 given that they could never appear beyond the author's mind without 10
 their symbolic particularization and determination into visual and aural 11
 means. Finally, a reader's "understanding" of a text cannot be the free 12
 and unbound creation of meaning, but the restricted assimilation of its 13
 author's intentions as facilitated by linguistic and/or nonlinguistic signs. 14

The opening of Wang Bi's essay argues for the enabling aspect of the 15
 media. Far from a suspicion of language theory, whether it is in ancient 16
 or modern terms, we find here an evaluation of signs as the unmatched 17
 bridge that allows a transmission of thoughts from one person to another, 18
 even between persons born with hundreds of years in between. By using 19
 linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, the authors of the *Zhouyi* built a bridge 20
 to their intentions, and it is only by walking this bridge back that we can 21
 reach their thoughts. The enabling aspect of the media is the basis on 22
 which we are to build the next step of the theory ("this being settled" 23
gu 故). Nevertheless, we are about to witness a shift in perspective. The 24
 sampling from the *Zhuangzi*'s fishnet allegory in the second section of the 25
 essay is used to examine the media from a different angle. 26

言者所以明象	Words are the means to clarify the images;	28
得象而忘言	get the images and forget the words.	29
象者所以存意	Images are the means to preserve the intentions;	30
得意而忘象	get the intentions and forget the images.	31
猶	Similarly,	32
蹄者所以在兔	"Snares are the means to get rabbits;	33
得兔而忘蹄	get the rabbit and forget the snare.	34
筌者所以在魚	Fishnets are the means to get fish;	35
得魚而忘筌也	get the fish and forget the net."	36

Wang Bi's choice of lines from the fishnet allegory is a declaration of his 38
 intentions in sampling the *Zhuangzi*. He uses the visually and concep- 39

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1 tually memorable images of the rabbit snare and the fishnet to portray
 2 a different aspect of the media that is not enabling, but trapping. The
 3 trapping aspect, which affects only readers, implies the risk of getting
 4 stuck in the words as opposed to using them to access the images, and
 5 getting stuck in the images as opposed to using them to access the
 6 intentions, which are the ultimate object of understanding. Far from the
 7 unmatched enabling means of the first section (*mo ruo xiang/yan* 莫若
 8 象/言), the second section describes words and images as hunting traps:
 9 “Words are snares for the images; images are nets for the intentions”
 10 (言者, 象之蹄也。象者, 意之筌也). The trap consists in a certain call
 11 for the sign to be read too literally, to find its significance in its own
 12 referent, neglecting the gap between the two. As we have seen, this is
 13 the problem with computational exegetes who read “horse” as “horse”
 14 instead of, say, “strength,” getting stuck in a relation of identity of the
 15 sign with itself. The connector *you* 猶, here translated as “similarly,”
 16 denotes that the following lines introduce an equivalent idea to what
 17 has previously been asserted by using different phrasing. Like dragons in
 18 *Qian* 乾, the lines that Wang Bi samples from the *Zhuangzi* should not
 19 be read literally but for their implications. Interestingly, the fact that we
 20 must negotiate between different possible meanings while reading proves
 21 once again that thought is partially independent from language, and that
 22 linguistic and nonlinguistic signs have correlations with meanings but
 23 not necessarily in an unequivocal or literal way.

24 Were we to take Wang Bi’s words literally in section 2, the
 25 inadequacy of language theory would seem to be an appropriate way of
 26 approaching his essay. He literally writes that one is to forget words after
 27 getting their meaning, which he then reinforces by using an equivalent
 28 formulation from the *Zhuangzi*. Yet this literal reading of section 2 does
 29 violence to the overall structure of the essay. Wang Bi uses the Zhuangist
 30 images of the trap and net to highlight an important point in his theory:
 31 the media have a trapping aspect that readers must take into account.
 32 However, this new claim regarding the trapping aspect of the media should
 33 not invalidate the enabling evaluation offered before. The first and second
 34 sections enjoy a perfect parallelism in distinctly exposing each aspect
 35 of the media. Where the first section established the logic “intentions-
 36 images-words” to express how authors take advantage of the media to
 37 put forward their intentions, section 2 uses a reverse-order opening
 38 that mirrors back this logic, “words-images-intentions,” highlighting the
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process that a reader must follow to reach the intentions and the risks 1
involved in such process. Through this parallelism, Wang Bi invites us 2
to consider both claims as simultaneously valid, none of them taking 3
priority over the other. Namely, images and words, the *suoyi* or media, 4
have both aspects at the same time: one enabling, the other trapping. 5
These aspects coexist and neither one has primacy over the other. 6

