In this chapter I address a basic problem: why would a text like the Rituals of Zhou (Zhouli 周禮), which purports to describe the administrative structure of the Western Zhou 周 dynasty (ca. 1050–771 BCE), come to be employed by Wang Mang 王莽 (45 BCE–23 CE) and, later, Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086) in projects of strong state centralization? Answering this question for the case of Wang Mang, however, is no easy task. In contrast to what we have later for Wang Anshi, there are almost no sources to help us understand precisely how Wang Mang used, appropriated, and presented the Zhouli. We are told in the History of the Han (Hanshu 漢書) that Wang Mang employed the Zhouli, but we possess no commentaries on the text by either Wang Mang or one of his associates. In fact, we have no full commentary until Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE), who was far removed from the events of Wang Mang’s time and was concerned with different issues.

Even the statements in the Hanshu about how Wang Mang used the Zhouli—referred to as the Offices of Zhou (Zhouguan 周官)—are brief. We are told that Wang Mang changed the ritual system of the time to follow that of the Zhouguan,¹ that he used the Zhouguan for the taxation system,² and that he used the Zhouguan, along with the “The Regulations of the King” (“Wangzhi” 王制) chapter of the Records of Ritual (Liji 禮記), to organize state offices.³

I propose to tackle this problem in a way that is admittedly highly speculative. I will discuss the argument of the Zhouli in relation to other claims being made about state organization in early China. This will still not, of course, explain how figures in the court of Wang Mang were reading and appropriating the Zhouli, but it will at least

¹ Hanshu (“Jiaosi zhi”) 25.1265. All references to the dynastic histories in this chapter are to the Zhonghua shuju editions.
² Hanshu (“Shihuo zhi”) 25.1180.
help us speculate on the cultural resonance that the *Zhouli* might have had in the Han, why groups might have attempted to appropriate the *Zhouli*, and what implications such appropriations might have had at the time.

*The Organization of the Zhouli*

The *Zhouli* opens with the following claim:

> It is the king who establishes the state, distinguishes the quarters and rectifies the positions, structures the state and aligns the fields, sets up the offices and designates the functions. He thereby serves as the pivot for the populace.

This statement is then repeated at the start of each new section of the text, and each section of the text describes how the king set up the administrative structure for one of the six divisions of the state.

The first of these divisions concerns the officials in charge of administering the realm:

> He thereupon institutes the official for Heaven, the minister of the state, to employ and take charge of his subordinates and to supervise the regulation of the territories, so as to assist the king in ruling the territories and states.

The text then lists the officials under the minister, along with a short description of their functions. These are the “heavenly officials” (*tian guan* 天官).

The next section concerns the “earthly officials,” charged with educating and training the populace. The structure is the same as for the heavenly officials:

> It is the king who establishes the state, distinguishes the quarters and rectifies the positions, structures the state and aligns the fields, sets up the offices and designates the functions. He thereby serves as the pivot for the populace. He thereupon institutes the official for Earth, the minister of the multitude, to employ and take charge of his subordinates

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4 *Zhouli* (“Tianguan”) (Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series [hereafter ICS]) 1.0/1/3. Here and throughout, my translations have greatly benefited from the excellent translation by E. Biot 1851.

5 *Zhouli* (“Tianguan”) ICS 1.0/1/3–4.