

# The *Huainanzi* and Textual Production in Early China

*Edited by*

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Cover illustration: Woodblock edition of the *Shen Xian zhuan* (*Biographies of the Immortals*) that includes an early Daoist hagiography of Liu An. Liu An is ascending to the heavens as a transcendent being. Courtesy of Harvard Yenching Library.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The *Huainanzi* and textual production in early China / edited by Sarah A. Queen, Michael Puett.

pages cm. — (Studies in the history of Chinese texts, ISSN 1877-9425; volume 5)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-90-04-26503-5 (hardback : acid-free paper) — ISBN 978-90-04-26532-5 (e-book) 1. *Huainanzi*—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. *Huainanzi*—Criticism, Textual. 3. *Huainanzi*—Influence. 4. China—Intellectual life—221 B.C.–960 A.D. 5. Learning and scholarship—China—History—To 1500. 6. Chinese literature—221 B.C.–960 A.D.—History and criticism. 7. Chinese literature—Authorship. 8. Philosophy, Chinese—History—To 1500. I. Queen, Sarah A. (Sarah Ann) II. Puett, Michael J., 1964– III. Title: *Huainanzi* and textual production in early China.

BL1900.H825H83 2014

181.114—dc23

2013044938

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ISSN 1877-9425

ISBN 978 90 04 26503 5 (hardback)

ISBN 978 90 04 26532 5 (e-book)

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## Sages, Creation, and the End of History in the *Huainanzi*

*Michael Puett*

There is nothing frightful in us and on earth and perhaps in heaven above except what has not yet been said. We shall never be at peace until everything has been said, once and for all time; then there will be silence and one will no longer be afraid of being silent. It will be all right then. (Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night*)<sup>1</sup>

“An Overview of the Essentials”, chapter 21 of the *Huainanzi*, makes grand claims for itself. As Sarah Queen, Griet Vankeerberghen, and Judson Murray have argued, the “Overview” claims that the *Huainanzi* is, in essence, a summation of all possible knowledge and a guide to all possible situations.<sup>2</sup> As it states rather grandiosely:

若劉氏之書，觀天地之象，通古今之論，權事而立制，度形而施宜.... 非循一跡之路，守一隅之指.... 故置之尋常而不塞，布之天下而不窳。

The book of Mister Liu observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of ancient times and the present, weighs affairs and establishes regulations, measures forms and puts forth what is fitting. . . . It does not follow a path from one trace, nor hold fast to instructions from one corner. . . . Therefore, one can establish it regularly and

1 Louis-Ferdinand Celine, *Journey to the End of the Night*, trans. John H. P. Marks (New York: New Directions, 1934), 325.

2 Sarah A. Queen, “Inventories of the Past: Rethinking the ‘School’ Affiliation of the *Huainanzi*,” *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 14.1 (2001): 51–72; Griet Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An’s Claim to Moral Authority*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Judson Murray, “A Study of ‘Yaolüe’ 要略, ‘A Summary of the Essentials’: Understanding the *Huainanzi* through the Point of View of the Author of the Postface,” *Early China* 29 (2004): 45–108; Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 159–60.

constantly and never be blocked; one can promulgate it throughout all-under-Heaven and never make a mistake.<sup>3</sup>

As the text makes explicit, all other texts were written in response to particular moments, while the *Huainanzi* was written to last forever. It builds upon the insights of previous sages and pulls together all knowledge into a single coherent system.

But such grand claims at first glance appear to contradict many of the historical narratives that appear throughout the rest of the text. Take, for example, the following narrative from chapter 8:

昔者蒼頡作書而天雨粟，鬼夜哭；伯益作井，而龍登玄雲，神棲崑崙；（智）能愈多而德愈薄矣。

In ancient times, when Cang Jie created (*zuo*) writing, Heaven rained grain and the ghosts cried all night. When Bo Yi created (*zuo*) wells, the dragon ascended to the dark clouds and the spirits perched on Kun Lun. As wisdom and intelligence progressively grew, virtue became scarcer.<sup>4</sup>

The narrative is one of clear degeneracy. The history of the world—and more particularly the inventions of the sages that drove such a history—resulted in the loss of an original unity. As we shall see, comparable narratives abound in the work.

But we seem to have a fundamental contradiction here. Knowledge would appear to be at least implicitly progressive, in the sense that in various fields, such as, for example, astronomy and warfare, sages have developed ways of understanding that the “Overview” of the *Huainanzi* claims are being synthesized and unified into a full and even final summation. But how does such a claim cohere with a vision of history as degenerative, in which human attempts to understand and gain control of the world result in the loss of an assumed original unity?

One possible answer to this question is that we are dealing here not (despite the claims of the “Overview”) with a unified text but rather with a conglomerate-

3 D. C. Lau et al., eds., *A Concordance to the Huainanzi* 淮南子逐字索引, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1992), 21/228/28–31. All references to the *Huainanzi* in this essay will be to this edition; citations will be in the form chapter/page/line(s).