The third section of “Clarifying the Images” confirms that this is 7
the case by drawing out the consequences of the previously established 8
premises in a synthetic exercise that comprises what we have learned from 9
sections 1 and 2. Since the media has an enabling aspect, authors can 10
use it in conveying their intentions; since it also has a trapping aspect, 11
readers must not remain at the literal level of the media, but “forget” it 12
in getting the message. Section 3, discussed below, resolves this tension 13
and offers precise instructions on how to properly read given the two 14
conflicting aspects of the media. 15

Forgetting for Getting 16

Throughout “Clarifying the Images,” Wang Bi amazes us with his insights 17
into semiotics, language, signs, and their relation to ideas and meaning. 18
He first advanced the claim that not all thought is linguistic, a thesis that did 19
not enjoy so much popularity in the second half of the twentieth century 20
with poststructuralist and deconstructionist philosophy but has more recently 21
resurged due to advances in neuroscience.²⁷ He then announced the gap 22
between the sign and its direct referent, welcoming nonliteral correla- 23
tions and equivalences as necessary for interpretation and the creation of 24
meaning. In section 3, Wang Bi surprises us again when he explains that 25
both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs, the media, have a function beyond 26
communication whose purpose is to store ideas: “Images are generated from 27
the intentions and [intentions] are preserved in the images. . . . Words are 28
generated from images and [images] are preserved in the words” (象生於意 29
而存象焉. . . . 言生於象而存言焉). As a logical consequence of the media’s 30
storing function, we must not confound the media with what it is storing, 31
which is the mistake of all literalist approaches to interpretation: “What is 32
to be preserved is not the same as its image/words” (所存者乃非其象/言也). 33
Given that what is preserved necessarily differs from the means by which it 34
is preserved, “those who preserve the words do not get the images” (存言者, 35
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1 非得象者也) and “those who preserve the images do not get the intentions”
2 (存象者, 非得意者也).

3 Wang Bi’s innovation lies with the apparently simple suggestion
4 that both dimensions of the media, enabling and trapping, coexist, an
5 insight that he fruitfully employs to establish practical implications for
6 both authors and readers. Namely, the poetics of a text and the semiotic
7 analysis of the sign both inform and impose normative constraints on
8 reading practices. Signs store and communicate the author’s intentions
9 but, in receiving them, the reader cannot stay at the superficial level
10 of what the sign literally says. In a way, the reader must search for the
11 meaning that is preserved in between the lines by paying attention to
12 equivalences and structure. This reading in between lines that allows a
13 reader to get the intention is conceptualized as an exercise of forgetting.
14 However, where in section 2 Wang Bi read the *Zhuangzi* lines as “get
15 and then forget,” he will introduce now a logical difference turning the
16 relation between getting and forgetting into a relation of simultaneity:
17 getting by forgetting, or forgetting for getting.

18		
19	然則	This being so,
20	忘象者乃得意者也	those who forget the images, thereby
21		get the intentions;
22	忘言者乃得象者也	those who forget the words, thereby get
23		the images.
24	得意在忘象	Getting the intentions lies with
25		forgetting the images;
26	得象在忘言	getting the images lies with forgetting
27		the words.
28		

29 Sections 1, 2, and 3 of Wang Bi’s essay can be read as thesis, antithesis,
30 and synthesis in a dialectical model. The newly proposed relation of
31 simultaneity between forgetting and getting is not a simple negation
32 of forgetting’s priority with regard to getting that had been established
33 in section 2 through the sampling of the fishnet allegory. Rather, it is
34 a synthetic result of the integrative analysis of the dual aspect of the
35 media explored in sections 1 and 2. Section 3 synthesizes these con-
36 flicting aspects (enabling versus trapping) in a new proposition that
37 relies on, yet necessarily qualifies, both of them. The codependency of
38 the thesis and the antithesis plays out into a resolution that combines
39 both statements while excluding the possibility of their radicalization.
40

