In 139 BCE, during a court visit to the capital, Liu An 刘安, king of Huainan 淮南, presented the Huainanzi 淮南子 to his nephew, Emperor Wu 武 (r. 141–87 BCE), who had become emperor only two years earlier. The text that Liu An presented was the product of many hands and many years of collecting, selecting, collating, and organizing textual units of various sorts, and it represents one of the most ambitious literary projects of Western Han 汉 times (202 BCE–9 CE). That such an effort was organized at the court of one of the lord-kings (zhuhouwang 諸侯王), men enfeoffed by the Han emperors as kings over often-large territories as a reward for extraordinary military achievements or as an acknowledgment of close kinship ties with the reigning emperor, is certainly significant. Even though the territorial, political, military, and legal powers of these lord-kings had been drastically curtailed during the reign of Emperor Jing 景帝 (r. 157–141 BCE), the presentation of the Huainanzi demonstrates the continued confidence of these lord-kings in their role as important cultural agents in the young empire. The independence of their archival and literary pursuits also illustrates the extent of their autonomy from the central court in Chang’an 长安. This confidence, understandably, carried over into the first years of Emperor Wu’s reign. The king of Huainan’s gesture of offering the newly acceded emperor a copy of his book underscores that confidence.
Many would call the *Huainanzi* a philosophical text, insofar as its discourse moves on a fairly abstract level. The text is also characterized by a very high degree of intertextuality. The product of a sustained effort at text collection, the *Huainanzi* is heir to the many texts that it seeks to integrate within its own synthesis, a synthesis intended to surpass all previous efforts. The *Huainanzi*’s indebtedness to other texts is evident from the many words, phrases, and passages that the text borrows, explicitly or implicitly, from its predecessors. Altogether, these complex borrowings lend the *Huainanzi* a decidedly archaic character, and the text, arguably, can be seen as the last of its kind.

The question that I shall address in this essay is whether such an archaizing, philosophical text also speaks to issues relevant to its own historical context. In other words, should the *Huainanzi* be analyzed and evaluated only in regard to its merit in organizing, clarifying, and pushing toward abstraction the discourse it inherited from its predecessors, or does the *Huainanzi* manage to break out of this shell to contribute to ongoing political debates? I shall pursue this inquiry through a close analysis of those passages within the *Huainanzi* that pertain to the *zhuhou* (lords). Other issues could have been chosen as well. However, the *Huainanzi*’s discourse on lords is particularly interesting, not only because the proper relations between the lord-kings and the emperor were an issue of much debate in Western Han times, but also because some scholars would like to read the *Huainanzi* as containing a bold claim for more autonomy for the lord-kings from the imperial court at Chang’an.

The *Huainanzi* nowhere explicitly addresses the relationship between the lords and the center; rather, it refers to lords in passing, in sixty-one passages scattered over many of its twenty-one chapters. That Liu An, the text’s patron, was himself a member of the *zhuhou* (the Western Han reincarnation of scholarly policy), see Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch’in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2000).

4 The *Huainanzi* would have been included in what Sima Qian, in the last chapter of his *Shiji* (史記), characterizes as ‘empty words’ (*kong yan* 空言), to which he opposed his own historical prose; Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 130.3297.


7 Only five chapters (2, 4, 7, 10, 16) do not have any passages containing the term *zhuhou*.