4 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 8/62/27–28.

tion of very different chapters written with very different views. Under such a reading, the argument that the history of sagely inventions is one of degeneracy would simply be the argument of chapter 8 (as well as other chapters), while the claim that historical knowledge is progressive, culminating in the *Huainanzi* itself, would be the argument of the “Overview.” The *Huainanzi*, in other words, should be read (according to this view) as a compilation of discrete and unrelated chapters.

But the problem with such a reading is that the juxtaposition of these seemingly conflicting narratives in fact reflects a larger pattern within the entire text. Indeed, chapter 13 contains both progressive and degenerative visions of history, and it provides both, one after the other, within the opening section of the chapter. So, at least on this issue, there would appear to be a very consistent play on these seemingly inconsistent visions of history.<sup>5</sup>

To explicate what might be going on, I shall turn first to chapter 13—one of the places where this juxtaposition between progressive and degenerative visions of history is very explicit. I shall then go on to explore how this juxtaposition is in fact a more common pattern in the text as a whole and discuss what might be the larger argument in the text concerning the progressive and degenerative aspects of sagely knowledge. This in turn will allow for a fuller discussion of the larger aims of the text as a whole—why it was put together and what roles it was intended to serve.

### Degeneracy and Progression in Human History

“Discourses on the Boundless”, chapter 13 of the *Huainanzi*, opens with the sort of statement found commonly throughout the text.<sup>6</sup> In distant antiquity, there were rulers, but they ruled through virtue rather than violence. The cosmos was harmonious, the seasons came at the right time, and humans lived properly within this larger harmony:

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5 For an excellent attempt to argue that several themes cut across the *Huainanzi* as a whole, see Judson Murray, “The Consummate Dao: The ‘Way’ (*Dao*) and ‘Human Affairs’ (*Shi*) in the *Huainanzi*” (PhD diss., Brown University, 2007).

6 Michael Puett, “The Belatedness of the Present: Debates over Antiquity during the Han Dynasty,” in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, ed. Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl, Würzburger sinologische Schriften (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2008), 177–90; Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 159–66.

古者有蓋而繼領以王天下者矣，其德生而不（辱）〔殺〕，予而不奪，天下不非其服，同懷其德。當此之時，陰陽和平，風雨時節，萬物蕃息，烏鵲之巢可俯而探也，禽獸可羈而從也。

In ancient times, kings wore caps and rolled-up collars to rule all-under-Heaven. Their virtue (*de* 德) was of life, not death, of giving, not usurping. None under Heaven rejected their service; all embraced their virtue. In those times, yin 陰 and yang 陽 were harmonized; the winds and rains, timely and moderate. The myriad things prospered and flourished; nests of birds could be looked into; wild animals could be ensnared and kept compliant.<sup>7</sup>

The myriad things flourished in this harmony, and even the wild animals were submissive to humans.

But the narrative then shifts immediately. Yes, humans lived in harmony, but they also had to reside in caves and endure the freezing temperatures of winter and the horrible heat of summer:

古者民澤處復穴，冬日則不勝霜雪霧露，夏日則不勝暑熱蟲蚋。

In ancient times, the people lived in humid lands, hollowing out caves again and again. In the winters, they could not bear the frosts, the snows, the fogs, and the dew; in the summers, they could not bear the oppressive heat, the sultry days, the mosquitoes, and the flies.<sup>8</sup>

Seeing this, the sages in the past thus taught humans how to create shelters by cutting down trees and building houses:

古者民澤處復穴，冬日則不勝霜雪霧露，夏日則不勝暑熱蟲蚋。聖人乃作為之築土構木，以為（宮室）〔室屋〕，上棟下宇，以蔽風雨，以避寒暑，而百姓安之。

The sages therefore created for them the pounding of mud and the cutting of trees to make houses; above they placed rafters, and below they

<sup>7</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/3–5.

<sup>8</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/6.

made shelters to protect against the winds and rain and to keep out the cold and heat. The hundred families were put at ease.<sup>9</sup>

And, of course, humans had no clothing to withstand the temperatures when they left their shelters, so the sages helped here as well:

伯余之初作衣也，綖（寐）〔麻〕索縷，手經指挂，其成猶網羅。後世為之機杼勝複以便其用，而民得以掩形御寒。

Bo Yu was the first to make clothing. He spun the hemp, working the warp with his hand, suspending it through his fingers, forming it like netting. Later generations [of sages] made them looms for doubled weaves to increase their usefulness. The people were thus able to protect their bodies and drive off the cold.<sup>10</sup>

Humans also had to rely on found objects or simple constructions to undertake daily activities, and they thus had to labor constantly with few substantive results. The creation of implements for cutting, plowing, and drawing water alleviated these difficulties:

古者剡耜而耕，摩蜃而耨，木鉤而樵，抱甕而汲，民勞而利薄。後世為之耒耜耨鋤，斧柯而樵，桔槔而汲，民逸而利多焉。

In ancient times, the people sharpened sticks to plow, polished clam shells to weed, cut firewood with wood, and hauled water in jars. The people labored, but their gains were few. Later generations [of sages] made them plows, plowshares, hoes, axes for cutting firewood, and drawing systems for hauling water. The people were at ease, and their gains multiplied.<sup>11</sup>

Impassable rivers prevented humans from connecting with each other across distances. The sages thus taught humans how to make rafts and boats, which enabled humans from different regions to transport and exchange their goods:

9 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/7–8.