On the one hand, if we focused exclusively on section 1, we could be led to remain at the level of the sign, given that the sign is presented as unproblematically emerging from intentions and the unmatched bridge that brings us back to them. On the other hand, if we focused exclusively on section 2 with the sampling from the fishnet allegory, we could be led to fully abandon the sign, for there it is presented as a tool that, if reified or hypostasized, becomes a trap that engages the intention: the trap of literalness that makes us mistake the intention for the sign that conveys it. By integrating both claims and taking seriously the coexistence of both aspects of the media, we conclude with Wang Bi that, while forgetting is necessary (consequence of claim 2), forgetting is not an abandonment of the sign, for the sign is the only carrier of the intention and the locus of any possible interpretation (consequence of claim 1). Hence we learn that forgetting is inherent to getting (notice that *zai* 在 works both to express method and simultaneity); not the instrumental approach to a tool that has fulfilled its purpose, but the very exercise of displacement by which the intention that the sign has stored becomes actualized. In this way, the conflicting aspects of the media are not so much resolved or dissolved as they are accounted for in Wang Bi's proposal for reading the *Zhouyi*, which can be extrapolated to a more general theory of interpreting and understanding.²⁸

We must remember that, in approaching the *Zhouyi*, readers must reach the intentions of the sage-authors who composed it while making room for actualizing the relevance of its meaning to contemporary contexts. In forgetting words and images to get the intentions, the reader lets go of identity and apprehends equivalence by thinking of one element of the relation in terms of the other. The exercise of forgetting is necessary because, as Wang Bi has already argued: (1) There is a gap at the heart of the semiotic relation: immaterial and invisible intentions always depend on some material means to be externalized, stored, and conveyed, with the result that intentions cannot be found in the intentions themselves but in their signs. (2) And yet, even though intentions are always discovered in the signs used to convey them, they are not identical to the signs. These two facts lead readers to two risks that they must avoid: (1) They should not mistake the signs for the intentions themselves (remember that "what is to be preserved is not the same as its image"); and (2) they should not do away with the signs either, for intentions can only be discovered in the signs that preserve them. In short, the intentions are always revealed in a sort of a relational tension between signs and meaning.

1 We are coming closer to understanding the concept of forgetting.
 2 Forgetting the signs in getting the intentions suggests a technical sense of
 3 forgetting that finds resemblances with the Zhuangist art of active oblivion,
 4 a technique to progressively let go of certainties, patterns of thinking, feeling
 5 and interacting, and spontaneous tendencies.²⁹ As Kohn has argued, as a
 6 meditation and self-cultivation practice, *wang* 忘 is better translated as
 7 oblivion, “because the connotation of forget in English is that one *should*
 8 remember but doesn’t do so.”³⁰ Wang Bi’s forgetting is an intentional letting
 9 go of the reader’s tendency to cling to particular signs as if they were literal,
 10 absolute, and necessary, in a movement to favor flexible correlations and
 11 semantic openness. In this way, Wang Bi’s forgetting can be compared with
 12 the meditational/self-cultivational *wang* in its function of decentering the
 13 self. A desired effect of “sitting in oblivion” (*zuo wang* 坐忘) is ceasing
 14 to see the world in self-referential terms. Similarly, forgetting the sign in
 15 getting the intention decenters the reader as the main source of meaning.
 16 In Wang Bi’s semiotic analysis, the relation between intentions, images,
 17 and words cannot be overcome. Intentions only come to light through
 18 images and words, which preserve and enable the intentions. Therefore,
 19 when readers *forget* the visible signs in order to get the intentions, they
 20 are not fully abandoning the signs, but actively letting go of the literalist
 21 view that establishes their character as necessary and their relation as
 22 one of identity. By getting rid of this conception, readers are able to
 23 travel through the relational tension between sign and intentions toward
 24 comprehending the intended meaning of the signs.³¹

25 Wang Bi’s hermeneutics does not condemn the particular, local, and
 26 contingent; it does not reject language or any other means of semantic
 27 particularization such as symbols and images. What Wang Bi’s hermeneu-
 28 tics does is caution readers against the trapping and misleading aspect of
 29 the particular, the singular, the determinate, the given word, the name,
 30 and the visible entity because their seemingly finished character makes
 31 us think that there is no more to it than what we perceive. Things that
 32 are determinate may lead to a repetition of the same where meaning is
 33 lost and signs turn flat and shallow. Thus, Wang Bi’s hermeneutics vin-
 34 dicates the fundamental value of determinate signs in storing meaning,
 35 and the crucial need for readers to rely on them to actualize meaning,
 36 but he must do so with these caveats in mind. Forgetting leads in Wang
 37 Bi’s hermeneutics to a sort of remembering: the exercise of displacement
 38 both of the sign and the self through which the memory of what the
 39 author intended in the sign becomes actualized.

