# INTRODUCTION

The *Huainanzi* (*The Master of Huainan*) is a compendium of knowledge dating from early in China's Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). It was compiled under the auspices of, and probably with the active participation of, Liu An (179?–122 B.C.E.), the king of Huainan. Liu An was an influential member of the imperial family who ruled a sizable kingdom within the Han Empire. He also was known as an essayist, critic, poet, and patron of learning.

The *Huainanzi* was completed and presented to the imperial throne in 139 B.C.E. Its twenty-one chapters contain a comprehensive survey of contemporary knowledge, from self-cultivation techniques to the arts of rulership and from cosmology and geography to public speaking, military affairs, and the importance of education. The book's final chapter summarizes the entire work and claims that it synthesizes the best features of all other schools of thought, thereby creating a compact yet comprehensive distillation of all knowledge necessary for ruling the empire. For readers today, it opens a fascinating window into the intellectual and political life of China in the second century B.C.E.

## Historical Background

For much of the first millennium B.C.E., China was divided into a large number of states ruled by members of a hereditary aristocracy. Those rulers were nominally subject to the authority of the kings of the Zhou dynasty (1046–256),

but after the eighth century B.C.E. the power of the Zhou kings waned, and they had little control over state affairs. For a time, during the Spring and Autumn period (722–481), the state rulers themselves tried to keep order, recognizing a succession of first-among-equals strongmen called *ba* (hegemons) who exercised authority on behalf of the Zhou kings. But that system eventually broke down, and during the Warring States period (481–221), the states grew larger and more powerful but fewer in number as the larger states conquered and absorbed their smaller neighbors. Warfare and treachery were commonplace, and philosophers and political theorists had only moderate success devising systems of rulership that would restore order once again.

In the mid-third century B.C.E., just as the enfeebled Zhou dynasty was coming to an end, the king of the state of Qin embarked on a conscious program of conquest, intended to defeat the other states and bring all of China under his own dominion. Abolishing hereditary offices, the king instituted a merit-based bureaucracy in the state of Qin and mobilized the whole population for the twin purposes of agriculture and war. His campaign was successful, and the last of the Zhou-era states submitted to Qin in 221 B.C.E. Taking the newly coined title Qin Shihuangdi (First Emperor of Qin), he extended his strict laws and bureaucratic government throughout the country. He then embarked on an ambitious—and, as it proved to be, overly ambitious—program of public works: building roads, canals, a section of the Great Wall, and his own huge, magnificent tomb. When the First Emperor died in 210, the country erupted in rebellion and civil war, and the Qin dynasty collapsed. The causes of that collapse were complex, but the explanation widely accepted at the time emphasized the populace's resentment of the burden of taxes and labor service placed on them, as well as the regime's policy of inflicting severe punishments for even petty crimes.

The principle of a united China endured, however, after some initial backtracking. In 206 B.C.E., the rebel chieftain Liu Bang proclaimed himself king of Han, and four years later, having defeated the last of his rivals, he assumed the title of emperor. Having come to power, he had to decide what his new government would look like and to what extent it would reflect the centralizing tendencies of Qin. Initially the new emperor instituted a hybrid system, keeping most of western China under direct imperial control and dividing the lands in the rich eastern parts of the country into kingdoms, semiautonomous realms that were handed over to the emperor's important allies and relatives. At the time, this would have been seen as a perfectly normal policy, sanctified by centuries of use. Soon, however, the Han dynasty found itself involved in a generations-long struggle to define the proper relationship between the imperial government and the neofeudal kingdoms. Rebellions and plots against

the imperial throne by various regional kings were brutally suppressed in 196, 174, and 154 B.C.E. Some scholars suggest that at least some of these "rebellions" were provoked, and perhaps fabricated, by imperial authorities as a way of eliminating the regional kings and bringing their territory under imperial control.

