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Pre-Qin Daoist Reflections on the *Xianneng*

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Abstract

In the pre-Qin era, the *xianneng* 賢能 [those of virtue and talent] were a commonly discussed topic, on which every school of thought had its own views. Daoist discussions on the *xianneng* sometimes reflected strong aversion and rejection, yet at other times gave them abundant praise and approval. Because of uncertainty on the universality of moral principles, on the limitations of one's individual ability, and on the effectiveness of political actions, views in the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 on the *xianneng* saving society were skeptical in nature, sometimes even taking a mocking tone. Scholars of the Huang-Lao tradition had realized the limitations of individual ability and hoped that the greatest level of political benefit could be attained. Consequently, under the premise of safeguarding monarchical authority, fully displaying the skills and talents of all kinds of sages (imperial teachers and virtuous officials) through the practice of *wuwei* 無為 [inaction], and the highest leaders' respect for virtue became the main direction in the Huang-Lao understanding of the *xianneng*. This tendency has much in common with the Legalist school of thought.

Keywords

Daoism – Huang-Lao – *Laozi* – *xianneng* – *Zhuangzi*

1 Introduction

The term “those of virtue and talent” [*xianneng* 賢能] generally refers to leaders who are both morally strong and highly talented. Without a doubt, following the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period

[770-221 BCE], political meritocracy [*xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治]¹ became an important part of China's political culture. As to its substance, political meritocracy was seen as a political concept that could be applied to a monarch just as well as a minister. If applied to a monarch, it often was characterized by striving for the ideal, calling for those who possessed both skills and integrity to occupy the highest political positions. In earlier times, teachings on the abdication of a once-popular monarch referred to this kind of situation and were mostly popular with Confucians and Mohists. However, after the abdication of King Kuai of Yan in 316 BCE these ideals came under real and ruthless attack and were no longer widely popular.

The concept of *xianneng* was used by the monarchy to set requirements for moral character and ministerial competence, prerequisites extremely common and, at the same time, easily carried out. During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, the social structure underwent major transformations, intense changes occurred in the political system, and competition among states was fierce. Under the principle of not challenging any authority higher than the monarch, the inspection, discovery, promotion, and use of various talented people became a matter of the utmost importance. No household could avoid this, and the schools of thought had some differences over how they interpreted "virtue" and "talent." Relatively speaking, Confucians valued virtue most. The emphasis of early Confucian thought on virtue was often due to the fear that someone from a humble social background might break into aristocratic circles and gain recognition, regardless of whether he had virtue, so even true talent still needed to be "packaged" in virtue.² Along with their emphasis on virtue, Confucians also often took painstaking care to emphasize

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- 1 In recent years, because of the widespread popularization of this idea by the Canadian political scientist Daniel Bell, "political meritocracy" is seen as a distinguishing characteristic of the politics of ancient China. Bell's main point is that the key characteristics of the politics of ancient China were "having superior ability and virtue" and "having ability and integrity." Today, political meritocracy suits China better than a democratic electoral system. Wu Wanwei has translated Bell's work *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* 賢能政治：為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國 (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016). Although this article also uses the concept of "political meritocracy," it does not discuss its influence on, or its function in, the present-day political system. I also believe that political meritocracy is not an independent political pattern: any political system can end up practicing "political meritocracy." In the pre-Qin era, most political doctrines except for some Daoist thought highlighted the necessity of promoting and assigning high-ranking positions to the "talented and virtuous," in order to promote and put their respective political views into practice.
 - 2 There are many accounts of this in the *Zuo Commentary* [*Zuo zhuan* 左傳] and the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語]. For a discussion of this, see Wang Guoliang 王國良, "Rujia xian-neng zhengzhi sixiang yu zhongguo xianneng tuiju zhidu de fazhan 儒家賢能政治思

the importance of selfless commitment to the public interest without seeking reward. For example, the chapter “Conduct of the Scholar” [*Ru xing* 儒行] in the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記] says:

The scholar recommends members of his own family [for public service], without shrinking from doing so because of their kinship, and proposes others beyond it without regard to their being at enmity with him; he estimates men’s merits, and takes into consideration all their services, selecting those of virtue and ability, and putting them forward, without expecting any recompense from them; the ruler thus obtains what he wishes, and if benefit results to the state, the scholar does not seek riches or honours for himself—such is he in promoting the employment of the worthy and bringing forward the able.³

Even though the idea of “elevating the worthy” [*shang xian* 尚賢] in Mohist thought also attaches importance to “virtue,” the main emphasis was on using true talent to break through limitations imposed by order of succession and appointment by favoritism, so as to allow low-ranking talented and virtuous people to reach important positions, without, however, avoiding the seeking of benefits, and emphasized the importance of corresponding esteem and remuneration. “Elevating the Worthy I” [*Shangxian shang* 尚賢上] says:

The sage kings of ancient times, in the conduct of government, gave precedence to virtue and exalted worthiness so, although someone might be a farmer, or a craftsman, or a merchant, if he had ability then they promoted him, conferring on him high rank, giving him a generous salary, entrusting him with important matters, and providing him with executive power.... Thus, officials were not necessarily assured of permanent nobility, and ordinary people were not necessarily lowly for their whole lives. Those with ability were advanced. Those without ability were demoted.⁴

想與中國賢能推舉制度的發展 [Confucian Thought on Political Meritocracy and the Development of a Meritocratic Selection System for Office], *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 [*Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*], no. 3 (2013).

3 *Liji*—Ruxing. 禮記•儒行. Translation from the Chinese by James Legge, *The Book of Rites (Li Ji): English-Chinese Version* (Washington [DC]: Intercultural Press, 2013), 297.

4 *Mozi*—Shangxian shang. 墨子•尚賢上. Translation from the Chinese by Ian Johnston, “Exalting Worthiness I,” in *The Mozi: A Complete Translation* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), 59.