40

Relational Codependency

I am presenting the relation between intentions, images, and words as one of codependency, where intentions and signs need each other to come to fruition. A minimal approach to ontological priority entails that *a* is prior to *b*, or that it is more fundamental. This is certainly the case with the intentions, which are not only prior in time to the signs, but also necessary while the signs chosen to convey them are contingent. However, in a more demanding approach, ontological priority may entail that in a claim where *a* is prior to *b*, *b* depends on *a* for its existence, while *a* is independent from *b*. While it is the case that images and words depend on intentions for their existence (they emerge from intentions), we should also notice that intentions depend, materially or symbolically, on the media—not to arise, but to exist beyond the author’s mind, and to be preserved and conveyed. We may therefore argue that the relation between intentions and signs is one of codependency.

In the standard reading of the fishnet allegory, a relation of instrumentality is at work: words and images are tools subordinated to intentions, and accessorial with respect to the fundamental reality of the intentions. Therefore, they can be easily disposed of after use. Wang Bi, in turn, corrects the instrumentality of the sign in order to create a relational codependency that can never be overcome. In Wang Bi’s model, words, images, and intentions become an ongoing resource for one another. Intentions are a resource for the proliferations of signs, while images and words are resources available for the actualization of intentions—something that lies within easy reach for the author of intentions, to the service of thinking. In summary, signs are not to be reified and fixated into a relation of self-referential identity, which would lead to a loss of potentiality to signify and capacity to remain relevant. Nor are signs to be dismissed as disposable instruments. Forgetting the signs in getting the intentions does not imply a disparaging treatment of the signs. On the contrary, it suggests the most appropriate and respectful way to treat the sign, as the sign constantly demands to be forgotten in this technical sense of displacement and gap-opening. Through the concept of forgetting, Wang Bi recovers the semantic richness of the sign, which, being local and particular, points beyond itself. The reader forgets in order to make room for a difference and allow intentions to be continuously actualized in new signs by using new local resources.

1 The last line of the essay summarizes the central idea by toying with
 2 the notions of visibility and invisibility: “Only by forgetting the images
 3 in reaching to their intentions (*yi* 意), the meaning (*yi* 義) makes itself
 4 apparent” (忘象以求其意, 義斯見矣). By forgetting that which can be
 5 seen, what cannot be seen appears visible. One can only see by unsee-
 6 ing, get by not clinging, and remember by forgetting. Tang Jungyi 唐君
 7 毅 (1909–1978) has interpreted the difference between “intentions” and
 8 “meaning” as one between private and personal thoughts versus public and
 9 general concepts that have already been expressed and articulated (意知
 10 所知即義).³² The meaning that makes itself apparent through the exercise
 11 of forgetting is indeed the author’s intention as conveyed through the
 12 sign and activated by a new reader. Drawing on the dichotomy visible/
 13 invisible, the essay closes with a renewed emphasis on the importance of
 14 forgetting the sign in actualizing its meaning.³³ Unlike rabbits and fish,
 15 intentions are not visible material entities. They belong to the formless
 16 realm of thought, and must dwell with signs on which they rely to be
 17 materialized, preserved, conveyed, and made explicit. The reliance of
 18 thought on signs radically amplifies the risk to mistake the sign for the
 19 intention, which led Wang Bi to paradigmatically illustrate the trapping
 20 aspect of the sign through the fishnet allegory and to version the self-cul-
 21 tivational concept of forgetting to serve at the core of his hermeneutical
 22 theory. Nevertheless, as we have seen, it would be a mistake to take the
 23 part for the whole. Wang Bi’s synthesis of the dual aspect of the media
 24 and his analysis of the codependency between thought and sign lead not
 25 to the abandonment of the sign but to its actualization into new forms
 26 of meaning articulation that properly express the intentions of the sages
 27 and renovate their relevance into a new context.