Liu An, the patron and editor of the *Huainanzi*, was a grandson of the Han dynasty's founder, Liu Bang. Liu An's father, Liu Chang, had been established as king of Huainan in 196 B.C.E., when he was still an infant. (The name of the kingdom means "south of the Huai River." At its largest extent, it encompassed the present-day Anhui and Jiangxi provinces and some adjacent territories.) In 174, the youthful Liu Chang was accused of rebellion and died on the road to exile. Although the kingdom of Huainan was temporarily abolished, it was reestablished (with much less territory) in 164, when Liu An, still in his teens, was named the second king of Huainan. He grew up to be a talented and ambitious monarch whose royal palace became a magnet for writers and intellectuals. At some point, Liu An began working with some of his guest-scholars to produce a book that would synthesize the best points of all schools of thought and provide infallible guidance on how a government should be run. That book is what we now know as the *Huainanzi*.

The fourth Han sovereign, Emperor Jing (r. 157–141 B.C.E.), also was a grandson of the founder and thus was Liu An's cousin. Much of the *Huainanzi* was compiled during Emperor Jing's reign, and it is quite possible that the writing of this manifesto for imperial government reflected Liu An's hope that he might succeed his cousin as emperor. (Unlike later European monarchies, Chinese dynasties did not always pass down the throne to the eldest son of the late ruler; succession could also run from brother to brother, cousin to cousin, and so on.) That did not happen, however. Instead, a teenage son of Emperor Jing, Liu Che, mounted the throne. Known to posterity as Emperor Wu (the Martial Emperor), he reigned from 141 to 87 B.C.E., winning a reputation as the Han dynasty's longest-ruling and most successful emperor.

Having been passed over in the imperial succession, Liu An tried to find another outlet for his ambitions. In 139 B.C.E., he traveled to the Han capital at Chang'an and presented his treatise on good government, the *Huainanzi*, to the imperial throne. He evidently intended to establish himself as a trusted elder cousin (in effect, an honorary uncle) and personal adviser to the young emperor. Records tell us that Emperor Wu was "delighted" with the book, but Liu An himself failed to gain much influence at court. He returned to Huainan and in 122 was accused of harboring imperial ambitions. He committed suicide rather than face prosecution, the kingdom of Huainan was abolished, and Liu An's extensive library and other personal possessions were confiscated by

the throne. Even though Liu An died in disgrace, the *Huainanzi* lived on. It never achieved canonical status (it was not, for example, part of the curriculum of studying for the imperial civil service examinations), but the *Huainanzi* endured through the centuries, attracting the attention of numerous commentators and intellectuals for the inherent interest of its ideas, the beauty of its prose, and its comprehensive approach to understanding the cosmos and the place of humans in it.

## The *Huainanzi*

The *Huainanzi* consists of twenty-one chapters. The final chapter, "An Overview of the Essentials," summarizes and characterizes the entire work. Written in an elaborate style of prose-poetry, that chapter probably was recited orally at the imperial court when Liu An presented the book to Emperor Wu. The "Overview" claims that the book's twenty substantive chapters encompass the best features of all earlier thinkers and thus supersede them. Moreover, the chapters leave out nothing of importance and so constitute a complete, unique, and infallible guide to the policies that should be followed by the imperial clan in governing the empire. The book envisions an emperor who has undergone rigorous training in the techniques of self-cultivation, leading to a state of sagehood (that is, being perfectly aligned with the basic forces of the cosmos); who has been comprehensively educated in history, statesmanship, rhetoric, and other necessary qualities; and who rules through loyal ministers and reliable bureaucrats, supported by the Lords of the Land—hereditary aristocrats like Liu An himself. It envisions an imperial establishment that is adaptable to changing times but preserves the best features of the past. Liu An's vision of empire reflected his own position and his own self-interest. In the end, though, that vision was overtaken by the imperial regime's centralizing tendencies and by an imperial ideology that differed significantly from Liu An's intellectual program. Yet some of its basic ideas remained influential, including the notion that the emperor should have the qualities of a sage and that his rule should be so attuned to cosmic forces and cycles as to seem effortless.