The Legalists main point was that the virtuous should not challenge the centralization of monarchic power. Therefore, Shen Dao wrote: “Establishing a lord and yet still revering the worthies leads to conflict between worthies and lords, and the chaos of this is greater than if there were no lord at all.”⁵ If the talented and virtuous fuel dissension and discord, they must be firmly repressed. As the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 says: “He who manages to get clothing and food without working for [magistrates] is called an able man, and he who wins esteem without having achieved any merit in battle is called a worthy man. But the deeds of such able and worthy men actually weaken the army and bring waste to the land.”⁶ At the same time, Legalists believed that virtue was neither trustworthy nor reliable, and that a monarch should only make use of people’s tendency to follow profit while avoiding harm, use the method of reward and punishment to make the most of things, and allow the talents of all kinds of sages to fully develop. As the *Han Feizi* says: “Ministers exert their utmost strength to comply with the ruler’s need; the ruler confers ranks and emoluments to comply with the minister’s desires. Therefore, the relationship of ruler and minister is not as intimate as the bond of father and son; rather, it is an outcome of mutual calculations.”⁷ This quotation points out that the relationship between a ruler and a minister is, in fact, based on business, trade, and reciprocal scheming. Therefore, in Legalist thought “virtue” and “ability” often both stand for ability, without necessarily being connected to virtue.

How about Daoists, then, who faced the same social reality and were just as keen to come up with a sound strategy to keep the country safe; surely, they could not avoid the topic of the *xianneng*—so how did they approach it? We found out that, with regard to *xianneng*, Daoist thought sometimes expressed strong aversion and denial and yet at other times showed abundant praise and approval. How could this kind of contrast take root in the logic of Daoist ideology? Few scholars have paid attention to this, and it is therefore an issue worth discussing in more depth.

5 Shenzi—Yiwen. 慎子·逸文. This and all translations from the Chinese of quotations from the *Shenzi* are by Eirik Lang Harris, *The Shenzi Fragments: A Philosophical Analysis and Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 124.

6 Hanfeizi—Wudu. 韓非子·五蠹. Translation from the Chinese by Burton Watson, *Han Feizi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 105.

7 Hanfeizi—Nanyi. 韓非子·難一. W.K. Liao, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu: A Classic of Chinese Legalism* (London: Probsthain, 1959), 146.

2 Distrust in, and Refusal of, *Xianneng* in the Lao-Zhuang Tradition

Considering Laozi the originator of Daoist thought, we note that the *Daodejing* 道德經 does not make direct use of the word *xianneng* and does not juxtapose *xian* and *neng*, and yet the book evidently does pay attention to this issue and contains discussions about it. In chapter 3, for example, it bluntly puts forward the idea of not valuing or employing the virtuous [*bushangxian* 不尚賢]:

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.⁸

Here the concept of *bushangxian* is not necessarily aimed directly in opposition to the Mohist idea of *shangxian* 尚賢, because the latter is likely to have been a popular topic earlier or at that time, only the Mohists had made it one of their key views. Looking at what follows, “not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep people from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder” and “the sage, in the exercise of his government ... constantly tries to keep people without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it,”⁹ we note that these men who “have knowledge” and are therefore able to stir people’s feelings and desires and cause rivalry are in fact what *xian* stands for.

According to Laozi, social unrest stems mainly from a troubled relationship between the ruler and the people, the main cause of disorder being the ruler’s excessive avarice and overabundant “agency” [*youwei* 有為]. Laozi therefore suggests that the ruler yield and reach out to people—that is, turn his control into a fresh dose of vitality and energy among the people. Therefore, in his reflections on the correct way to address social unrest, Laozi does not rely on the “virtuous” and on the intelligence of the “wise” in seeking a good strategy to save society; in his view, this would have been a desperate choice of action, treating the symptoms rather than the disease; particularly after these world-saving remedies no longer had any effect, it was better to give them up and not use them. In resolving or mitigating a contradiction, the agency of the wise

⁸ Translations from the Chinese of this and all quotes from the *Daodejing* by James Legge, *Tao Te Ching: The Way and Its Virtue* (Miami, FL: Bailey Street Press, 2017), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*

and the virtuous was only likely to exacerbate the problem: better to subtract it than to add it. Inaction [*wuwei* 無為] and anti-intellectualism [*fanzhi* 反智] are this kind of subtraction: they cause people to be fully ignorant and free of desire, and they eliminate the core of all disputes. Only these ideas pave the way to an ultimate solution.

Following this train of thought, the *Daodejing* contains a considerable amount of discussion that opposes the employment of the *xianneng*. For example, Laozi describes the entire evolution of human civilization as a history of moral degeneration. We therefore find statements such as:

When the Great Dao [Way or Method] ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue. Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy. When harmony no longer prevailed throughout the six kinships, filial sons found their manifestation; when the states and clans fell into disorder, loyal ministers appeared.¹⁰

To Laozi, the concepts of benevolence and righteousness [*renyi* 仁義], knowledge and skill [*huizhi* 慧智], filial piety and parental affection [*xiaoci* 孝慈], and loyal ministers [*zhongchen* 忠臣] advocated by the virtuous are clearly not a sign of civilization making progress but, rather, the result of cultural backwardness. Not only would the use of these ideas to save humanity not return humankind to a true and good society, but it would only cause more chaos. “Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy”¹¹ means that widespread hypocrisy and falseness are, in fact, an inevitable consequence of human intelligence.

Laozi was not necessarily unaware of the fact that wisdom could bring convenience and benefits; his use of extreme language here is meant to emphasize that wisdom brings people many more afflictions than advantages. At the same time, he states that “simple views, and courses plain and true, would selfishness end and many lusts eschew.”¹² The ultimate solution lies in remaining simple, with few desires. Of course, Laozi does not actually mean to cut off people’s desires and instincts; he only wants people to restrain their desires to

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ This phrase, however, does not appear in the *Guodian Daodejing*, a version reproduced in the mid-Warring States period [475–221 BCE]. Only in the early Han Mawangdui version does the statement appear: “Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy.”

¹² James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1891), 62.

a reasonable level, to “fill their bellies, ... and strengthen their bones,”¹³ “think their [coarse] food sweet; their [plain] clothes beautiful; their [poor] dwellings places of rest; and their common [simple] ways sources of enjoyment.”¹⁴ For Laozi, this is not unachievable, as indicated by the following:

the sage, in the exercise of his government, empties their minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones. He constantly [tries to] keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it.¹⁵

The most outstanding politics involves weakening and limiting politics driven by feelings and ambition, keeping those who have knowledge from acting on it, and not allowing the virtuous with strong willpower to find use for their skills. Chapter 65 says that “governing the state by wisdom” is a calamity; rather, “he who does not try to do so” is a blessing for the state. The ancient rulers at the time were strong; not only did they not encourage people to become virtuous and talented, but they even preferred stupidity. Because Laozi says “[there is] no calamity greater than to be discontented with one’s lot; no fault greater than the wish to acquire,”¹⁶ any wondrous thing that encourages indulgence in material desire and weaken natural instincts, any opinionated moral sermon, and any resourceful skill that fuels discontent are all misfortunes that intensify contradictions in society. Only by abandoning ideas such as benevolence and righteousness and other such so-called moral standards and eliminating any tendency toward profiteering and argument can humanity achieve a truly meaningful rescue. In other words, returning to the perfect Great Way is the only way out for humanity.