28
 29

30 Forget, Actualize, Remember

31

32 Wang Bi’s proposal is not rare compared with other hermeneutic practices
 33 in those times. What is unique in “Clarifying the Images” is the succinct,
 34 theoretical, and systematic articulation of the theory, which we had not
 35 found before. But already in Han times we find scholars who approach
 36 the classics in just the way that Wang Bi would theorize centuries later.
 37 A privileged example is the Han poet and philosopher Yang Xiong 楊雄
 38 (53 BCE–18 CE), who believed that the most respectful and accurate
 39 strategy to actualize the intentions of the sages was not to comment on
 40

the classics but to rewrite them entirely. The rewriting of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) gave way to *Model Sayings* (*Fayan* 法言), while the rewriting of the *Zhouyi* produced *The Canon of Supreme Mystery* (*Taixuan jing* 太玄經).³⁴ Much as Wang Bi would theorize later, the goal of Yang Xiong's hermeneutical practice is neither to fully abandon the transmitted sign (the recorded words of the sages) nor the authors' intentions in a move toward favoring reader-created meaning. On the contrary, translating the transmitted signs into new ones actualizes the original intention of the sages into new media that can convey it more accurately and efficaciously for the new audiences. Rewriting the classics saves them from the risk of being taken literally, hence from becoming either shallow and irrelevant or cryptic and devoid of guiding value. Although sharing the same assumptions regarding the dialectics of forgetting and remembering in the act of interpretation, Wang Bi proposes not to rewrite the classics but to learn to read them properly in order to actualize their meaning. A few years after Wang Bi's premature death, the poet Shu Xi 束皙 (263–302) rewrote six *Lesser Elegancies* 小雅 odes that had been cataloged yet lost in transmission in his influential "Filling Out the Missing Odes" ("Bu wang shi" 補亡詩).³⁵ In this scenario, it is not the case that some particular words need to be forgotten in order to make room for the intention, but rather the opposite: some words have de facto been forgotten and urgently need to be remembered for the completion of this important cosmic and political ritual and the sociopolitical order that results from its performance. Interestingly, Shu Xi does not claim to invent these odes, but to remember them, as they would have been written, in accordance with the intentions of the sages: "Fixing our thoughts on what had come before, and setting our minds upon the past, we [Shu Xi and his peers] filled out the words in order to stitch together the old institutions" (遙想既往, 存思在昔, 補著其文, 以綴舊制).³⁶

Overall, we find two reverse phenomena. In the case of Shu Xi's odes, we have the meaning but the words themselves were lost (summarized as 有其義而亡其辭). In the case of Yang Xiong and Wang Bi, we have words and images, but their meaning is lost (summarized as 有其象言而亡其義). In all three cases there is something found, something lost; something forgotten or to forget, something to be remembered. Remembering in this context is a different activity than recalling or bringing images to mind. Remembering the intentions of the ancient sages involves an exercise of actualization: a revitalized realization of the original, a restoring hermeneutic exercise that challenges the distinction

1 between reception and creation. Understanding, then, whether it is a
 2 text, an image, or a person, consists in remembering a memory that one
 3 never individually had.

Notes

7
 8 1. Wang Bi 王弼, Han Kangbo 韓康伯, and Kong Yingda 孔穎達 ed.,
 9 *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易注疏 (Taipei: Taiwan xuesheng, 1998), 96. The commentary
 10 to the image (*xiang zhuan* 象傳) reads: “‘A sack tied up: no fault’ means that
 11 being careful leads to no harm/trouble” (括囊无咎, 慎不害也). *Zhouyi zhushu*,
 12 97.

13 2. Herbert Fingarette introduced the first pragmatic reading of the *Analects*
 14 in his groundbreaking work, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (San Francisco,
 15 CA: HarperCollins, 1972). On pragmatic readings of the Chinese classics, see
 16 also Yang Xiao, “How Confucius Does Things with Words: Two Hermeneutic
 17 Paradigms in the *Analects* and Its Exegeses,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 2
 18 (2007): 497–532.

19 3. Wang Bi was posthumously characterized as a scholar of the Dark or
 20 *Xuanxue* 玄學, a category first used in the *Jinshu* 晉書 (Tang period, 618–907),
 21 and which took the term *xuan* 玄 (darkness, mystery, profound) from the *Laozi*
 22 老子 as central to a series of philosophical exercises and exchanges in the third
 23 century.

24 4. As Richard Lynn, Rudolf Wagner, Chen Guying, Edward Shaughnessy,
 25 Ming Dong Gu, and others have explained, Wang Bi changed the course of
 26 *Zhouyi* exegesis to put the emphasis on disclosing and reinterpreting intentions
 27 and meaning, a trend of reading the *Zhouyi* as a philosophical text already started
 28 by the *Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳. My reading of “Clarifying the Images” owes much to
 29 the insightful previous scholarship on Wang Bi and the *Zhouyi*.

