
Excerpted from the complete translation of the Huainanzi, which was also published by Columbia University Press, The Dao of the Military: Liu An’s Art of War includes Andrew Meyer’s translation of “An Overview of the Military” (“Bing lüe” 兵略) accompanied by his substantial introduction that elaborates on several key themes briefly touched upon in his short prologue to the same chapter in the complete Huainanzi translation. This affordable paperback edition is, I assume, meant as a textbook for undergraduate or graduate use. Since the topics and motifs employed in “An Overview of the Military” might be of great interest for students in several fields—whether history, philosophy, religious studies, or political theory—the volume could potentially be an appropriate textbook for a number of courses. My review of this text will assess how well it fulfills its presumed purpose and will be aimed at those readers who wish to consider it as a textbook for their classrooms.

As indicated by its title, the translated Huainanzi chapter synthesizes and reflects upon a host of intellectual traditions circulating in the early Han; indeed, this tendency to synthetic reflection was common in the early Han and informed, as Meyer notes in his earlier prologue, the similarly titled “Bing shu lüe” 兵書略 (“An Overview of Military Writings”) composed by Liu Xiang 劉向 (ca. 77-ca. 6 BCE). The Huainanzi chapter not only responds to specific military techniques but, in keeping with the rising interest in cosmology, also contemplates cosmologically informed ethical norms bearing upon, however abstractly, the military and political arenas. The issues and vocabulary used are shared by texts of earlier eras, such as the Sunzi, but are reshaped to apply to the imperial circumstance. As with the rest of the Huainanzi, “An Overview of the Military” is a recondite and somewhat repetitive text, phrasing and rephrasing certain motifs and trends in a sonorous, quasi-liturgical format. These various themes and motifs are seen as intertwined, potentially resulting in cosmic order, the benefits of which would blanket the empire.

One major theme Meyer stresses in his introduction (to which he also calls attention in his earlier prologue in the Huainanzi volume) is the text’s repeated concern with “sustaining the perishing” and “reviving the extinct” (存亡繼絕), the “perishing” and “extinct” referring to the noble vassal houses of the idealized Zhou kingdom whose religious exercises to their ancestral houses was essential to the ritual order underlying imperial unity. Thus the Huainanzi, according to Meyer, stands in stark opposition to those Warring States texts, like the Sunzi, that viewed military operations in mechanical, relatively secular terms, rather than as religiously tinged undertakings to right the moral balance of the empire. The Huainanzi, as Meyer demonstrates, is clearly affected by the increased appearance of military treatises, but it is not disconnected from a pre-Warring States emphasis on aristocratic sensibilities, in which warfare was pursued only when absolutely necessary, and not simply to increase the state’s wealth and power. With this sensibility, the empire, now ostensibly unified,
would not experience the financial and psychological costs of military adventurism. The stressing of the need to preserve wholeness and unity underlies not only the above motifs but also the text’s formulation of the fundamental concept of the “Way,” in which the “Way,” as with the governance provided by a wise emperor, unites all things, in both the cosmic and political order. The renewed call to “sustain the perishing” and “revive the extinct,” Meyer declares, signifies the *Huainanzi*’s preference for political solutions to conflict. For Liu An, sponsor of the *Huainanzi*, to preserve the ancestral cults, and thus the aristocratic lineages, was the centerpiece for any reconciliation between the vassal states and the early Han central government. “Unrighteous” campaigns, that is, those campaigns that are not in response to “unrighteous” acts, violate the “way” and the unifying ritual, and cultural, order. In sum, for the *Huainanzi*, the use of coercive military power in a “functional” empire “can thus never be anything but an extreme emergency measure.” Furthermore, whatever the consequence for the defeated area, its rulers’ ancestral cults must be respected if any lasting political bond with the imperial government is to be maintained (53).

As stated above, “An Overview of the Military” exemplifies the variety and complexity of the intellectual trends of the Warring States and early Han periods. Because of this, as Meyer’s exposition of the above motif indicates, the text often makes subtle, and not so subtle, intertextual references, not only through catch-phrases—as with “sustaining the perishing” and “reviving the extinct”—but also historical episodes and borrowed conceptual vocabulary. To translate such a rich (albeit thematically very redundant and somewhat plodding) text is a task demanding of exceeding care and consideration of possible alternatives, especially if one is to hope that the text’s riches will be attractive not only to students, who can be difficult to impress, but also to other non-expert scholars and a general reading public. In omitting the Chinese, the Columbia editions produce seamless, uninterrupted English but force those who wish to attend to translation choices (and thus the necessarily involved interpretation) to follow along with the Chinese text. Thus they are not ideal for graduate use. For non-specialists, more problematic is the lack of consistency and subtlety (and sometime inaccuracy) in a number of Meyer’s translations. Perhaps my interest in consistency is overly fastidious—translation is as much a poetic exercise as an exacting one—and my general reservations are by no means limited to this particular translation of the *Huainanzi*. But given the prominence of the *Huainanzi* for early Han thought, I feel the burden to translate it carefully is all the more important, especially since early Han thought has been treated repeatedly in the past as muddled and weak, in comparison to the vibrant texts of the Warring States period. So I emphasize this out of an affection and protectiveness toward the now rapidly growing field of Han studies. Below I give a small, somewhat haphazard sample of word choices about which I have misgivings. For brevity’s sake I have omitted my concerns about more complex translation issues.

A simple instance is translating both *bai xing* 百姓 and *min* 民 as “common people,” obscuring any subtle distinction in the use of the two terms, the first more literally meaning “the many surnames.” Indeed, there is nothing utterly inaccurate with translating the former as “common people,” just that such may conceal certain connotations. More worrisome are the translation of *zhi* 治 (103) as “studying,” rather than “governing” or “organizing”; *xing*, a vital conceptual term, as “conditions” (106, 126); and *xu*, which has a critical function in earlier Daoist texts, as “deficiency” rather than the more common “vacuity” or “emptiness”