

Preface

It has taken many years, and several other books, to finish this study of which the present book is the second of three separate volumes. In fact, the writing of this study took as many years as Wang Bi, its subject, lived, namely, twenty-three. Debts of gratitude for spiritual and material support and critical discussion have accumulated. The core ideas were developed in 1971 in Berkeley, where I spent a wonderful year as a Harkness Fellow. The first of many drafts of an extrapolative translation of the *Laozi* through the Wang Bi *Commentary* was begun then and continued in the following year in Berlin with a habilitation grant from the German Research Association (DFG). A position as assistant professor at the Free University of Berlin began a long detour. My education had been exclusively in the field of classical Chinese studies; the focus of the Berlin Institute was modern China. While gaining some expertise in this new field, work on Wang Bi remained active, but on the back burner. After the job in Berlin had run its course in 1977, I finished the first full draft of this study, which I submitted in 1980 in German as a habilitation thesis. It was passed in 1981 with my late teacher Professor Wolfgang Bauer (Munich) and Professor E. Zürcher (Leiden) as external referees. Cornell University was generous enough to invite me as a fellow into its Society for the Humanities in the same year, which resulted in a book on Taiping religion. In the subsequent years I worked as a research fellow at Harvard University and as a research linguist at the University of California at Berkeley on two books about the politics of modern Chinese fiction.

Only small segments of my Wang Bi study were published in English during these years, among them earlier versions of Chapters 1 and 3 of this book. In 1987, I began to teach at the University of Heidelberg in Germany, an institute in urgent need of a major development effort. A stipend from the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk made possible another year at Harvard, working now on the English version of this study. In the meantime, scholarship had revived in mainland China, and a sizable amount of new work had emerged. I was relieved that my core arguments seemed

solid enough to survive, and developed new sections, such as the analysis of Wang Bi's commentarial strategies contained in the first volume of this series, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator*, a full critical edition of the *Laozi* text used by Wang Bi, as well as of his commentary, and an analysis of the textual transmission of Wang's commentary, both of which are contained in this volume; all the rest was reworked. In short bursts of feverish work between long stretches of other equally feverish work, the study finally was completed.

It is published in the following three independent volumes, of which the present is the second: *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi*; *A Chinese Reading of the Daode jing: Wang Bi's Commentary on the Laozi. With Critical Text and Translation*; and *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy in China: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark (Xuanxue)*.

Much of the emotional cost of such a study is not borne by the author but by those on whom this kind of work imposes painful deprivations. For my lovely daughters, Martha and Tina, this book had been a burden ever since they were born. I wish to thank them both, as well as their mother, for the many years of their bearing the burden of this work with me, and I apologize for the disruptions in their lives.

Catherine Vance Yeh, with her unflinching optimism and support, is thanked for the study's eventual completion—because of her efforts, this protracted, tumultuous, and often very frustrating work lost its grim colors and ended up enriching our lives.

My thanks to the foundations and universities that have generously supported this work at various stages, such as the DFG, the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk, and the universities of Cornell, Harvard, and Berkeley, which offered me research opportunities; to the members of the research group "Text and Commentary" in the Institute of Chinese Studies in Heidelberg, who gave much-needed spiritual support and critical advice; and to Dr. Johannes Kurz and Holger Kühnle who, during the last stages, helped as research assistants to finish the manuscript and the bibliography. In addition, Florence Trefethen eventually applied her firm and gentle pen in an effort to make my English more understandable and economical.

This book is dedicated to my daughters Martha and Tina Dohna as congratulations for completion of their own studies.