### Sources and Claims

In the early Han period, Liu An's *Huainanzi* became part of a lively, energetic, sometimes acrimonious multipart conversation among scholars and administrators about the nature of the cosmos, the role of humans in it, the structure and function of government, and other fundamental issues. Some intellectu-

als of the time took the position that a single text—for example, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu*) or one of its principal commentaries or the *Changes* (*Yijing* or *Zhouyi*)—constituted a complete and infallible (if properly interpreted) source of all knowledge and wisdom. Others advocated a doctrine (imperfectly understood today and still debated by scholars) known as Huang-Lao that supposedly combined the teachings of Laozi (that is, the *Daodejing*) and the Yellow Emperor. Others, like Liu An, advocated drawing on a diverse menu of texts to formulate a syncretic doctrine. Earlier works of this type, such as the *Mr. Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lüshi chunqiu*), directly influenced the *Huainanzi*. In turn, the *Huainanzi* makes the extraordinary claim that it distills and encompasses all essential knowledge, thus rendering all earlier books superfluous and making it unnecessary to compose any more new ones. Not surprisingly, that claim was not widely endorsed by contemporaries. Still, the *Huainanzi* offers a very wide-ranging and informative look at the intellectual currents in the early Han.

## Root and Branch

The central organizing metaphor of the *Huainanzi* is the concept of roots and branches—in other words, that certain ideas, concepts, institutions, and texts are fundamental, while others are derivative or peripheral. Put another way, the roots are associated with principles and the Way, and the branches are associated with "affairs," or actualizations of the principles of the Way. The first eight chapters of the work are "root" chapters; the next twelve deal with "branch" issues; and the last summarizes and makes claims for the work as a whole. The root chapters build on one another to create a framework for the branch chapters that follow.

Chapter 1 deals with the Way (*dao*), the indivisible monad that is both the universal source of all things and the all-encompassing totality of everything.

Chapter 2 describes how individual humans can align themselves with the Way to achieve extraordinary states of accomplishment such as the Genuine or the Perfected.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 form a cosmological trilogy of chapters that examine, respectively, astronomy and astrology, geography (both real and mythical) and the interactions of topography and living beings, and the calendar and the appropriate rituals and emblems for every month and season. These three chapters correspond structurally to the familiar triad in early Chinese thought—Heaven, Earth, and Man—in the order in which they emerge from the cosmic root.

Chapter 6 introduces the concept of resonance, the idea that every stimulus evokes a response conveyed through the medium of *qi*. In principle, these

stimuli and responses should be comprehensible through an understanding of cosmic regularities, but the chapter admits that in practice many of them remain mysterious.

Chapter 7 covers the theory and techniques of personal self-cultivation, fundamental to success as a ruler (political and administrative techniques of rulership are considered "branch" phenomena).

Chapter 8 articulates a theory of history that sees humans progressing from a "root" state of primitive communitarianism, associated with the Way and its Potency, through successively elaborate forms of culture associated with "branch" virtues such as Humaneness and Rightness, down to the present day when laws and punishments have become necessary for government. The self-cultivated ruler is urged to adhere to the root while making properly expedient use of branch techniques.

Chapters 9 through 20 describe various branch phenomena, including rulership and administration (9), the relationship between government and moral values (10), customs and ritual (11), qualities of the ideal ruler (12), the concept of change in historical context (13), proverbial wisdom (14), the military (15), rhetoric (16 and 17), the vagaries of human affairs (18), the necessity of education and personal effort (19), and Moral Potency as the foundation of government (20). Obviously the classification of these matters as branch phenomena does not imply that they are unimportant, only that they are derived from fundamental principles, rather than being fundamental in their own right.

## Key Concepts in the *Huainanzi*

The *Way* (*dao*) is the source of everything in the universe and embraces all things in their totality. Nothing can exist apart from or in contrast to the Way; the Way cannot be negated. Even the term itself is provisional. In fact, the Way is not namable because to name it would be to differentiate it from something else. (As the opening line of the *Laozi* famously puts it, "The Way that can be called 'The Way' is not the everlasting Way.") According to the *Huainanzi*, the key to success in all human activities is that they be attuned to the Way. The term also can be used to denote a specific doctrine, teaching, or technique (for example, "the Way of charioteering").