10 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/9–10.

11 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/10–11.

古者大川名谷，衝絕道路，不通往來也，乃為窳木方板，以為舟航，故（也）〔地〕勢有无，得相委輸。

In ancient times the great rivers and famed waterways cut across the roads and impeded the comings and goings of the people. They thus hollowed logs and quartered timber to make rafts and boats. Therefore, when a region had something special, it could be exchanged and transported.<sup>12</sup>

But when there was no river, humans still had to walk long distances while carrying loads on their backs. The sages thus created wheels and carts and taught people how to yoke horses and oxen to carts to carry their materials great distances:

為（鞞）〔鞞〕躡而超千里，肩負擔之勤也，而作為之榘輪建輿，駕馬服牛，民以致遠而不勞。

They [the people] made shoes from hides and traversed a thousand *li* 里; they labored to carry loads on their backs. They [the sages] thus created for them the bending of wood into wheels, the constructing of carts, and the yoking of horses and oxen. The people could thus go great distances without becoming tired.<sup>13</sup>

But in our first hint that these innovations were having degenerative implications in terms of relations between humans and the rest of the myriad things, the wild animals, who before could be kept compliant, were now injuring people. The sages thus created bronze and iron weapons to kill animals:

為鷙禽猛獸之害傷人而无以禁御也，而作為之鑄金（鍛）〔鍛〕鐵，以為兵刃，猛獸不能為害。

Since ferocious beasts would injure people and there was nothing with which to stop them, they created for them the casting of metal and the forging of iron to make weapons and arms. The animals could harm them no more.<sup>14</sup>

12 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/11–13.

13 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/13–14.

14 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/14–15.



In constructing this narrative, the authors are careful to point out that each of these inventions occurred in response to a clear problem facing humanity. The sages' innovations are thus presented as a proper response to an accurately perceived problem:

故（居）〔民〕迫其難則求其便，困其患則造其備，人各以其（所）知，去其所害，就其所利。

Thus, pressed by difficulties, the people searched for what was advantageous; bound by adversity, they created what was necessary. In each case, the people used what they knew to eliminate that which harmed them and to seek that which benefited them.<sup>15</sup>

The implication is clear: sages cannot and should not be bound by tradition. Rather, they must innovate according to the needs of the moment:

常故不可循，器械不可因也，則先王之法度有移易者矣。

If the unchanging past should not be followed, if the implements [of the past] should not be continued, then the standards of the former kings must be changeable.<sup>16</sup>

As the authors state bluntly a little later in the chapter: 夫聖人作法而萬物制焉 “Sages create standards, and the myriad things are formed within them.”<sup>17</sup>

When they innovated, the sages were acting properly in response to the times, and the narrative clearly presents the resulting creations as correct and traces a progressive growth for humanity. But then how are we to understand the opening passage, in which we are told that, prior to these innovations, humans lived in a state of harmony with the rest of the cosmos, such that even the wild animals could be ensnared and were submissive? The end of the narrative makes it clear that these inventions of the sages have allowed humans to gain control of the natural landscape but have also led to, among other things, animals attacking humans, such that the sages had to create weapons to kill them. The progressive inventions of the sages seem also to have broken the harmony that existed in distant antiquity. Although sages must innovate with

15 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/15–16.

16 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/120/16–17.

17 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/15.

the changing times and create a progressive array of inventions, these innovations seem to lead to degeneration as well.

The chapter then makes the point explicit. The weapons had to be created to kill the wild animals, but, of course, once they were created they were inevitably used against other humans as well. The overall arc of the narrative is one in which the inventions of the sages—all properly done in response to problems at the time—also led to an increase in the amount of violence and subjugation. The virtue that reigned in distant antiquity was gradually destroyed:

古者民醇工麗，商（撲）〔樸〕女（重）〔童〕，是以政教易化，風俗易移也。今世德益衰，民俗益薄，欲以（撲）〔樸〕（重）〔童〕之法，治既弊之民，是猶无鑄銜（櫛）策鋏而御馭馬也。

In antiquity the people were pure, the artisans skillful, the merchants honest, the women virtuous. This is why governance and education were easy to transform and the customs easy to alter. Now, virtue (*de*) is declining more and more, and the customs of the people are becoming more and more stingy. Wanting to use honest and virtuous laws to put in order a people already corrupted is like wanting to control a horse without a bit and a whip.<sup>18</sup>

If kings in distant antiquity could rule by virtue alone and without the need for violence, subsequent rulers must rule by force:

