Chapter 3

Representations of Confucius in the Huainanzi

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The Huainanzi is undoubtedly one of the most philosophically nuanced and aesthetically sophisticated texts of the Han period. The process that created it was long and complex, a collaborative endeavor involving not only diverse scholars but, in addition, many different modes of composition and compilation, as the literary form and content of the Huainanzi suggest. The third century CE commentator Gao You, the earliest extant witness describing the text’s authorship and aims, also supports that view. In his famous preface, Gao explained clearly that the collaborative work included Liu An, eight men mentioned by name, and a number of unnamed Confucians (ru 儒). Looking back from the perspective of the third century CE at a text created some three centuries earlier, Gao asserted that the authors of the Huainanzi were chiefly concerned with forging a synthesis between two paired concepts: ‘the Way and Potency’ (daode 道德) and ‘Humaneness and Rightness’ (renyi 仁義). What did these terms denote to Gao You? Perhaps they functioned as shorthand referents to concepts that had become associated with Laozi and Confucius. By Gao You’s time, the cults of Laozi and Confucius were firmly established, with particular practices and ideas tied irrevocably to these two great figureheads. However, at the time the Huainanzi was coalescing as a text, the cultic stature of Confucius and Laozi was yet to be achieved. Likewise, the ‘Daoist’ and ‘Confucian’ traditions associated with them were still quite fluid and open to debate, as the inventories of Sima Tan and Liu Xiang demonstrate.1 What precisely were the respective contributions of the diverse array of scholar-practitioners, steeped in various texts, who came to the court of Liu An to create the Huainanzi?

Much has been said in both past publications and in the present volume concerning the ‘Daoist’ contributions to the Huainanzi. Indeed, the Laozi and the Zhuangzi have long been recognized as seminal influences in the Huainanzi.

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The *Laozi* figures most prominently in chapter 1, “Originating in the Way,” and chapter 12, “Responses of the Way”. The *Zhuangzi* is the primary inspiration in chapter 2, “Activating the Genuine”, chapter 7, “The Quintessential Spirit”, chapter 11, “Integrating Customs”, and chapter 18, “Among Others”. In contrast, the role of Confucius in the *Huainanzi* has yet to be explored. Thus, this essay seeks to hone our present understanding of the authorship and the formation of the *Huainanzi* by examining the representations of Confucius and his teachings across the text. What images of Confucius, his teachings, and his followers does the *Huainanzi* promote? Are they generally negative or positive? In what contexts do they appear? Do they predominate in certain chapters and not in others? If so, in which chapters? Do they appear in isolation from concepts associated with the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* or are they integrated with them?

Examining such questions will deepen our current understanding of the text’s syncretism (its aim to harmonize *daode* and *renyi*, in Gao You’s terminology). It will also contribute to ongoing efforts to map the rising prominence of Confucius in the Han. The multiple personalities ascribed to Confucius, along with his newfound prestige, are evident in the proliferation of Han collections that preserve narratives, dialogues, and sayings associated with him. The images of Confucius collected in the *Huainanzi* afford an additional view of ongoing Han efforts to define and control Confucius and his legacy. Do such portrayals collectively yield a cohesive or a disjointed vision of Confucius? In short, where do we locate the singular or multivalent image of Confucius in the *Huainanzi* along the trajectory of images ranging from the sagely teacher of the *Analects*, the prophetic uncrowned king of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, the supernatural godlike figure of the apocrypha, or the iconic Confucius of the Eastern Han cults?

Confucius and Confucians are mentioned no fewer than fifty times in twelve chapters of the text, and Confucius is quoted sixteen times in six chapters.

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