*Potency* (*de*) is the activation of the Way in the phenomenal world. The word *de* is etymologically related to another word (also pronounced *de*) that means "to obtain," so potency has the connotation of "to accumulate." For example, during the spring and summer, the potency of yang accumulates while the potency of yin reciprocally diminishes. But in autumn and winter, yin's potency

accumulates while yang's potency diminishes. The sage-ruler accumulates potency, allowing him to bestow rewards on the deserving. Therefore, *de* also has the sense of "reward" or "benefit." When the term occurs in the *Huainanzi* in contexts that are clearly Confucian in orientation (for example, in regard to such virtues as Humaneness and Rightness), we translate it as "Moral Potency." (Older, and in our view less apt, translations of this difficult word include "power" and "virtue.")

*Qi* means both "matter" and "energy." Everything that exists is made of *qi*, and every action is a manifestation of *qi* energy. *Qi* comes in various textures, from the most ethereal and refined to the coarse and lumpish. Ethereal *qi* is heavenly, and coarse *qi* is earthly. Spirits are made of highly refined *qi*, but ordinary physical matter is made of coarse *qi*. Highly refined states of consciousness such as tranquillity and clarity are manifestations of ethereal *qi*. *Qi* consequently serves as a vibrating, resonant medium that conveys responses to stimuli. In medical and self-cultivation contexts, *qi* means "vital energy" or "vital breath," the animating principle of a living body. The principal aims of various techniques of self-cultivation are to refine the body's *qi*, to attain deep states of insight, and to control and direct the flow of energy within the body.

*Wu* and *you* are paired antonyms that mean "to be without" and "to have," "nonexistence" and "existence," "nothing" and "something." We live in the world of "something," but "nothing" is both temporally and conceptually prior to "something." *Wu* contains myriad potentialities, but *you* is reduced to a single instantiation. For that reason, the *Huainanzi* (like the Daoist classics the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*) exhibits a strong preference for *wu* over *you*.

In the *Huainanzi*'s cosmology, the primal unity of the undifferentiated Way divides into *yin* and *yang*, two reciprocal forces that are in a constant state of motion and transformation. Yin and yang are complementary rather than antagonistic. They are paired opposites, each containing the germ of, and ultimately evolving to become, the other. Yin is dark, female, moist, low-lying, cool, oviparous, and winter; and yang correspondingly is bright, male, dry, high, warm, viviparous, and summer. Unlike some other Han texts, the *Huainanzi* does not conspicuously privilege yang over yin but regards both as cosmic forces necessary for the universe to function.

The *Five Phases* (*wuxing*) represent the five paradigmatic manifestations of *qi*: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. (The term *wuxing* is sometimes translated as "five elements," but this is misleading because the five are paradigms, not constituents, of physical phenomena.) The five are "phases" of *qi* in the same sense that steam, liquid water, and ice are "phases" of $H_2O$. All phenomena can be classified as belonging to one or another of the Five Phases, as well as being yin or yang.

*Resonance* (*ganying*) refers to the ability of a stimulus to evoke a response through the vibrating medium of *qi*, even in the absence of a perceptible physical connection between the two. The classic example is that if the "C" string of one musical instrument is plucked, the "C" string of a nearby instrument will vibrate. Chapter 6 of the *Huainanzi* describes resonance as being both crucial to the workings of the cosmos and deeply mysterious and hard to fathom.

*Nature* (*xing*) is the quality that makes a thing itself, the attributes that are present from birth in a living creature. "Nature" is often contrasted with deliberate human undertakings, so it is said that to run and kick is the nature of a horse, while to control a horse with bit and reins is to impose human will on the animal.