30 5. Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, *juan* 67, 13b–14a. I discovered this
 31 Zhu Xi passage in Ming Dong Gu, *Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing: A
 32 Route to Hermeneutics and Open Poetics* (Albany: State University of New York
 33 Press, 2005), 101–2.

34 6. All my quotes from “Clarifying the Images” are in Lou Yulie 樓宇烈,
 35 *Wang bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 609.

36 7. Tang Yung-t'ung and Walter Liebenthal, “Wang Pi's New Interpretation
 37 of the I Ching and Lun-yü,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 10, no. 2
 38 (1947): 124–61, 143.

39 8. Roland Barthes, *La mort de l'auteur*. In *Le bruissement de la langue: Essais critiques IV* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), 63–69. Ming Dong Gu argues that Wang
 40 Bi inaugurates a reader-oriented trend of open interpretation that presupposed
 the death of the author throughout his Wang Bi chapter in *Chinese Theories of Reading and Writing*, 81–150.

9. There are versions of this text in the *Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳, *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi” 漢書藝文志, *Shiji* 史記, *Hou hanshu* 後漢書, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義, and *Baihutong* 白虎通. Each of these sources utilizes the story of the origins of the trigrams for a different purpose, such as a genesis of civilization and cultural achievements in the *Xici zhuan*, or an explanation of the origins of writing in the *Shuowen jiezi*.

10. Willard Peterson, “Making Connections: ‘Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations’ of the Book of Change,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 1 (1982): 67–116. See pp. 80–81 for a discussion on translating *xiang* 象 as either image or figure. I do not translate the term *xiang* as figures in “Clarifying the Images” because Wang Bi does not portray *xiang* as observer-independent in the way that natural entities often are thought to be. While natural entities are figures, they become images when comprehended, and visual signs when represented.

11. *Zhouyi zhushu*, 674.

12. As Albert Galvany has noted, Wang Bi assumes the logic underlying divination languages such as the *Zhouyi*’s: thanks to the equivalence between language/signs and reality, it is possible to trace the path from the written sign back to natural signs/patterns (*wen* 文); and thereby to reveal inner and invisible intentions (*yi* 意) by means of external and visible signs (*xiang/yan* 象言). We also find this logic in morphoscopic practices and physiognomic techniques: it is possible to identify inner characteristics and tendencies in humans by means of the observation of their physical forms. Galvany, “Signs, Clues, and Traces: Anticipation in Ancient Chinese Political and Military Texts,” *Early China* 38 (2015): 151–93.

13. The sages have left traces (*ji* 跡) behind in the form of writings, by means of which their intentions and teachings can potentially be recovered. On the question of traces from a wiser past, how to recover them, and whether it is even possible to recover them, read Tobias Zürn’s chapter in this volume. As we will see, Wang Bi participates in the philosophical project of trace-recovery that we most commonly associate with “Confucian” scholars and thinkers. But he also understands the merits of the critical premise that writings and other traces are but “dregs” or “residues” (*zaopo* 糟魄) from the past, most prominently developed in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Han Feizi*. Toward the end of recovering the traces from the past and actualizing their meaning and significance into the present, Wang Bi offers a third path that harmonizes (or fruitfully synthesizes) the two previous opposite attitudes. Scholars have discussed this syncretic or pluralistic element—particularly as a synthesis of Daoism and Confucianism—as one of the most characteristic elements of Wang Bi’s thought. See, among others, Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Wei jin xuanxue lungao* 魏晉玄學論稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1957), 83–85; Rudolf Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 133.