昔者，神農无制（今）〔令〕而民從，唐、虞有制令而无刑罰，夏后氏不負言，殷人誓，周人盟。逮至當今之世，忍詢而輕辱，貪得而寡羞，欲以神農之道治之，則其亂必矣。伯成子高辭為諸侯而耕，天下高（而）〔之〕。今時之人，辭官而隱處，為鄉邑之下，豈可同哉？

In ancient times, Shennong used no regulations or commands, yet the people followed. Tang and Shun had regulations and commands but no punishments. The Xia used no false words; the Shang made oaths; the Zhou made covenants. When one comes down to the present time, people accept shame and think lightly of being disgraced; they value taking and belittle giving. Wanting to use the way of Shennong to put things in order would only make chaos inevitable. When Bocheng Zigao resigned

18 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/1–3.

from being a feudal lord and simply tilled the fields, all-under-Heaven exalted him. Now, those who resign from office and become hermits are placed at the bottom [of the hierarchy] of their locales. How can this be considered the same?<sup>19</sup>

Violence and war thus become all the more endemic in human society—and progressively more so with each subsequent innovation:

古之兵，弓劍而已矣，槽柔无擊，脩戟无（別）（刺）。晚世之兵，隆衝以攻，渠檐以守，連弩以射，銷車以鬪。

The armies of antiquity had bows and swords; their lances had no sharp points, their halberds no tips. The armies of the later ages have siege weapons and battering rams with which to attack, spiked balls with which to defend, joined crossbows with which to shoot, and iron chariots with which to fight.<sup>20</sup>

But this degeneracy, this loss of virtue, and this introduction of increasing levels of violence into human society are simply the result of the sages' proper innovations. Those innovations led to human domination and control over the world, but they also resulted in the destruction of the unity, harmony, and virtue that reigned before.

### The Harmony of the Cosmos

At this stage, chapter 13 of the *Huainanzi* might appear to be making a claim about the inherently tragic nature of invention: any innovation, even if properly created, will always produce negative and dangerous results.<sup>21</sup> But in fact the chapter will ultimately go in a very different direction. To begin with, the chapter fully celebrates sagely invention. To quote in full the passage excerpted above:

19 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/3–6.

20 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/6–7.

21 I have argued that such a tragic vision of innovation is present in Sima Qian's *Shiji*, a work written not long after the *Huainanzi* was composed. See Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 177–212.

夫聖人作法而萬物制焉，賢者立禮而不肖者拘焉。制法之民，不可與（達辱）〔遠舉〕；拘禮之人，不可使應變。耳不知清濁之分者，不可（今）〔令〕調（意）〔音〕；〔心〕不知治亂之源者，不可令制法〔度〕。必有獨聞之（耳）〔聽〕，獨見之明，然後能擅道而行（矣）〔也〕。

Now, sages create standards, and the myriad things are formed within them; the worthy establish rituals and the unworthy are held within. The people regulated by the standards cannot plan far ahead; the men held by the rituals cannot respond to changes. An ear that does not pick up the distinction between clear and distorted cannot order pitches and notes; a heart that does not understand the distance between order and disorder cannot impose regulations and standards. It is necessary to hear clearly and see clearly, for only then is one capable of acting in accord with the Way.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the chapter is primarily opposed to any attempt to restrict such sagely innovation to past precedent:

夫殷變夏，周變殷，春秋變周，三代之禮不同，何古之從？

Now, the Yin replaced the Xia; the Zhou replaced the Yin; the Spring and Autumn period replaced the Zhou. The rites of the Three Dynasties were not the same. Why should antiquity be followed?<sup>23</sup>

Sages innovate as necessary. It is only the scholars who believe in adhering to the past:

大人作而弟子循。知法治所由生，則應時而變；不知法治之源，雖循古，終亂。今世之法（藉）〔籍〕與時變，禮義與俗易，為學者循先襲業，據籍守舊（教），以為非此不治，是猶持方柄而周員鑿也，欲得宜適致固焉，則難矣。

Great men create and disciples transmit. If you understand from whence standards and order arise, then you can respond to the times and change. If you do not understand the origin of standards and order, you end up in disorder even if you accord with antiquity. The standards and edicts of

22 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/15–18.

23 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/20.

the current age should change with the times; the rites and propriety should be altered with customs. Scholars accord with those who came before, inherit their practices, rely on their records, and hold fast to their teachings—thinking that there can be no order if it is not thus. This is like placing a square peg into a round hole: they hope to obtain a proper fit and a fixed point, but it is very difficult.<sup>24</sup>

But this only heightens our earlier concern: what then is the text arguing when it emphasizes the harmony of yin and yang that existed in the distant past—a harmony that was broken by the progressive sagely creations? If the sages should be free from following the past, then why would it matter how things operated in the past, and why emphasize that, at least in the sense of a lost harmony, things were better before the sagely creations began?