In short, judging from Laozi’s logic, knowledge, skills, moral standards, fame, and status are the true cause of misfortune, the actual source of evil. Therefore, if no cause of misfortune and no source of evil exist, then there is no reason for the praise or even the existence of the virtuous, who are carriers of knowledge, skills, moral standards, fame, and status. That is why Laozi says, “the ruling sage acts without claiming the results as his; he achieves his merit and does not rest arrogantly in it: he does not wish to display his superiority.”¹⁷ Before the people,

13 Ibid., 49.

14 Ibid., 122.

15 James Legge, *Tao Te Ching*, 15.

16 James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 89.

17 Ibid., 119.

he does not pose as a ruler but in all respects focuses on rulers who exercise restraint and are ready to compromise; even though he may have real wisdom and talent, he intentionally does not reveal them to avoid causing unnecessary unrest: this is what is called “not displaying his virtue.”

Later Daoist scholars such as Zhuangzi adopted Laozi’s painstaking stance against wisdom and virtue. Like Laozi, Zhuangzi believed that after the entire perfect Great Way was destroyed and disappeared, all sorts of doctrines and methods appeared to address all kinds of problems and controversies, along with the wise and virtuous who advocated them. However, the farther they were from the Great Way, the weaker the function and effectiveness of such teachings and methods were. As recounted in the chapter “The World” [*Tianxia* 天下] in the *Zhuangzi* on the circumstances of the destruction of the Way:

There ensued great disorder in the world, and sages and worthies no longer shed their light on it. The Dao and its characteristics ceased to be regarded as uniform. Many in different places got one glimpse of it, and plumed themselves on possessing it as a whole. They might be compared to the ear, the eye, the nose, or the mouth. Each sense has its own faculty, but their different faculties cannot be interchanged. So it was with the many branches of the various schools. Each had its peculiar excellence, and there was the time for its use; nevertheless, no one covered or extended over the whole range of truth. The case was that of the scholar of a corner who passes his judgment on all the beauty in heaven and earth, discerns the principles that underlie all things, and attempts to estimate the success achieved by the ancients. Seldom can one embrace all the beauty in heaven and earth or rightly estimate the ways of the spiritual and intelligent; and thus it was that the Dao, which inwardly forms the sage and externally the king, became obscured and lost its clarity, became repressed and failed to develop. Everyone in the world did whatever he wished and was a rule unto himself. Alas! The various schools held on their several ways and could not come back to the same point or agree. The students of that later age unfortunately did not see the undivided purity of heaven and earth and the great scheme of truth held by the ancients. The system of the Dao was about to be torn into fragments all under the sky.¹⁸

18 *Zhuangzi*—*Tianxia*. 莊子•天下. Translation from the Chinese of this and all quotes from James Legge, trans. *Zhuangzi* (USA: Create Space Independent Publishing, 2015), 309.

This is to say that people in the world are all opinionated, insistent on their views, and yet “no one covered or extended over the whole range of truth” and mastered the thought and vision of the overall situation, therefore no one is able to evaluate the situation as a whole and “pass his judgment on all the beauty in heaven and earth, discriminate the principles that underlie all things, and attempt to estimate the success arrived at by the ancients.” He is nothing more than a person of limited talent. This inevitably leads to everyone doing “whatever they wish and be a rule unto themselves” with their theories resembling the ear, the eye, the nose, or the mouth or “many branches of various schools.” Although they have some brightness, some growth, and some use, they still cannot see “the undivided purity of heaven and earth, and the great scheme of truth held by the ancients.” Therefore they cannot be called “those not separate from the primal source,” “those not separate from the essential nature,” and those “not separated from the real truth”: heavenly men, spirit-like men, and perfect men. I need to point out that the “sages and worthies” [*xiansheng* 賢聖] that we encounter here are people who, in Zhuangzi’s view, could master “the Dao, which inwardly forms the sage and externally the king,” and clearly not those with limited talent.

Only after discussing the decline of the Way in the chapter “The Way of Heaven” [*Tiandao* 天道],¹⁹ do we come across “benevolence and righteousness,” “objects and their names,” and the “five variations” and “nine variations” of “rewards and penalties.” Because in the eyes of common people, the virtuous who could master these concepts are all “speakers who know the instruments of government, but do not know the method of it, are fit to be used as an instrument in the world, but not fit to use others as their instruments”: they are sophists, men of small ideas, whose theories can merely “serve their superiors,” yet “it is not by them that those superiors nourish the world.”

The chapter “Letting [It] Be, and Exercising Forbearance” [*Zaiyou* 在宥] discusses the reasons that “abolishing sageness and casting away knowledge will bring the world to a state of great order.”²⁰ The most talented and virtuous among rulers—the Yellow Emperor, Emperor Yao, and Emperor Shun, known as the Three Sovereigns and seen by everyone as exemplary sages who created benevolence and righteousness and formulated laws—were ruthlessly mocked by Confucian and Mohist thinkers. Zhuangzi points out that if the world is in turmoil and increasingly chaotic, it is because Confucian and Mohist scholars committed a crime against the Three Sovereigns, “meddling

19 *Zhuangzi*—*Tiandao*. 莊子•天道. James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 330.

20 *Zhuangzi*—*Zaiyou*. 莊子•在宥. *Ibid.*, 297.

with and disturbing [their] minds,”²¹ disturbing and harassing initially peaceful and calm minds, so the stronger their competence, the more brilliant their methods, and the more chaotic society becomes.

In the present age those who have been put to death in various ways lie thick as if pillowed on each other; those who are wearing the cangue press on each other on the roads; those who are suffering the bastinado can see each other all over the land. And now the Confucians and the Mohists begin to stand, on tiptoe and with bare arms, among the fettered and manacled crowd! Ah! Extreme is their shamelessness, and their failure to see the disgrace!²²

This intense chapter accuses Confucians and Mohists of being extremely shameless people who are only calculating the degree of seriousness of every type of punishment in tragic times without providing any way to ease people's woes. Therefore, sageness and wisdom and benevolence and righteousness are just the same as instruments of torture, but in people's eyes the greatly able and virtuous Zeng and Shi are no more than the first signs of characters such as Tyrant Jie and Robber Zhi. The chapter “Geng-sang chu 庚桑楚” even goes so far as to say: “if you raise the men of talent to office, you will create disorder; making the people strive with one another for promotion; if you employ men for their wisdom, the people will rob one another.”²³ Therefore, only “abolishing sageness and casting away knowledge” can “bring the world to a state of great order.”

