CHAPTER 6

The *Huainanzi’s* “Heavenly Patterns” and the *Shiji’s* “Treatise on the Celestial Offices”: What’s the Difference?

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Because Liu An supposedly aspired to the throne, the compilation of his *summa* and its presentation to his nephew Emperor Wu (r. 141–87 BCE) have been construed by many as overtly political acts. It is thought that after Liu An’s bid to succeed Emperor Jing had failed, his audience at court and presentation of his masterwork in 139 BCE may have signaled his aspiration to high office, perhaps as chancellor and mentor to his nephew, with whom he enjoyed close relations. This gambit failing in its objective, Liu An may have harbored a smoldering resentment toward his detractors at court, such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (ca. 179–104 BCE), so that his indictment in 122 BCE was not wholly trumped up, even though Emperor Wu never missed a chance to extinguish a kingdom and annex its territory.1

Others have assessed the pretensions of the *Huainanzi 淮南子* as a ‘comprehensive mirror to aid in government.’ Perhaps one might think of the work as a topical handbook (*zhinan 指南*) intended to serve as a heuristic overview of the totality of the knowledge base of the time. As Merlin Donald has observed, “the history of pedagogy might reflect the process of metalinguistic evolution.” One indication of this in the Han is the institution of elite formal education and the high social value placed on mastery of what Donald denotes the ‘external symbolic system (*ESS*),’ containing the totality of the knowledge deemed valuable by the society. As Donald says, “a Chinese bureaucrat of the Han dynasty spent a lifetime training for and immersed in the *ESS,*” and “one requirement for [its] successful use is a map of its contents.”2 Perhaps this is an

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1 In the estimation of Aihe Wang, “the theoretical opposition between Dong Zhongshu and the king of Huainan epitomized the symbolic and political struggles between the centralized empire represented by the scholar-officials and the pluralism represented by noble kings”; Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185.

alternative way to think about the context, motivation behind, and compass of the Huainanzi that goes beyond literary or political aims. It is this motive that appears to inform Liu An’s characterization of his ‘system’ at the very end of the final chapter, “An Overview of the Essentials” (“Yao lüe” 要略), which suggests that the work was intended for a considerably broader readership than just the emperor: “This book of the Liu clan [Huainanzi] observes the images of Heaven and Earth, penetrates the affairs of past and present, evaluates them so as to establish a system, takes the measure of forms, and applies [the system] as befits [the circumstances].”

Because of the symbolic resonances and ‘national security’ implications of astronomy/astrology in the early empire, my focus here will be on chapter 3, “Heavenly Patterns,” of the Huainanzi. Donald Harper has described this chapter as

a synopsis of astro-calendrical knowledge derived from the more technical literature now restored to us; the Huainanzi seems to assume the Han reader’s knowledge of the technical literature, without which it would have been difficult to follow the astrological essay.

One cannot help noticing major differences in both substance and outlook between the two nearly contemporary texts “Heavenly Patterns” (“Tian wen” 天文) in the Huainanzi and “Treatise on the Celestial Offices” (“Tianguan shu” 天官書) in the Shiji. Since the topical coverage is ostensibly the same, it will

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3 The parallel with the “Appended Commentary” to the Changes would, of course, have been unmistakable, as would Liu An’s immodest claim to sageliness: “anciently, in ruling all-under-Heaven, Paoxi looked up to observe the images in Heaven and looked down to observe the patterns of Earth…. Heaven suspends images, to manifest the propitious and the inauspicious, and the sage makes of himself their semblance. Out of the River there emerged a Diagram, and from the Luo [River] there emerged a Writing; the sage models himself on them.”

4 Donald Harper, “Warring States Natural Philosophy and Occult Thought,” in The Cambridge History of Ancient China, from the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C., ed. Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 847. This does imply that, rather than being composed specifically for Emperor Wu, the Huainanzi’s presentation to the throne in 139 BCE did indeed represent a “repurposing” of a work compiled for different ends.