CHAPTER 2

Daoist Inner Cultivation Thought and the Textual Structure of the *Huainanzi*

Harold D. Roth*

The issue of the intellectual filiation of the *Huainanzi* has vexed scholars for generations. Is it an ‘eclectic’ work (*zajia* 雜家), as it was categorized in the Bibliographical Monograph of the History of the Western Han? Is it a ‘Daoist’ work, as others have categorized it? Is it a work that self-consciously eschews any and all intellectual affiliation, claiming for itself a uniqueness that makes it the essential philosophical blueprint for ruling the Han Empire? Our *Huainanzi* translation team has gone over all these arguments time and again and agreed to disagree.¹ In the following essay I shall present an argument for the *Huainanzi* being a work of the ‘inner cultivation’ tradition that received the label ‘Daoist’ from Sima Tan in his famous and influential discourse “On Six Lineages of Thought” in chapter 130 of the *Historical Records*. When one analyzes the carefully organized series of nesting ‘root-branches’ structures in the text, it becomes clear that while the authors did incorporate a great variety of ideas from earlier intellectual traditions into the unique synthesis they created in the *Huainanzi*, the ideas and practices of the Daoist inner cultivation tradition constitute the normative foundation into which all these other ideas are integrated. I shall begin by presenting an overview of previous research on this tradition of practice and philosophy, then proceed to discuss how the carefully crafted root-branches structures in the book demonstrate how the ideas from this tradition provide the normative foundation of the entire book. I shall conclude with how this textual analysis impacts theories of the intellectual affiliation of the *Huainanzi*.

---

* I would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Arun Stewart, Brown class of 2011: “Alas! Heaven has bereft me” (*Lunyu* 11).

The Inner Cultivation Tradition

Those of us who have studied the surviving textual sources from the late Warring States and early Han are confronted with an array of separate texts. Given the limited production and circulation of written works in this period, it simply is not logical to conclude that they were all produced independently of one another. Indeed, some of them cite or borrow material from others, such as the *Mencius* citing the *Analects*, the ‘Outer Chapters’ of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi* citing the *Laozi*, and so on; so we know that at least some later authors were aware of earlier written works. But even if the *Mencius* never cited the *Analects* by title or Confucius by name, we would understand that the two works were intellectually related because they share a common set of philosophical concerns, the most important of which are benevolence (*ren* 仁), propriety (*li* 礼), knowledge (*zhi* 知), rightness (*yi* 義), and filiality (*xiao* 孝). These philosophical concerns, furthermore, are positively valued in these two works and in a third major work of this early intellectual tradition, the *Xunzi*. These concepts form a unique field of discourse and techniques that can be used to differentiate distinctive intellectual lineages in pre-Han China. The very existence and survival of works like the *Analects*, the *Mencius*, and the *Xunzi* imply that there must have been some sort of social organization to create, copy, and transmit them. Relying on the evidence of a teacher-student social relationship that we find in many sources, starting with the *Analects*, we can postulate that this is the basis for the social organization that created, preserved, and transmitted the texts of the distinctive philosophical lineages in pre-Han China.

Indeed, Mark Lewis posits the existence of such groups, which were outside the ‘ambit of the state’ and were formed by master-disciple traditions that relied on writing both to transmit doctrine or information and to establish group loyalties. Internal evidence of shifting usage and doctrinal contradictions shows that several of these works evolved over long periods of time. The masters were invented and certified as wise men in this progressive rewriting by

---


3 The surviving evidence for the social organization of the early Confucian tradition has been thoroughly analyzed in E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, *The Original “Analects”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).