At the same time, Zhuangzi proves from another point of view why talent and virtue should not be trusted or relied on. Laozi's thought places stronger emphasis on the importance of the Way in observing the world and reflecting on problems and on the decisive role and guiding function of the “Way” and the “universe” in the relationship between the Way and living beings and that between the universe and humankind. But Zhuangzi highlights the need to observe the world and reflect on problems from the point of view of living beings and humankind. He explores how mankind can continue to exist appropriately, with dignity and perhaps even poetry. Zhuangzi realized that, if people want to secure such an existence, they first have to clarify one crucial prerequisite, namely, that compared to the Great Way and the universe, they

21 *Zhuangzi*—Zaiyou. James Legge, *Zhuangzi*, 91.

22 *Ibid.*, 91-92.

23 *Zhuangzi*—Gengsangchu. 莊子•庚桑楚. *Ibid.*, 210.

were extremely negligible in size, their function was extremely limited, their wisdom was not boundless, and their political actions were not omnipotent.

The reasons why society moves closer and closer to chaos and cannot be saved are decided by the nature of all living things. Compared to the perfection, continuity, infinity, and completeness of the Great Way, living things can only be relative, temporary, limited, and divided, and humans, which are among those living things, are just as negligible and pitiable. As the chapter “Cultivating a Healthy Life” [*Yang sheng zhu* 養生主] states, “there is a limit to our life, but to knowledge there is no limit. With what is limited to pursue after what is unlimited is a perilous thing; and when, knowing this, we still seek the increase of our knowledge, the peril cannot be averted.”²⁴

First, it is ridiculous to arrogantly and conceitedly believe that it is possible to save the world by means of one’s own strength without being aware of one’s physical irrelevance and the limitations of intelligence and talent. Second, precisely because all living things, including humans, have some limitations and unfinished deeds—if not *yin* then *yang*, if not male then female, if not large then small, if not valuable then worthless—and are unable to reach farther than the two poles, humans can only dwell in specific places, occupy certain positions, obtain limited knowledge, and have a limited function. Even so, people still easily believe their own wisdom to be absolute and their talent to be inexhaustible. In “The Adjustment of Controversies” [*Qiwu lun* 齊物論], Zhuangzi offered a vivid discussion and critique of people’s unhealthy tendency to become self-important. People always believe that if this is right, then that is wrong—in other words, “that view involves both a right and a wrong; and this view involves also a right and a wrong,”²⁵ which causes everyone to rely on his own opinion and maintain his own views, never yielding and endlessly arguing. “So it is that we have the contention between the Confucians and the Mohists, with one side affirming what the other denies, and vice versa.”²⁶ According to Zhuangzi, these seemingly blind assumptions merely cover a certain aspect of the Great Way, but if a concept or value is defended tenaciously or promoted stubbornly, they will hide from reality or even cause greater chaos. Therefore, those sages, distinguished men, and capable ministers pleased with themselves are endlessly bragging about wisdom, talent, method, and values that are not in any way universally applicable. As per “The Floods of Autumn” [*Qishui* 秋水], “when we look at them in the light of the Way, they are neither noble nor mean. Looking at them in themselves, each thinks itself noble and despises

24 *Zhuangzi*—Yangshengzhu. 莊子•養生主. Ibid., 27.

25 *Zhuangzi*—Qiwulun. 莊子•齊物論. James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 183.

26 Ibid., 182.

others. Looking at them in the light of common opinion, their being noble or mean does not depend on themselves.”²⁷ From the standpoint of the Way, right and wrong, expensive and cheap, superior and inferior, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, possibility and correctness are all opposites, and no one’s opinion can become the perfect truth.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi tells people that any kind of theory or method has both strong and weak points, to the point that its weaknesses might even be determined by its strengths. In the words of *Lie Yukou* 列禦寇, “knowledge seeking to reach to all that is external; bold movement producing many resentments; benevolence and righteousness leading to many requisitions”;²⁸ people who have technical skills, intelligence, and talent will come to harm because of excessive harassment from living beings. Heroic and active people will suffer from hatred because of this; those who are excessively benevolent and righteous, just as some people will obtain happiness, will have to bear the blame of those who have not. This is why Zhuangzi says: “understanding all knowledge so as to possess an approach to it.”²⁹ Those only able to master a certain kind of knowledge and talent and yet unable to grasp the overall situation and truly understand the Great Way may well be those skilled and respected sages, and yet they are not worth a mention.

Finally, Zhuangzi soberly realizes that, as brilliant as a sage may be, it is still very difficult for him to fully retreat from the entanglement of social connections and the plots of political rights. “Formerly, Lung-feng was beheaded; Pi-kan had his heart torn out; Chang Hong was ripped open; and Zi-xu was reduced to pulp. Worthy as those four men were, they did not escape such dreadful deaths.”³⁰ As excellent as a sage may be, it is very difficult for him to preserve his strength forever without being buffeted by destiny.

Consequently, Zhuangzi mercilessly bursts the beautiful bubble of the *xian-neng*, the “talented and virtuous,” to the point of taking a stance completely opposed to that of Mohists and Confucians: “in the age of perfect virtue they attached no value to wisdom, nor employed men of ability.”³¹ If the wise were valued, there would be seeking of profits, and influence by values, and it would become impossible to shake off the control of destiny and enter the endless spiritual realm.

27 *Zhuangzi*—*Qiushui*. 莊子·秋水. Ibid., 379.

28 *Zhuangzi*—*Lie Yukou*. 莊子·列禦寇. Ibid., 211.

29 Ibid.

30 *Zhuangzi*—*Qujie*. 莊子·胠篋. Ibid., 283.

31 *Zhuangzi*—*Tiandi*. 莊子·天地. James Legge, *Zhuangzi*, 111.

In short, according to the Lao-Zhuang tradition, the moral principles set down by the talented and virtuous are by no means universal, the individual talents they embody are by no means unlimited, and the political conduct they encourage is certainly not always effective. Therefore, those with talent and virtue are not almighty; in fact, one must distrust them and be on guard against their wisdom and ability, and should even turn away from it and criticize it.