Intriguingly, the text then turns, immediately after emphasizing the necessity of sages innovating as necessary, to a discussion of this harmony:

天地之氣，莫大於和，和者，陰陽調，日夜分，而生物。春分而生，秋分而成，生之與成，必得和之精。故聖人之道，寬而栗，嚴而濫，柔而直，猛而仁。太剛則折，太柔則卷，聖人正在剛柔之間，乃得道之本。積陰則沉，積陽則飛，陰陽相接，乃能成和。

As for the *qi* of Heaven and Earth, none is as grand as harmony. Harmony is the interchange of yin and yang, the distinction of day and night, and the generating of things. In the period of spring things are born, and in that of autumn they are completed; they need to obtain the essence of harmony. Therefore, the way of the sages is lenient yet firm, strict yet kind, pliant yet upright, forceful yet humane. Too much hardness leads to inflexibility; too much softness leads to laxity. The sage properly resides between hardness and softness and thereby obtains the root of the Way. If one accumulates yin, one will sink; if one accumulates yang, one will rise. When yin and yang join, they are thereby able to complete harmony.<sup>25</sup>

The cosmic harmony alluded to in the opening portion of the chapter is here invoked again—the interchange of yin and yang energies results in the birth and completion of the myriad things, and their flourishing requires the

<sup>24</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/20–23.

<sup>25</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/122/29–123/2.

essence of harmony. We have already been told that the myriad things are formed within the standards created by sages, and we now see one of the keys for this: a sage must play this same role for the worlds he creates. If the interchange of yin and yang allows the flourishing of the myriad things, then the sage must equally join yin and yang such that the myriad things flourish within the worlds the sage has created.

The implications of this argument become clear soon thereafter, as the chapter turns to the more recent period of the Qin unification and its aftermath. The Qin, according to the text, introduced an extreme form of militarization:

秦之時，高為臺榭，大為苑囿，遠為馳道，鑄金人，發適戍，入芻稟，頭會箕賦，輸於少府。丁壯丈夫，西至臨洮、狄道，東至會稽、浮石，南至豫章、桂林，北至飛狐、陽原，道路死人以溝量。當此之時，忠諫者謂之不祥，而道仁義者謂之狂。

In the time of Qin, they built to great height towers and pavilions, made extensive gardens and enclosures, built far-reaching imperial roads, and cast bronze figures. They sent out troops; they brought in grasses and grains. Taxes, levies, and duties were transported to the treasuries. Young men and strong men were sent west to Linchao and Didao, east to Huiji and Fushi, south to Yuzhang and Guilin, north to Feihu and Yangyuan. On the roads, the dead filled the ditches. At this time, those who loyally remonstrated were called inauspicious, and those who took humaneness and propriety as their way were called mad.<sup>26</sup>

After the Qin introduced this militarization, the subsequent Han rulers had to respond to it. Although the founder of the Han dynasty brought back the teachings that the Qin had attempted to extinguish, the first step was to unify the realm by defeating the Qin:

逮至高皇帝，存亡繼絕，舉天下之大義，身自奮袂執銳，以為百姓請命于室天。當此之時，天下雄儁豪英暴露于野澤，前蒙矢石，而後墮谿壑，出百死而給一生，以爭天下之權，奮武厲誠，以決一（且）（旦）之命。當此之時，豐衣博帶而道儒墨者，以為不肖。逮至暴亂已勝。

26 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/124/2–5.

When we come down to the time of Emperor Gao [the founder of the Han], he preserved what had been extinguished; he continued what had been cut off. He raised the great propriety of all-under-Heaven; he personally worked and grasped a sword so as to beseech august Heaven on behalf of his people. At this time, those under Heaven who were courageous, brave, valiant, and talented endured sun and rain in the fields and marshes; the vanguard were exposed to arrows and stones; the rearguard fell into ravines and ditches. For every hundred sent out, one would survive in the struggle for the balance of all-under-Heaven. With a determined martialism, with a rigorous sincerity, they thereby cut short their allotted life to a single day. At this time, those who wore sumptuous clothing and wide sashes, and who took Confucianism and Mohism as their way, were considered unworthy. This continued until the tyranny and disorder were ended and overcome.<sup>27</sup>

Once the Qin were defeated and the civil wars were brought to an end, the founder of the Han was able to begin to promote civility as well:

海內大定，繼文之業，立武之功，履天子之（圖）籍，造劉氏之（貌）冠，摠鄒、魯之儒墨，通先聖之遺教，戴天子之旗，乘大路，建九旂，撞大鍾，擊鳴鼓，奏《咸池》，揚干戚。當此之時，有立武者見疑。一世之間，而文武代為雌雄，有時而用也。

When, throughout the land, things were greatly settled, he continued the undertakings of civility (*wen*) and established the merits of martialism (*wu*). He carried out the registry of all-under-Heaven; he created a [ceremonial] cap for the house of Liu. He unified the Confucians and Mohists of Zou and Lu and penetrated the transmitted teachings of the former sages. He displayed the banners of the Son of Heaven, traveled the great roads, established the nine pennants, rang the great bell, struck the drum, played the “Xianche” [music], raised the shield and battle-ax. At this time, those who established martialism were seen as suspicious. In this period, civility and martialism alternated as female and male; at the right time each was used.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/124/5–8.

<sup>28</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/124/8–11.