- 1 14. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju,
2 2004), 944.
- 3 15. Hans-Georg Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory: A Text Critical
4 Analysis,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 24, no. 7 (2000): 489–502, 491.
- 5 16. Reference and translation in Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory,”
6 494. *Zhuangzi jishi*, 946.
- 7 17. Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory,” 498.
- 8 18. Jane Geaney, *Language as Bodily Practice in Early China: A Chinese
9 Grammatology* (Albany: State University New York Press, 2018), 114–21.
- 10 19. Wim De Reu, “A Ragbag of Odds and Ends? Argument Structure
11 and Philosophical Coherence in *Zhuangzi* 26,” in *Literary Forms of Argument
12 in Early China*, ed. Joachim Gentz and Dirk Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 271–
13 77.
- 14 20. De Reu, “A Ragbag of Odds and Ends?,” 275.
- 15 21. Möller, “Zhuangzi’s Fishnet Allegory,” 492; De Reu, “A Ragbag of
16 Odds and Ends?,” 247–48.
- 17 22. Sarah Mattice, *Exploring the Heart Sutra* (New York: Lexington Books,
18 2021), ch. 1, “Sampling Authenticity.”
- 19 23. For ancient literalist interpretations of Wang Bi’s essay, see Gu, *Chinese
20 Theories*, 124.
- 21 24. On the ontological *suoyi*, see Rudolf Wagner, *Language, Ontology, and
22 Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi’s Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*
23 (Albany: State University New York Press, 2003).
- 24 25. Compare with the *Xici*: “The sages established the images as means to
25 fully express their intentions, set forth the hexagrams as means to fully express
26 natural and created tendencies, attached verbalization as means to fully express
27 what they said, and made them all in flux and comprehensive as means to fully
28 express their utility” (聖人立象以盡意，設卦以盡情偽，繫辭以盡其言，變而通之以盡
29 利), *Zhouyi zhushu*, 641; Peterson, “Making Connections,” 98–99.
- 30 26. Compare Wang Bi’s realist attitude with Wittgenstein’s “the limits
31 of my language are the limits of my world” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 5.6)
32 and the linguistic turn in twentieth-century European and analytic philosophy.
33 Wang Bi’s approach to thought and language is shared by other Classical Chinese
34 philosophers. See, for instance, the *Guanzi* 管子, when it says that “thoughts/
35 intentions are prior to speaking/words” 意以先言. Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳, *Guanzi
36 jiaozhu* 管子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 37, 786.
- 37 27. Among many other studies, I refer here to the important contributions
38 by Evelina Fedorenko and Rosemary Varley, “Language and Thought Are Not the
39 Same Thing: Evidence from Neuroimaging and Neurological Patients,” *Annals
40 of the New York Academy of Science* 1369, no. 1 (2016): 132–53; Steven Pinker,
The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature (New York: Penguin Books,
2002), 207–13; Michael Siegel, Rosemary Varley, and Stephen C. Want, “Mind

over Grammar: Reasoning in Aphasia and Development,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 5 (2001): 296–301; Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), ch. 3.

28. On Wang Bi’s use of “interlocking parallel style,” which has a similar effect as a dialectic method, see Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator*.

29. See Franklin Perkins’s chapter in this volume for an exploration of the Zhuangist art of forgetting.

30. Livia Kohn, *Sitting in Oblivion: The Heart of Daoist Meditation* (Dunedin, FL: Three Pines Press, 2010), 1.

31. We may say that Wang Bi’s forgetting differs from the meditational “sitting in oblivion” insofar as it is an intentional activity that does not involve an ultimate suspension of consciousness. However, interpretations of *zuo wang* vary.

32. Tang Junyi 唐君毅, *Zhongguo zhexue yuannun: yuandao pian* 中國哲學原論：原道篇 (Hong Kong: Xinya yanjiusuo, 1973), 2.885. Cited by Richard Lynn, “Wang Bi and *Xuanxue*,” in *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*, ed. Liu Xiaogan (New York: Springer, 2016), 389.

33. This dichotomy has been explored by Jane Geaney, *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002); Geaney, *Language as Bodily Practice*.

34. On Yang Xiong, see Michael Nylan, *Yang Xiong and the Pleasures of Reading and Classical Learning in China* (New Haven: CT: American Oriental Society, 2011).

35. *Wang* 亡 either refers to odes that had music and titles but no lyrics, or odes that originally had lyrics which were lost in transmission. The latter is the preferred theory for most scholars and favored by Shu Xi himself. Zhao Jing 趙婧, *Lun shu xi de shijing xue ji qi buwangshi chuanguo* 論東哲的詩經學及其補亡詩創作, *Xinyang shifan xueyuan xuebao* 35, no. 2 (2015): 127–30; Tom Mazanec, “Righting, Riting, and Rewriting the *Book of Odes (Shijing)*: On ‘Filling Out the Missing Odes’ by Shu Xi,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 40 (2018): 5–32.

36. Reference and translation in Mazanec, “Righting, Riting, and Rewriting,” 12.