3 Praise for, and Approval of, *Xianneng* in the Huang-Lao Tradition

Huang-Lao Daoism prospered during the Warring States, Qin, and Han eras. It focused on merging Laozi's and the Yellow Emperor's ideology on the Way, on supplying practical politics with concrete, realistic guidance, and on striving to promote political views that are applicable anywhere at any time and transcend the relationship between mankind and heaven.³² Therefore, even though it likewise held the Way in great esteem, the Huang-Lao tradition clearly had major differences with the Lao-Zhuang tradition. One was detached from the world, and the other was rooted in it; one dissected, the other constructed; one criticized, the other built; one opposed wisdom, the other used wisdom; one kept away from politics, and the other engaged in politics. Since it was a political ideology, Huang-Lao thought had to rely on people of talent and virtue to be carried out, and therefore could not reject the talented and virtuous as the Lao-Zhuang tradition did, let alone consider them initiators of turmoil. On the contrary, why sages were needed, what kind of sages were needed, and how to make use of them were important elements of Huang-Lao political thought.

First, why are the talented and virtuous needed, and what were the necessity and the logic of their existence? Huang-Lao thinkers had a specific explanation of that. As indicated by statements such as “since the ruler’s wisdom and talents are not sufficient to spread his splendour across lands and seas, he is surrounded by high ministers who assist him”³³ and “the virtue of Heaven and Earth, the powers of the Sage, and the uses of the myriad things in Creation,

32 For a basic definition of Huang-Lao Daoism, its function, and its significance, see the introductory remarks in Cao Feng 曹峰, *Jinnian chutu huanglao sixiang wenxian yanjiu* 近年出土黄老思想文献研究 [Studies on Recently Discovered Huang-Lao Literatures] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015).

33 *Huainanzi—Xiuwu*. 淮南子·修務. Wang Liqi 王利器, *Wenzi shuyi* 文子疏義 [Commentary on *Wenzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2000), 372.

are not perfect in every direction,”³⁴ Huang-Lao scholars realized that, other than the universal and complete Great Way, even if the universe and the sages were not perfect in every way, if the competence of sages had its strong and weak points and their wisdom had its limits, it was necessary to provide them with supplementary assistance, and the best rulers would inevitably be good at using the wisdom of others. This, of course, implies an important prerequisite, namely, that Huang-Lao scholars would respect and protect the highest ruler, but he also had to be a wise man who experiences the Way and adheres to it.

Second, unlike Zhuangzi, Huang-Lao thought did not merely focus on individual freedom; there had to be arrangements and a role for the talented and virtuous. Huang-Lao scholars thought that all political affairs in the world had to follow and adhere to the example of the Way: not only did politics have to adjust to the pace of the Way, but political systems and patterns also had to follow the tempo of natural events. The first section of the chapter “Sixteen Classics” [*Shiliu jing* 十六經] in “Establishing the Mandate” [*Liming* 立命], in *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經, describes how when the Yellow Emperor became a forefather with “a mandate from Heaven, a position on earth, and fame as a person,”³⁵ he first emphasized the three highest ranks for officials, that is, the importance of setting up a political system and making plans for the talented and virtuous. Then, he stressed the importance of “counting days, of the calendar month, of calculating age, so as to move along with the pace of the sun and moon,”³⁶ that is, imitating and following the motion, pace, and order of the universe. Consequently, as the system of heaven is centered on the polar star and surrounded by countless stars, the politics of people inevitably revolve around the monarch, with the talented and virtuous surrounding him as a support mechanism. The chapter “The Way’s Governance” [*Daoduan* 道端] in the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 says: “Heaven is how the myriad beings got established; Earth is how the myriad beings got security. Thus, heaven settles them; earth places them; time develops them; things receive them. the sage models them.”³⁷

However, in the eyes of Huang-Lao scholars, this shaping, and following of, the Way is multilayered. A sentence in the “Nine Rulers” [*Jiuzhu* 九主] of

34 *Liezi*—Tianrui. 列子•天瑞. Yan Beiming 嚴北溟 and Yan Jie 嚴捷, *Liezi yizhu* 列子譯注 [*Translation and Commentary on the Liezi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2016), 6-7.

35 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Huangdi sijing jinzhu jinyi* 皇帝四經今注今譯 [*Modern Commentary and Translation on Huangdi Sijing*] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016), 196.

36 *Ibid.*, 199.

37 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. 鶡冠子•道端. Translations from the Chinese of the *Heguanzi* are by Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History: Linking Religion to Philosophy in Early China* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2013), 113.

the Mawangdui Silk Texts [*Mawangdui boshu* 馬王堆帛書] says: “the ruler governs heaven, his aides govern the earth, his ministers govern the four seasons, his people govern all living things,”³⁸ where clearly the progression “people—ministers—aides—ruler” is well matched with that of “all living things—the four seasons—the earth—heaven.” The chapter “The Circularity of the Way” [*Huandao* 圜道] in the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* [*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋] says: “the Way of Heaven is circular and the Way of earth is square. The sage-king models himself after them to establish the high and the low.... The ruler holds to the circular; the ministers take their places in the square. When the square and the circular are not interchanged, the state flourishes.”³⁹ Further, the chapter “Proper Conduct and Assessing the Situation” [*Xing lun* 行論] says, “he who follows the Way of heaven will become monarch, and he who follows the Way of earth will simply become an official.”⁴⁰ This indicates that all kinds of political concerns among people reflect all kinds of concerns in the world. Like all kinds of concerns in the world, political concerns among people must present themselves as complementary and synchronized. Along with such views, Huang-Lao Daoists had quite a number of special strategies when it came to talent and virtue in politics, as if the appearance of all these sages was not meant to settle existing political problems and conflicts but, rather, to harmonize with the order of the universe. As chapter “Daoduan” in the *Heguanzi* tells us,

consequently, the first kings in appointing knights promoted the worthy and employed the able. They did not pander to their generation. Humane men sit on the left and east, loyal ministers sit in front and south, righteous ministers sit on the right and west, the sage sits in the rear and north. The left makes a law of humane benevolence, so spring generates and reproduces. The front makes a law of loyalty, so summer’s achievements stand. The right makes a law of righteousness, then autumn completes

38 Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬, *Mawangdui hanmu boshu huangdishu jianzheng* 馬王堆漢墓帛書<黃帝書>箋證 [Commentary on the Mawangdui Han Dynasty Silk Manuscripts of Huangdishu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2004), 253.