*Self-cultivation* (*yang shen*) refers to a variety of meditative techniques and disciplines aimed at refining and controlling one's store of vital energy to attain a state of authenticity that is a manifestation of "quintessential spirit" (*jingshen*). These are collectively referred to as "the techniques of the mind." The results of successful self-cultivation are described with a variety of terms denoting superior attainments: both the Superior Man (*junzi*) and the Sage (*sheng*) are regarded as active participants in the human realm of affairs, while the Genuine (*zhenren*) and the Perfected (*zhiren*) are mysterious, self-sufficient beings beyond the reach of ordinary concerns. One consequence of self-cultivation can be the achievement of "spirit-illumination" (or "spiritlike illumination"), an ability to see deeply into matters hidden from the perception of ordinary humans.

*Wu wei* literally means "without acting." In the *Huainanzi*, it generally does not refer to a state of utter inaction but to the ability of a person (especially a ruler) to be so attuned to the Way and therefore so filled with Potency that his desires are translated into reality without any visible effort on his part. Things that occur through *wu wei* appear to come about "naturally" or "spontaneously" (*ziran* [thus of itself]).

*Transformation* (*hua*) is the most profound of several terms for change ("change," "alteration," "shift," and so on) in the *Huainanzi*. A sage-ruler is able to "transform the people" by projecting his Potency in such a way as to evoke a spontaneous positive response in the natures of the people in his realm.

*Humaneness* (*ren*), *Rightness* (*yi*), *Ritual* (*li*), and *Music* (*yue*) are virtues and social phenomena associated especially with the teachings of Confucius and his followers. In the *Huainanzi*, these are taken to be valuable, indeed essential, qualities of a well-governed society in the conditions that obtain in the present day. But they are derived, rather than fundamental, qualities ("branches" rather than "roots"). Thus government conducted by means of these virtues is inferior in principle to the primitive harmony brought about by the sages of antiquity,

who, being perfectly attuned to the Way, transformed the people by means of non-action.

## Sources of the *Huainanzi*

True to its stated claim to draw on the best ideas of all previous thinkers and texts, the *Huainanzi* quotes, paraphrases, alludes to, and echoes a very wide range of earlier materials. It treats four texts as canonical; that is, it usually quotes them by name and regards them as authoritative in affirming or ratifying a position. These four are the *Laozi*, the *Odes*, the *Changes*, and the *Documents*. The *Huainanzi* also draws heavily on many other texts but seldom or never refers to them by title.

Chapter 1 of the *Huainanzi* is heavily based on the *Laozi*, which therefore can be said to form the root of the work's root chapters. Interestingly, the *Laozi* is not referred to by name in *Huainanzi* 1. Instead, it appears that the authors of the opening chapter of the *Huainanzi* assumed that its readers were thoroughly familiar with its source text. But the *Laozi* is quoted extensively by name in *Huainanzi* 12 and in many other chapters of the text.

The *Odes* (a collection of some three hundred poems comprising liturgical hymns, dynastic legends, folk songs, and other genres), the *Changes* (a divination text consulted for aid in making decisions), and the *Documents* (a collection of supposedly ancient historical documents of varying degrees of reliability) became closely associated with the Confucian tradition during the Han dynasty. The *Huainanzi* quotes these texts, usually by name, most often in the "branch" chapters of the text and only seldom in the "root" chapters. This is consistent with the *Huainanzi*'s position that the Confucian virtues, like Humaneness, Rightness, Propriety, and Music, are derived properties of the Way.

The *Huainanzi* also draws extensively on the *Zhuangzi* (the second great work, along with the *Laozi*, of pre-Han Daoism), which forms the philosophical basis for *Huainanzi* 2 and 7 and is often alluded to (but not usually cited by name) in other chapters, both "root" and "branch." Several *Huainanzi* chapters allude to the *Hanfeizi* (which argues for hard-nosed political centralism and performance-based rewards and punishments to achieve political goals), the *Xunzi* (a work in the Confucian tradition that advocates a pragmatic approach to political and administrative issues and places great emphasis on the need for education and moral cultivation), and the *Guanzi* (itself a highly eclectic work dealing with government administration, cosmology, self-cultivation, and other matters). The *Huainanzi* also draws on, or at least shares material with, earlier syncretic texts such as the *Shizi* (*Master Shi*) and the *Lüshi chunqiu*.