The early Han was thus marked by a fundamental conflict between the martialism (*wu*) inherited from the Qin and the civility (*wen*)—the transmitted teachings of the former sages—supported by those like the Confucians and Mohists.

Such a conflict between martialism and civility has continued up to the time of the authors of the *Huainanzi*:

今世之為武者則非文也，為文者則非武也，文武更相非，而不知時世之用也。此見隅曲之一指，而不知八極之廣大也。故東面而望，不見西牆；南面而視，不覩北方；唯無所嚮者，（則）〔為〕無所不通。

In the present time, those who practice martialism reject civility. Those who practice civility reject martialism. [Supporters of] civility and [supporters of] martialism oppose each other, but they do not understand timely utilization. Each sees only one instruction from a corner or a bend and does not understand the length and greatness of all the eight points. Therefore, when one looks to the east, one does not see the western wall; when one looks to the south, one does not see the north. Only if one does not incline toward any side will one comprehend everything.<sup>29</sup>

The key now, the text is saying, is to balance these competing legacies from the past—the militaristic legacy of the Qin and the textual creations of the previous sages.

The vision of history being advocated by the text is now becoming clear. Sages do respond to particular moments and create as necessary, unconcerned with past precedent. But such creations in themselves have ambivalent consequences since, based as they are on specific problems at specific moments, they introduce into the world new elements that can break an earlier harmony. The result is a history that is both progressive (involving an accumulation of inventions) and degenerative (based on the loss of what existed before).

But the text is clearly pointing toward a higher vision of sagehood as well—one where the sage would create a world in which the same harmonizing principles that occur within the cosmos (at its best) would be re-created within the worlds created by the sage. In such a vision of sagehood, everything that exists—including everything created by the previous sages—would be combined and harmonized, just as the cosmos in distant antiquity was harmonized with the energies of yin and yang.

<sup>29</sup> Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 13/124/11–13.



The full argument of the chapter thus becomes apparent. The opening statement of the chapter concerning the harmony that existed in distant antiquity provides the basis for the larger argument concerning the harmonizing work of the sages. But as the subsequent narrative makes clear, the text is not calling for a simple return to this earlier harmony—because it was also, as the narrative emphasizes, a period when humans had no shelter, no clothes, no boats, no carts, and so on. And yet these very creations ultimately resulted in a loss of harmony and a gradual degeneration of humans and their relations both to each other and to the rest of the cosmos. But were a sage to arise now, the goal would be to create a world in which everything that exists—including the accumulated innovations of the previous sages—would be harmonized. Such a world would include violence (since this was introduced and is now part of the legacy within which humans must live) but would also include shelters, clothes, and all the other sagely inventions as well. Were this world to be achieved, it would thus replicate the harmony of distant antiquity but would also include and encompass all the subsequent inventions of the sages that gave humanity control over and knowledge of the world. In other words, the world thus created would not simply be the result of yet another sagely innovation but would rather be a harmonizing creation in which a new order would be created, encompassing all that exists and all that came before within a grand unity.

### Writing, Wells, and the Great One

Such an argument, intriguingly enough, is repeated throughout the text. Reference was made above to the degenerative claims given in chapter 8:

昔者蒼頡作書而天雨粟，鬼夜哭；伯益作井，而龍登玄雲，神棲崑崙；（智）能愈多而德愈薄矣。

In ancient times, when Cang Jie created (*zuo*) writing, Heaven rained grain and the ghosts cried all night. When Bo Yi created (*zuo*) wells, the dragon ascended to the dark clouds and the spirits perched on Kun Lun. As wisdom and intelligence progressively grew, virtue became scarcer.<sup>30</sup>

The argument here is one we saw in chapter 13: the inventions of the sages—in this case writing and wells—resulted in the loss of an earlier cosmic harmony.

30 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 8/62/27–28.

Virtue became increasingly scarce as human attempts to gain knowledge and control over the world grew.

But, here again, the ultimate argument of the chapter is not that we should get rid of writing and wells. The argument, on the contrary, is that one must strive to harmonize all these innovations. The chapter makes the point in terms of the Great One.<sup>31</sup> I quote from John Major's excellent translation:

帝者體太一，王者法陰陽，霸者則四時，君者用六律。

The thearch embodies the Great One, the king emulates yin and yang, the hegemon follows the four seasons, the prince uses the Six Pitch Pipes.<sup>32</sup>

The thearch (or emperor) embodies the Great One. The text then defines the Great One:

太一者，牢籠天地，彈壓山川，含吐陰陽，伸曳四時，紀綱八極，經緯六合，覆露照導，普汜無私，蠓飛蠕動，莫不仰德而生。陰陽者，承天地之和，形萬殊之體，含氣化物，以成埴類。

The Great One encloses and contains Heaven and Earth, weighs upon and crushes the mountains and streams, retains or emits yin and yang, stretches out and drags along the four seasons, knots the net of the eight directional end points, and weaves the web of the six coordinates. It renews the dew and universally overflows without partiality; it [causes the] waterflies to fly and wriggling things to move; there is nothing which does not rely upon it and its Power in order to live. Yin and yang uphold the harmony of Heaven and Earth and shape the physical form of the

31 One of our earliest references to the Great One is the “*Taiyi shengshui*” (“The Great One Generates Water”), a text excavated from a Guodian tomb sealed around 300 BCE. The Great One is presented in the text as that which gives birth to the rest of the cosmos, including Heaven and Earth. Over the next two centuries, appeals were made repeatedly to the Great One as something encompassing Heaven, Earth, and the rest of the pantheon. See Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 160–65, 174–75, 305–8.