39 *Lüshichunqiu—Huandao*. 呂氏春秋•圜道. Translation from the Chinese by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: Lüshi Chunqiu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 109-110.

40 *Lüshichunqiu—Xinglun*. 呂氏春秋•行論. Zhang Shuangli 張雙棣 et al., *Lüshi Chunqiu yizhu* 呂氏春秋譯注 [Translation and Commentary on Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals] (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1986), 735.

the harvest. The rear makes a law of sagacity, then winter shuts down and stores.... these four are what the ruler takes from outside.⁴¹

Here, the Four Great Officers [Sidafu 四大夫] are a rank entirely made up; however, to Huang-Lao scholars, scrupulously abiding by the principle of “from the Way to the affairs of this world,” creating it was a necessary measure. Just as the chapter *Weiming* 微明 in the *Wenzi* 文子 divides humanity into twenty-five types of people according to the regular patterns of the five elements, it covers not only all kinds of ranks but, at the same time, all kinds of needs.

In the past, Master Zhonghuang said: “Heaven has five directions, Earth has five phases, music has five notes, food has five flavors, color has five primary hues and man has five dispositions. Between heaven and earth there are twenty-five types of people. The highest five are the numinous man, the true man, the man of the Way, the accomplished man and the sagely man. The next five are the virtuous man, the worthy man, the wise man, the capable man, and the eloquent man. The intermediate five are the impartial man, the loyal man, the trustworthy man, the righteous man, and the ritual man. The next five are the knight, the artisan, the hunter, the farmer, and the merchant. The lowest five are the layman, the servant, the fool, the boor, and the petty man. The top five compare to the bottom five as human beings to cows and horses. The sagely man looks with his eyes, listens with his ears, speaks with his mouth, and walks with his feet. The true man sees clearly without looking, hears clearly without listening, he moves without walking, and is impartial without talking. Therefore, the true man has never made a mistake in the means by which the sagely man moves all under heaven, whereas the sagely man has never observed the means by which the wise man straightens those who follow worldly customs.⁴²

Even though the chapter “Weiming” attaches great importance to the “true ones” who, moving along with the Way, “see clearly without looking, hear clearly without listening, move without walking, and are impartial without talking,” the difference from the Lao-Zhuang school is that the “wise ones” who

41 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History*, 115.

42 *Wenzi*—Weiming. 文子•微明. Translation from the Chinese by Paul van Els, “The *Wenzi*: Creation and Manipulation of a Chinese Philosophical Text,” PhD diss., Leiden University, 2006, 181.

“straighten those who follow worldly customs,” even though in position they are inferior to “the true ones” [*zhenren* 真人] and “worthies” [*shengren* 聖人], here they are not targets of aversion but, rather, are considered to be those whom one should take seriously and rely on. They are seen as sages who “look with their eyes, listen with their ears, speak with their mouth, and walk with their feet”; on the one hand, they must rely on “true ones” and, on the other, they must also rely on “worthies.” The “true ones” do not interfere with the actions of the sage, and the sage does not interfere with the actions of the “worthies.” The world can be made up of these twenty-five kinds of people whose position in society and tasks have been clearly assigned and form a harmonious, rational structure.

Third, the existence of sages is, in fact, a sign of “inaction” or an outcome of “inaction.” Just as the chapter “Daoduan” says:

cold and warmth’s changes are not what one essence transforms. The Under-Heaven’s tasks are not what one man can alone know. The sea waters’ breadth and greatness do not look to one stream’s flow. Consequently, the illumined ruler, to rule his generation, urgently seeks men. He does not alone attempt it. Together with heaven and earth, he firmly establishes the four wefts to sustain the nation’s governance. Hooks and strings mutually extend, bits and halters mutually control. When divisions into threes and fives are both prepared, established positions will then be firm.⁴³

If an outstanding ruler wants to achieve great things, not only is it impossible for him to rely solely on a monarch’s own ability or that of a number of talented ministers but he must use all kinds of talented people and thereby obtain a political structure that is open to mutual cooperation, harmonious and restrained, and let all sages be exclusively at his service. To this aim, the monarch must practice inaction, or else inaction must become the certain outcome of the action of those who are talented. The chapter “Distinguishing Proper Functions” [*Fen zhi* 分職], in the *Lüshi chunqiu* discusses this in detail: “if the ruler is able to renounce his own wisdom, talent, and accomplishments, he will be able to bring fully into play his people’s wisdom, talent and accomplishments.”⁴⁴ Sima Tan’s discussion in “On the Fundamentals of the Six Schools” [*Lun liujia yaozhi* 論六家要旨] can be considered the manifesto of the

43 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History*, 114.

44 *Lüshi Chunqiu*—Fenzhi. 呂氏春秋•分職. Zhang Shuangli, *Lüshi Chunqiu yizhu*, 888.

Huang-Lao School; in it, his criticism of Confucians is that “the ruler will make strenuous efforts, and the ministers will be at leisure,”⁴⁵ the Confucians prefer to have the ruler be an example to everyone, and they therefore advocate the idea of “the ruler being the proper model of all in the world,”⁴⁶ the ruler has to do everything well, he has to strive for perfection, and also has to “lead, while the ministers adapt; be first, while the ministers follow.”⁴⁷ The outcome of this is “knowledgeable, yet incompetent; hard-working, yet unproductive,”⁴⁸ in fact, this is a statement mocking the Confucian ruler who is unable to effectively control and use the talented and virtuous, wearing himself out doing a thankless job.

What kind of *xianneng* should be seen as important and useful, then? The quotation above from the chapter “Weiming” in the *Wenzi* shows that the two kinds considered most important by the Huang-Lao school were, on the one hand, “the true ones” and, on the other, the “worthies.” “The true ones” could guide the monarch to experience spiritual enlightenment and thereby allow him to be a man who can see the overall situation and master natural laws. Characters of this kind are visibly rare in other schools of thought. I have noticed that writings of the Huang-Lao genre include a batch of special texts that can be called a “ruler’s teacher literature.” These texts usually take the form of a dialogue, many of which are between an ancient emperor or monarch, such as the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, or Emperors Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, and Yin 殷, King Wen of Zhou 周文王, King Wu of Zhou 周武王, and others and a character who has a deep understanding of the Way and of the affairs of the world, with a wide vision and an open mind, such as Qibo 岐伯, Peng Zu 彭祖, Yi Yin 伊尹, and Jiang Taigong 姜太公. The topics the ruler asks about are often the most significant and vital issues, for example, how to obtain sovereignty, and, once one gains military success, how to obtain a long period of peace and political stability, and how to remain in good health and live a long life. Teachers are often messengers for the Way: what they say appears to be veiled in mystery and yet definitely has a practical significance. Scriptures that were handed down, such as the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, the *Liu tao* 六韜, and *Da dai liji: Wuwang jianzuo* 大戴禮記·武王踐阼, and excavated texts such as Jiuzhu 九主 in the Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, the bamboo slip