Individual chapters of the *Huainanzi* can often be associated with particular source texts. *Huainanzi* 3 borrows from astronomical and cosmological texts like the "Tian wen" (Questions About Heaven) section of the poetic anthology *Chuci* (*Elegies of Chu*). *Huainanzi* 4 has much in common with the *Shanhaijing* (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*), an account of real and mythical geography within and beyond the borders of China. Much of *Huainanzi* 5 quotes from (or shares a source text with) the *Lüshi chunqiu*, while *Huainanzi* 15 draws on a rich tradition of pre-Han military texts such as the *Sunzi bingfa* (*Master Sun's Arts of War*). In addition, portions of the *Huainanzi* apparently quote from or are based on earlier texts that have been lost and are now unknown or known only by title. For example, several sections of *Huainanzi* 3 quote verbatim from a short work known as the "Wuxing zhan" (Stations of the Five Planets), a previously unknown text archaeologically recovered at Mawangdui, Changsha, in Hunan Province, in 1973. Probably many other passages in the *Huainanzi* are quoted from lost and now untraceable sources.

The fact that much of the *Huainanzi* is taken from earlier sources does not mean, however, that the text is simply a grab bag of recycled materials. The genius of Liu An and his court scholars was precisely that, drawing on early China's rich textual tradition and creating new material as needed, they formulated a comprehensive and persuasive view of the world and how it should be ruled by a sagelike, cultivated, and morally potent sovereign.

## About This Book

*The Essential Huainanzi* is an abridgment of *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, the first complete English translation of Liu An's great work. Although about 20 to 30 percent of each chapter is included in this abridged volume, most of the ancillary features of the unabridged volume, such as the appendices explaining technical terms and an extensive bibliographical essay, have been omitted. Our aim in this book is to create a highly readable condensation of the *Huainanzi* while making it easy to refer to the unabridged work for readers who wish to do so. A few, very inconspicuous corrections to the translation have been made in this abridged volume; otherwise, the corresponding material in the unabridged and abridged texts is identical.

The introduction to each of the chapters of the abridged translation (except that to chapter 21 itself) begins by quoting the chapter summary from *Huainanzi* 21, "An Overview of the Essentials." After this self-introductory passage,

we briefly describe the content of the chapter, its sources, the significance of the chapter title, and the place of the chapter in the work as a whole. Considerably longer and more detailed chapter introductions may be found in the unabridged edition.

Section numbers (not present in the original Chinese text of the *Huainanzi*) were added to the unabridged translation, both to reveal underlying structural features of the text and to facilitate references to the translation itself. The numbers of sections quoted in full or in part in this volume match the section numbers in the unabridged translation.

We were careful to preserve in the formatting of our translations, in both the unabridged edition and this book, such formal characteristics as block prose, parallel prose (set line for line and indented), and verse (set line for line and indented even more). These features are important to appreciating the literary qualities of the text as well as the rhetorical force of its arguments.

We omitted most of the footnotes in the abridged edition, except for the explanatory footnotes necessary for understanding special terms, historical anecdotes, and the like. Those readers who require such information can find footnotes explaining textual issues, cross-references, and other scholarly questions in the corresponding passages in the unabridged translation.

The proper names of persons, identified in footnotes in the unabridged translation, are collected in a glossary at the end of this volume, to reduce further the distraction of numerous footnotes to the text.

For readers who might wish to consult the Chinese text on which our translation is based, the unabridged translation is keyed by chapter, page, and line to D. C. Lau, A *Concordance to the Huainanzi* (*Huainanzi zhuzi suoyin*) (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1992).

We already have defined some of the key terms in the *Huainanzi*, but a fuller explanation of these and other terms may be found in two appendices in the unabridged translation volume: appendix A, "Key Chinese Terms and Their Translations," and appendix B, "Categorical Terms."

In this book's short bibliography, we mention two Chinese editions of the *Huainanzi* and a few key Western-language translations and studies. A more extensive bibliography of translations and studies, along with a brief account of the transmission and textual history of the *Huainanzi*, may be found in the unabridged translation volume, in appendix C, "A Concise Textual History of the *Huainanzi* and a Bibliography of *Huainanzi* Studies."