32 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 8/64/5; Translation by John Major (slightly modified), from John S. Major, Sarah A. Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, and Harold D. Roth, trans., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

myriad different things. [They] retain *qi* and transform things in order to bring to completion the form of the myriad different things.<sup>33</sup>

The Great One is that which encompasses everything. It contains Heaven and Earth and directs yin and yang. Yin and yang then uphold the harmony of Heaven and Earth and shape the myriad things. The ruler is called upon to embody the Great One, just as he is called upon to emulate yin and yang. In other words, the ruler must encompass, direct, and harmonize everything that exists.

As such, the problem is not with writing and walls per se—in fact, once they have been created, they are among the many things that any ruler would need to incorporate, encompass, and bring into a harmonious order. The problem is rather that, when they were created, they were—like many creations—attempts to solve a particular problem by gaining more control for humans over phenomena. As such, they disrupted harmony. One who follows the Great One, however, encompasses everything and harmonizes these inventions, as well as everything else that exists.

### The Text as Sage

We are thus seeing a very consistent pattern. Previous sages are celebrated for having correctly responded to their situations and innovated appropriately, but previous sages are also criticized for having innovated in ways that were limited—based only on that particular moment and failing to connect to the rest of the larger world. The higher form of sagehood involves encompassing all that exists and bringing everything into harmony—just as the Great One does for the larger cosmos.

This same pattern of argument underlies chapter 21, “An Overview of the Essentials”, as well. Only here the argument is worked out not in terms of technological innovations but rather in terms of texts. Earlier figures, including the Confucians, Mozi, Guanzi, and Shang Yang, are singled out as having written important texts. In each case, these men were responding to a specific problem.<sup>34</sup> They were, in other words, the equivalents of sages who invented shelters, clothes, and writing.

33 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 8/64/5–8; Translation by John Major (slightly modified), from *ibid.*

34 My understanding of the “Overview” has benefited dramatically from the excellent discussions in Queen, “Inventories of the Past”; Murray, “A Study of ‘Yaoliü’”; and

Only the *Huainanzi*, however, encompasses all of this knowledge into one text:

若劉氏之書，觀天地之象，通古今之論，權事而立制，度形而施宜。

The book of Mister Liu observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of ancient times and the present, weighs affairs and establishes regulations, measures forms and puts forth what is fitting.<sup>35</sup>

It is, in other words, the equivalent of the ruler acting as the Great One:

以統天下，理萬物，應變化。

It thereby unifies all-under-Heaven, gives pattern to the myriad things, and responds to alternations and transformations.<sup>36</sup>

As such, it is not simply a response to a certain moment, nor does it have the potentially degenerative implications of other forms of knowledge:

非循一跡之路，守一隅之指。

It does not follow a path from one trace, nor hold fast to instructions from one corner.<sup>37</sup>

It can rather be utilized forever:

故置之尋常而不塞，（市）（布）之天下而不窳。

Therefore, one can establish it regularly and constantly and never be blocked; one can promulgate it throughout all-under-Heaven and never make a mistake.<sup>38</sup>

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Vankeerberghen, *The Huainanzi and Liu An's Claim to Moral Authority*. I build in part here on my argument in Puett, *Ambivalence of Creation*, 159–60.

35 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 21/228/28.

36 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 21/228/29–30.

37 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 21/228/30.

38 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 21/228/31.

In other words, the text itself serves as the Great One, unifying all previous knowledge into a single harmonious whole.

But what about the fact that this is a text, rather than a ruler, that is encompassing all that exists as the Great One? In a sense, the text serves as a final sage. Even if later rulers are not sages, they will be able, by following this text, to perfectly harmonize the world. And they will be able to do so precisely because they are building upon previous innovations—the very innovations that created a break from the earlier harmony. To give one obvious example: the *Huainanzi* authors now have writing and can thus write a text that can be used by non-sages. The early sages may have been able to act intuitively, but the subsequent innovations, for all the degeneracy they created, also allow the latter-born to do what the early sages could not.