45 Yao Nai 姚鼐, *Guwenzi leizuan* 古文辭類纂, annot. Hu Shiming 胡士明 and Li Zuotang 李祚唐 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2016), 5.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

manual *Shiwen* 十問 of the materials on medicine and nurturing life found at Mawangdui, as well as *Yin gaozong wen yu san shou* 殷高宗問于三壽 and *Tang zai chi men* 湯在啻門 from the Qinghua bamboo slips are all typical examples of “ruler’s teacher literature.” The existence of a large quantity of such documents shows that the sages so respected in Huang-Lao thought were none other than these “teacher” characters. Therefore, Huang-Lao thought divided people of virtue and talent according to whether they were more virtuous than the sovereign and treated them correspondingly.

For example, the chapter “Broad Selection” [*Boxuan* 博選] in the *Heguanzi* says: “Men have five types of arrivers: one is 100 times yourself, two is 10 times yourself, three is equal to yourself, four is servant, five is slaves.”⁴⁹ Lin Dongzi says that “the five types of arrivers” [*wuzhi* 五至] have broadened the scope for selecting worthies to include everyone in the country, no matter who they may be: as long as they have talent, they may serve the ruler without any exceptions.⁵⁰ Bearing in mind the aforementioned pattern of twenty-five kinds of people outlined in the chapter “Weiming” in the *Wenzi*, one certainly has such a feeling. However, Huang-Lao scholars still attach most importance to the ability to be one hundred or ten times more, and these sages, who are wiser than the ruler, they treat with extremely high esteem and ceremony. As the chapter “Boxuan” says:

Hence, if facing north, you serve them, then those hundred times yourself will arrive. If first to hasten and last to rest, first to ask and last to remain silent, then those ten times yourself will arrive. If you hasten when they do, then those equal to yourself will arrive. If you sit against a table or lean on your cane, and give orders by pointing and signaling, then servants will arrive. If you shout and scold, then slaves will arrive. Hence, an emperor dwells with teachers; a king dwells with friends; a perishing ruler dwells with servants.⁵¹

On “kings dwelling with friends,” the chapter “Aphorisms” [*Cheng* 稱] in the *Huangdi sijing* adopts similar rhetoric:

49 *Heguanzi*—Boxuan. 鶡冠子·博選. Translation from the Chinese by Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master (He Guan Zi): A Rhetorical Reading* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 74.

50 Lin Dongzi 林冬子, *Heguanzi yanjiu <鶡冠子>研究 [Research on Heguanzi]* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2016), 175.

51 *Heguanzi*—Boxuan. Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master*, 115.

A minister of an emperor is, in fact, a teacher of the emperor although he is a minister in name. A minister of a king is, in fact, a friend of the king although he is a minister in name. A minister of a powerful lord is, in fact, a guest of the lord although he is a minister in name. A minister of an imperiled ruler is, in fact, a hired laborer of the ruler although he is a minister in name. A minister of a ruler whose state is going to disintegrate is, in fact, a slave of the ruler although he is a minister in name.⁵²

It seems plausible that it was precisely such messengers of the Way who were able to become the emperor's teacher or the king's friend. "Five Phases" [*Wu xing* 五行] in the *Guanzi* 管子 says:

In ancient times, Huangdi obtained Chiyou and illuminated the way of Heaven; obtained Da Chang and arranged the resources of the earth; obtained She Long and arranged the eastern regions; obtained Zhu Rong and arranged the southern regions; obtained Da Feng and arranged the western regions; obtained Hou Tu and arranged the northern regions.⁵³

As to the second type of "worthies," in Huang-Lao thought they would have been bureaucrats by profession, familiar with political affairs and masters of some technical skill. These people were also an absolutely indispensable part of the national management apparatus. This touches upon the third issue in Huang-Lao politics of the virtuous: how to make use of, and have firm control of, the *xianneng*. The essentials of that are abiding by the natural world of all living creatures, making full use of their pluralism and complementary nature, controlling and selecting to promote all kinds of professionals as much as possible, and ensuring that you encourage their initiative, their enthusiasm, and their creativity, at the same time using advantages and ignoring disadvantages, mutually cooperating, and thereby "using all talents simultaneously," allowing complete freedom for these people's roles. The following quotation from the chapter "Nature" [*Ziran* 自然] in the *Wenzi* provides an excellent illustration of this:

52 Translation by Leo Chang and Yu Feng, *The Four Political Treatises of the Yellow Emperor: Original Mawangdui Texts with Complete English Translations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 47.

53 *Guanzi*—Wu xing. 管子•五行. This follows a translation found in a discussion of the "Wu Xing" in Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 131.

Among soldiers, there will be agile ones, heavy and slow ones, greedy ones, and honest ones; the characteristics of these four types of soldiers are all different, however on the battlefield none of them is indispensable. The agile ones are active, the heavy ones calm, the greedy ones eager to gain, and the honest ones not profit-thirsty. Therefore, the agile can be asked to charge and strike, but not defend; the heavy and slow are suited for defense, but not for assault; the greedy can be asked to storm and capture, but not to keep watch; the honest can keep watch, but are unsuitable for storming and capturing. Ones who keep their promises can maintain agreements and alliances; they cannot be asked to act spontaneously. These five types of men have opposite characters, however sages can still use them in a tolerant way.... If guarding just one corner means leaving out the rest of the world, and selecting one species means giving up all other beings, one is sure to achieve very little: the reach of one's administration will also certainly be very narrow.⁵⁴

This corresponds in meaning to the chapter “Integrating Customs” [*Qisu* 齊俗] in the *Huainanzi*: one needs to make the most of things, as well as use advantages and ignore disadvantages. In this way, he will no longer merely “guard just one corner, leaving out the rest of the world, and select one species, giving up all other beings.” The chapter “Ziran” in the *Wenzi* also says:

The sage handles matters strictly according to people's talents and their strong points. Those with a certain kind of merit will assume a corresponding level of official position, and those with a specific talent will be engaged in corresponding tasks. People whose energy surpasses that needed for their responsibilities will be capable of lifting the feeble, and those whose ability surpasses that needed to carry out their responsibilities will not feel in any difficulty carrying these out. The sage is good at using people's strong points, so that there are no redundant people, and no being's ability is discarded.⁵⁵

Here the emphasis is put on knowing to which posts people should be appointed so as to make full use of their ability. However, the phrase “those with a certain kind of merit will assume a corresponding level of official position, and those with a specific talent will be engaged in corresponding tasks” is identical in meaning to “the usual way of appointing a minister is that his

54 *Wenzi*—Ziran. 文子·自然. Wang Liqi, *Wenzi shuyi*, 349-350.