Further information about the historical background, the intellectual and political life of the early Han dynasty, the sources of the *Huainanzi*, the state of modern *Huainanzi* studies, and other related matters can found in the general

introduction to the unabridged translation. Likewise, more detailed information on individual chapters can be found in the chapter introductions of that work.

We gratefully acknowledge the contribution to the complete translation, and to this abridged volume, of two colleagues: Michael Puett, who participated in the translation of chapter 13, and Judson Murray, who participated in the translation of chapter 21.

We hope that this abridged edition of the *Huainanzi* will be read with interest and pleasure and that it will stimulate some readers to explore further in the field of *Huainanzi* studies.

# One

## ORIGINATING IN THE WAY

"Originating in the Way"
[begins with] the six coordinates contracted and compressed
and the myriad things chaotic and confused.
[It then] diagrams the features of the Grand One
and fathoms the depths of the Dark Unseen,
thereby soaring beyond the frame of Empty Nothingness.
By relying on the small, it embraces the great;
by guarding the contracted, it orders the expansive.
It enables you to understand
the bad or good fortune of taking the lead or following behind
and the benefit or harm of taking action or remaining still.
If you sincerely comprehend its import, floodlike, you can achieve a grand vision.
If you desire a single expression to awaken to it:
"Revere the heavenly and preserve your genuineness."
If you desire a second expression to comprehend it:
"Devalue things and honor your person."
If you desire a third expression to fathom it:
"Externalize desires and return to your genuine dispositions."
If you grasp its main tenets,
inwardly you will harmonize the Five Orbs
and enrich the flesh and skin.

If you adhere to its models and standards
and partake of them to the end of your days,
they will provide the means
to respond and attend to the myriad aspects of the world
and observe and accompany its manifold alterations,
as if rolling a ball in the palm of your hand.
Surely it will suffice to make you joyous!

"An Overview of the Essentials" (21.2)

"Originating in the Way" (Yuan dao), the first of the eight foundational or "root" chapters of the text, is significant because it provides the cosmological basis for the entire *Huainanzi* collection. It opens with a beautiful poetic rhapsody on the cosmology of the Way (*dao*) and its Potency (*de*) in the tradition of the *Laozi*, certainly one of the canonical sources for this essay and for the book as a whole. In it we see a detailed examination of how these cosmic foundations are manifested in the world and an in-depth description of how sages are able to use their unique penetrating vision of these foundations, attained through self-cultivation, to bring peace and harmony to the realm. Coming at the beginning of the entire twenty-one-chapter book and presented to the court at a time when its compiler, Liu An, was trying to dissuade his nephew, Emperor Wu, from accepting the arguments of his Confucian (*ru*) advisers, this chapter serves a number of purposes.

First, even though the chapter never directly affirms a particular intellectual affiliation, its cosmological, psychological, and political philosophy shows its indebtedness to the *Laozi* and some other important early Daoist sources on the relationship of cosmology and self-cultivation to rulership. Only such an ideal of rulership comprehends the inner workings of the cosmos and applies that wisdom to governing in harmony with them. Second, as the opening chapter of the collection, "Originating in the Way" sets out general themes that will be pursued in more detail in much of the remainder of the work, such as cosmology, human psychology and self-cultivation, and political philosophy. Its importance to understanding the entire book and seeing it in a clearer light cannot be overemphasized.

Perhaps the most important focus of this chapter is on how the Way generates and infuses the innate natures of all things and guides their spontaneous interaction through a series of regular patterns such as the movements of the stars and planets and the structured flow of vital energies in the human being. Taken together, these natures and patterns form a "normative natural order." Sages accord with this order through a self-cultivation process that is described

in this chapter. Its authors recommend practices that empty out consciousness to attain psychological states of tranquillity and freedom from self that, when they are applied to daily affairs, produce clear cognition, unbiased attitudes, and effortless action that yield a spontaneous harmony with the normative natural order. This cognitive mode is the essence of skilled rulership.