SUMMARY

Wang Bi (Wang Pi, styled Fu Si, 226-249 A.D.) was a well-known Wei-Jin metaphysical philosopher. He lived in the Zheng-shi era of the Wei dynasty (220-265 A.D.). This was the time of the decline of Han Confucianism and the rise of the early Qin Taoism in the intellectual milieu. Wang Bi’s philosophical genius and in particular, his insightful analysis of Lao Zi’s (Lao-tsu) Dao De Jing was undisputed both among his contemporaries and later philosophers. His renowned work - Commentary on the Lao Zi (Lao Zi Zhu) generated great enthusiasm in the study of Taoist classics among the literati and thereby brought forth a new intellectual learning movement known as xuan xue (profound learning). Of such significance was his commentary that it was used as the standard text for the study of Lao Zi after Wei.

The objective of this dissertation is to find out whether Wang Bi’s Commentary on the Lao Zi (Lao Zi Zhu) and The Structure of Lao Zi’s Pointers (Lao Zi Wei Zhi Li Liè) had interpreted and expounded the philosophical content of Lao Zi correctly and dutifully, and if so, to what extent was that achieved. In evaluating the product of Wang Bi’s study of the Lao Zi, it would then be possible to assign Wang Bi a rightful position in the history of Chinese philosophy. The dissertation consists of seven chapters which investigates the following aspects in Wang Bi’s commentary: ontology-cosmology, epistemology, political philosophy and the philosophy of life.

Chapter One introduces a general account of Wang Bi’s life including his biography, academic background, his outstanding eloquence displayed at the xuan tan (conversation on the profound) movement and his unsuccessful political career as well as his works.

Chapter Two traces the changes in the intellectual trends between Later Han and Early Wei in order to explain the revival of Taoism and why Wang Bi was able to promote Lao Zi xuan xue at this time. In particular, it highlights the xuan tan movement of the Zheng-shi era whereby Wang Bi played a key role in the intellectual discussions prevalent at that time. His two famous sayings “sage realization of wu” (sheng ren ti wu) and “sage has emotional response” (sheng ren you qing) reveal a great deal about his intellectual orientation. By embodying the sage with the essentially Taoist concept of wu, Wang Bi attempts to subsume Confucianism under Taoism and to propagate the Taoist philosophy. This is the mode of thinking he applied throughout to the commentaries on Lao Zi.

Chapter Three deals with Wang Bi’s theory of ontology-cosmology based on
Lao Zi’s *wu*. While the *Lao Zi* used *wu* to describe the characteristics of *dao*, Wang Bi states that *wu* is *dao* and *wu* is an abstract origin of all beings. As such Wang Bi consolidated the concept of *dao* to be *wu* and developed Lao Zi’s thoughts to a new metaphysical realm. According to Wang Bi, the Universe comes about not as a result of the action of any delineated entity. The ineffable *wu* makes it possible when it allows all beings to grow by themselves. In the course of development, *wu* which is also *zi ran* (what is naturally so) facilitates the growth of beings in their own ways without the intervention of action. Finally the working of the Universe which is also the relationship between *dao* and *wan wu* (all beings) is brought about by *ti wu yong you* where the functioning of beings is maintained and unified by *wu*.

Chapter Four on epistemology is derived from Lao Zi’s *dao chang wu ming* (the *dao* that is constant has no name). While the *Lao Zi* emphasizes that one must not be preoccupied with names in order to grasp the intangible concept of *dao*, Wang Bi refers *dao* to ‘profound meaning’ which is a concept that is nameless and limitless, unconfined by boundaries of any sort, in particular language. In other words, language in labelling things has a limiting effect. As a result, language is inadequate to describe the ineffable meaning. In addition, Wang Bi distinguishes the difference in nature between *ming* (name) and *chen* (description) to show the inadequacy of language. In this aspect, Wang Bi expands on the meaning of Lao Zi’s *dao chang wu ming* expounding the metaphysical thought of the movement then.

Chapter Five on political philosophy focuses primarily on the policy of *wu-wei* (nonaction) in the governing of the people. In the *Lao Zi*, *wu-wei* is accomplished in the sense that by doing nothing, much can be achieved. However, Wang Bi takes this seemingly ‘inert’ action and anti-Confucianist outlook to develop it more systematically under the theory of *chong ben xi mo*. By this he extolled the adherence to one’s origin (base) so that people will come to develop their own character and Confucianist moral values will naturally be realized and be developed to their fullest. This chapter again reinforces clearly the view that Wang Bi tries to subsume Confucianism under Taoism.

Chapter Six looks into the philosophy of life, namely how the individual should live and how he should coexist with others. The *Lao Zi* had given some philosophers the impression that Taoism advocates a primitive and reclusive way of life when it exhorts that one should remove desire and knowledge and become simple and innocent. However, Wang Bi did not interpret Lao Zi’s meaning in these literal ways. The way of *wu wei* and *zi ran*, according to him, is employed in the sense that man must not interrupt the growth of his natural character by learning not to be controlled by his sophisticated thinking and excessive desires and become embroiled in strife and competition. Instead, he
should also learn to be unaggressive and calm in order to live harmoniously with others and to return and find his true nature.

The final chapter states the main conclusions of each chapter, assesses the value of Wang Bi's commentary on the interpretation of the Lao Zi and explains how Wang Bi extends Lao Zi's philosophy to a metaphysical realm. On these accounts, the dissertation demonstrates how exceptional Wang Bi's insight was in comprehending Lao Zi's philosophy and deepening the understanding of his abstract work as well as elevating the philosophy to new heights.