55 *Ibid.*, 367.

position shall not surpass his ability”⁵⁶ in the chapters *Jingfa* 經法 and *Daofa* 道法 in the *Huangdi sijing*. These ideas are not unlike the concepts of “the shape and the law being consistent” [*xing ming can tong* 形名參同] and “to be worthy of one’s name” [*ming shi xiang fu* 名實相副] advocated by the Legalists.

As to employing the *xianneng*, Huang-Lao thought also particularly emphasizes “acting for the other” [*zi wei* 自為] as opposed to “acting for oneself” [*wei wo* 為我]. “Acting for the other” uses the selfish, mercenary, and yet defensive mentality of the common people to bring fully into play their initiative and enthusiasm in striving for themselves. On the contrary, “acting for oneself,” whether for the monarch or for the benefit of the people, according to Huang-Lao thought is likely to descend to thirst for fame, compliments, and indulgence in exaggeration, and there is no way of truly mastering and using it. The *Shenzi*, for example, explores this in depth:

The Way of heaven is such that if you follow then you will be great, while if you alter then you will be insignificant. To follow means following the dispositions of people. Among people, no one fails to act for himself; if you [try to] alter that and cause them to act for you, then there will be none whom you can secure and employ. Therefore, the former kings did not use as ministers those who would not accept a salary, and they did not take as partners in difficult endeavors those whose salary was not large. In circumstances where people are not able to act for themselves, those above will not get any use out of them. Therefore, if you make use of people who act for their own benefit rather than those who act for your benefit, then there are none whom you cannot secure and employ. This is what is called following [their dispositions].⁵⁷

Therefore, those not “acting for others” and not accepting a salary were not appointed, and only those truly acting for themselves were allowed to commit their wisdom and talent. The psychology of these seemingly unfeeling but actually keen people of talent attracted all the more interest among the various views on the *xianneng* in the pre-Qin era.

The four chapters in the *Han Feizi* that are Huang-Lao oriented advocate that “the ruler is not side by side with his subjects,”⁵⁸ the ruler guides, his peo-

56 Chen Guying, *Huangdi sijing jinzhū jìnyì*, 25.

57 *Shenzi*—Yinxun. 慎子•因循. Xu Fuhong 許富宏, *Shenzi jijiao jizhu* 慎子集校集注 [*Collected Annotation and Commentary on Shenzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 24-25.

58 Zhang Jue 張覺, *Hanfeizi yizhu* 韓非子譯注 [*Translation and Commentary on Hanfeizi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubans, 2016), 67.

ple have skills, and “the ruler uses the way of forms and names to handle his ministers.” One of the prerequisites for the “way of forms and names” is the unity and coordination of the scope of one’s devotion and dedication, and the salary grade, along the same train of thought as the theory of “autonomy.”

So do Huang-Lao views on the *xianneng* attach any importance to some aspect of “virtue” [*de* 德], or do they not? The aforementioned chapter “Daoduan” (in the *Heguanzi*) demonstrates that the Four Great Officers each possess a moral quality, for example, benevolence, honesty, justice, and wisdom. These moral qualities are matched with the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Therefore, the “virtue” here is not one built on human affection; in fact, Huang-Lao thought believes that creating virtue on the basis of human affection is detrimental to the implementation of *xianneng* politics. As the chapter “Qi su” in the *Huainanzi* says:

In ancient times, Grand Duke Wang and Duke Dan of Zhou met with each other after receiving fiefs.

Grand Duke Wang asked the Duke of Zhou, “How will you govern Lu?”

The Duke of Zhou said, “I will exalt the noble and draw close to my kindred.”

The Grand Duke said, “Henceforward Lu will grow weaker!”

The Duke of Zhou asked the Grand Duke, “How will you govern Qi?”

The Grand Duke said, “I will raise up the worthy and promote those of merit.”

The Duke of Zhou said, “In later generations, there will certainly be a ruler who rises through assassination.”

Afterwards, Qi grew daily larger, to the point of becoming hegemon.

After twenty-four generations, the ducal house was replaced by the Tian clan.⁵⁹

Clearly, according to the *Huainanzi*, the strength of the state of Qi resulted from respecting the worthy, and the weakening of the state of Lu was the consequence of excessive attention to the etiquette and moral values of drawing close to one’s kindred. Therefore, considering that Huang-Lao views on the *xianneng* sometimes also emphasize virtue, it is mainly virtue matching all the living things in nature; more often, in fact, there is no connotation of virtue among the *xianneng*, and “virtue” and “talent” stand mainly for knowledge,

59 *Huainanzi*—Qi su. 淮南子·齊俗. John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 399.

skills, and competence and do not acclaim superficial moral character and moral integrity.

In conclusion, the Huang-Lao school greatly values the *xianneng*. The *Huangdi sijing*, for example, repeatedly highlights the issue of “the virtuous unworthy” [*xian buxiao* 賢不肖]; what is being stressed sometimes is that the virtuous cannot be seen as unworthy and, at other times, that virtue and unworthiness should each fulfill its function. The majority of chapters in the *Heguanzi* discuss how the *xianneng* should be selected and used: chapter 1 is called “Boxuan”, which goes to show how much the *xianneng* are esteemed in the *Heguanzi*. On a number of points, the views of the Huang-Lao school resemble those of the Legalists, for example, in that of painstakingly protecting monarchical authority, in that of emphasizing the use of natural people and human feeling, and in that of using reward and punishment as a way of having everyone respond to their role; also, in that of emphasizing that the monarch must draw support from the wisdom of the talented and must find comprehensive use for the talents of various kinds of people; and finally in that of not highlighting virtue, even rejecting it. It may be that the Huang-Lao school influenced the Legalists; it is also possible that the similarities in these two schools of thought caused them to develop comparable views on the *xianneng*.

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