But now, with the *Huainanzi*, this knowledge has been synthesized into a full system that can be used by all. As Sarah Queen and Judson Murray have translated beautifully:

今專言道，則无不在焉，然而能得本知末者，其唯聖人也。今學者无聖人之才，而不為詳說，則終身顛頓乎混溟之中，而不知覺寤乎昭明之術矣。

Now, if we spoke exclusively of the Way, then there is nothing that is not contained in it. Nevertheless, only sages are capable of grasping its root and thereby knowing its branches. At this time, scholars lack the capabilities of sages, and if we do not provide them with detailed explanations, then to the end of their days they will flounder in the midst of darkness and obscurity without knowing the great awakening brought about by these writings' luminous and brilliant techniques.<sup>39</sup>

Knowledge has thus far been partial. It was attained by sages solving immediate problems. The progressive accumulations of these sagely understandings have led to a progressive knowledge of and control over the world but a consequent loss of harmony. The *Huainanzi* thus represents the point at which—if the text is followed—the progressive-degenerative interplay of sagely creation can be brought to an end.

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39 Lau et al., *Huainanzi*, 21/227/2–4.

### The End of History

I have noted a consistent set of arguments in the *Huainanzi*. At the origin, everything was unified. The text clearly and repeatedly presents this as a good thing. But it was also a world in which humans had no clothes, no houses, and certainly no texts. All these technologies are inventions of sages, and they were clearly wise inventions: they solved problems that needed to be solved. But the result was consistently one in which the invention led to a further break from the rest of the cosmos—and thus a further break from the earlier unity. The progressive growth of knowledge and the degenerative break from unity are flip sides of the same coin. The sages innovated as they needed to, and the result was both a progressive growth of knowledge and control as well as a degenerative loss of an earlier unity.

The striking move in the *Huainanzi*, however, is that the authors want to claim that this progressive/degenerative history is now coming to an end—or, more specifically, that the *Huainanzi* itself is bringing it to an end. By building upon all previous sagely inventions and bringing them together into a unified system, the *Huainanzi* thus re-creates the unity that existed before, but it does so in a way that therefore includes all the sagely innovations. The world (if we follow the *Huainanzi*) is thus unified, but it is unified by humans, who now live in houses, wear clothes—and, of course, have a single comprehensive text to explicate the world and guide behavior. In other words, the earlier unity that existed in the ancient past is being re-created, only now that unity includes all the technologies that had originally forced humanity away from that earlier harmony.

A project like this, of course, could be undertaken only by sages, and the *Huainanzi* authors are clearly making a very strong claim to sagehood. But unlike other sagely authors—such as Laozi and Zhuangzi—this is a text that is written such that non-sages can follow it as well. Knowledge has been summed up, and summed up in a way that is true for all time and can bring the world into harmony even if there is no sage on the throne.

In making these arguments, the *Huainanzi* fits into a larger context in the early imperial period, in which figures claimed to supersede dramatically the accomplishments of the past. The First Emperor famously claimed in his inscriptions to be a great sage and to have created a greater, larger state than any in previous history. Similarly, authors in the early Han asserted that they wrote better, longer works than their predecessors. One example among many would be Sima Qian, who, despite (or in part via) his protestations, undertook a work far grander and more

complex than his self-proclaimed predecessor Confucius's *Spring and Autumn Annals*.<sup>40</sup>

The *Huainanzi* authors make a fascinating move within this context. They also claim to have written a grander and more comprehensive work than any in the past. But they also assert that they have authored a work that will last for all time—a final summation of knowledge.

### Conclusion

In the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Francis Fukuyama published a famous essay declaring the ‘end of history.’ His point was not that events would not continue to occur but rather that, in the realm of ideas, the end had been reached: liberal democracy was the final position for humanity.<sup>41</sup> In making these arguments, Fukuyama was building upon the ideas of Hegel. But Hegel's claims were far more radical—not simply that a final point had been reached in the evolution of ideas but that he personally had achieved a final summation of all knowledge.

My argument in this essay has been that the authors of the *Huainanzi* took a position very similar to Hegel's.<sup>42</sup> They too claim to have achieved a final summation of knowledge. They do not necessarily claim to be greater sages than any that existed in the past (although the level of sagely arrogance in the text certainly implies that they may well have been tempted to do so). The argument is rather that the authors, living at a late stage of human history, understanding the workings of the larger cosmos, and understanding how a text can serve as the Great One, are bringing harmony to all that exists. They are thus able to build upon all that was created by the previous sages and to reach a final summation.

The subsequent history of Liu An himself and the kingdom of Huainan—with Liu An being charged with treason and the kingdom of Huainan being

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40 Michael Puett, “The Temptations of Sagehood, or: The Rise and Decline of Sagely Writing in Early China,” in *Books in Numbers*, ed. Wilt Idema (Cambridge, MA: Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University; distributed by Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2007), 29–33.

41 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?,” *National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 3–18.

42 For an earlier comparison of the *Huainanzi* with Hegel, see Michael Puett, “Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the *Huainanzi*,” *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72 (2000): 29–47.

occupied by imperial forces—has gained the *Huainanzi* a reputation as a radical text, standing against the empire. But the *Huainanzi* is probably, on the contrary, best thought of as a radical text in another sense: an imperial text displaying a greater degree of sagely arrogance than perhaps any of our other texts from the early Han, a text claiming to stand for all time as a final summation of how to achieve human and cosmic harmony, a text that, in world philosophy, finds its best comparison in Hegel.