Insidious Syncretism in the Political Philosophy of *Huainanzi*

A government might be established on the principle of benevolence towards the people, like that of a father towards his children. Under such a *paternal government* (*imperium paternale*), the subjects, as immature children who cannot distinguish what is truly useful or harmful to themselves, would be obliged to behave purely passively and to rely upon the judgement of the head of state as to how they ought to be happy, and upon his kindness in willing their happiness at all. Such a government is the greatest conceivable *despotism*.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

Current scholarly opinion endorses two complementary observations concerning “Zhushu” 主術 (The techniques of the ruler), the ninth chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子. First, the chapter is said to advocate a novel and practicable ethic centered on the beneficent ideal of *limin* 利民, “bringing profit to the people”; and second, by combining elements of pre-imperial Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, “Zhushu” displays the syncretism so characteristic of the *Huainanzi* compendium.¹

The former assessment goes back at least to the noted critic Hu Shi (1891–1962), who was so impressed with the text’s concern for the populace that he was prompted to announce: “These theories have a very democratic spirit.”² Contemporary views, if more circumspect, echo Hu’s statement. Kanaya Osamu describes the essence of “Zhushu” as “a political theory that held *wuwei* [nonaction] and *ziran* 自然 [self-so] to be central” and “government for the people.”³ Xu Fuguan, similarly, contends that Western Han thinkers like Liu An 劉安 (d. 122 B.C.) and his clients⁴ inherited the concept of *tianxia wei gong* 天下為公 (All under Heaven is for the people) common to the pre-imperial schools of Confucianism, Daoism, and Mohism, and constructed out of this legacy a more advanced political theory.⁵ And, most recently, Roger T. Ames, who has published a complete translation of the text, asserts that “the notion of government
for the people constitutes the unifying spirit of its entire political philosophy” (emphasis in original).6

I believe the notion of limin in the “Zhushu” chapter, far from implying an ancient form of democracy or “government for the people,” represents a consciously articulated ideology of autistic paternalism. The basic assumption—and hence the epithet “autistic”—is that the ruler’s subjects are not possessed of minds in any philosophical sense.7 Generations of commentators, moreover, have missed this theme in the text because of certain stultifying traditions of Chinese intellectual historiography. Scholars have been led astray by the interrelated assumptions that the dominant intellectual viewpoints in the first decades of the Han dynasty were Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism, and that the Huainanzi is a syncretic text marking the confluence of all three streams.

First, the terminology is obsolete; of the names “Confucianism,” “Daoism,” and “Legalism,” the latter two do not refer to a discernible philosophy with adherents who identified themselves as such.8 What “Legalism” denotes is never clear,9 and to speak of “Daoism,” as though this is what Sima Tan 司馬談 (d. ca. 110 B.C.) meant by daojia 道家, is simply anachronistic.10 But the more pressing problem lies elsewhere: there is more to the study of Chinese philosophy than merely identifying and classifying phrases like wuxi 墨義 (humanity and righteousness) as “Daoist” or “Confucian.” Scholars have hastened to point out which terms and ideas correspond to which of the august Six Houses of ancient Chinese thought, as though this kind of mapping represented an end in itself. But the real task of a modern critic is to consider the arguments themselves and the ways in which thinkers presented new ideas and responded to old ones. “Zhushu” is an excellent case in point. The mere cataloging of its sources can lead only to the confining pronouncement that the essay represents an amalgam of various philosophical schools.11 The more eye-opening, indeed the more sinister, interpretation of “Zhushu” is apparent only if we take seriously the ramifications of the text’s claims.

“Zhushu” opens with a description, in grave and austere language, of the proper techniques of rulership:

人主之術，處無為之事，而行不言之教，清靜不動，一度而不搖，因循而不任下，責成而不勞。（L 9.269; S 9.1a)13

The techniques of the ruler of men are “located in affairs [undertaken] without action and practiced in unspoken teachings.”14 Clear and tranquil,
he does not move. He rules with unity and is not agitated. He follows and
complies [with things] and delegates responsibilities to his subordinates. His
duties are completed yet he does not toil.

Readers of the second century B.C. would have easily recognized this idiom. “Nonaction” was, by this time, a clear political concept: it means to
rule with the Way and not to interfere by means of any purposive action
that might prove inimical to the cosmic order.\textsuperscript{15}

The text continues: the primary element of rulership lies in renxia 任
下, “delegating responsibilities to inferiors.”

心知規而師傅論導，口能言而行人稱辭，足能行而相者先導，耳能聽而執正
進諫[= 謀]\textsuperscript{16} (L. 9.269; S 9.1a)

His mind knows its schemes, but his instructors and teachers issue the edicts
of guidance. His mouth can speak, but his envoys make the laudatory
speeches. His legs can walk, but those who assist him lead the way. His ears
can listen, but those who grasp government [i.e., his ministers]\textsuperscript{17} decide
which plans to put forward.\textsuperscript{18}

Classical readers would still have found themselves on familiar
ground. It was a cardinal principle of wenzi 溫之 thought that the ruler must
assign duties to his subjects and reward or punish them according to their
performance, rather than undertake the onerous task of administration
personally.\textsuperscript{19} A famous illustration of this idea appears in the writings on
Han Fei:

鄭子產晨出，過東匠 [＝ 務]\textsuperscript{20}之問，聞婦人之哭，撫其御之手而聽之。有
問，過吏執而問之，則手授其封者也。異日，其御問曰：夫子何以知之？子
產曰：其聲慷慨，凡人於其親愛也，始病而愛，臨死而慷慨，已死而哀。今哭已
死不哀而慷慨，是以知其有為也。或曰：子產之治，不亦多事乎？事必待耳目
之所及而後加之，則鄭國之得患者矣。不任典成之吏，不察參伍之政，不
明度量，恃盡聰明，勞智慮，而以知言，不亦無術乎？且夫物眾而智寡，寡
不勝眾，智不足以知物，故因物以治物。下眾而上寡，寡不勝眾，者言君不
足以遍知臣也，故因人以治人，是以形體不勞而事治，智慮不用而義得。\textsuperscript{21}

Zichan of Zheng went out one morning and, passing the gate of the Eastern
Ward [of the capital], heard a woman crying. He stilled his driver’s hand
and listened. When he had time, he sent a deputy to arrest and interrogate
her; [he discovered that] she had strangled her husband with her own hands. Another day, his driver asked, “How did you know it?”

Zichan said, “Her sound was fearful. People always relate to their loved ones [as follows]: at the beginning of illness, they are worried; at the approach of death, they are fearful; after death, they are in grief. Now she was crying for one who was already dead and was not in grief but was fearful; from this I knew her crime.”

Someone [i.e., Han Fei] said: “Did Zichan’s rulership not [require] many things? One could know of crime only after it had reached one’s ears and eyes, and the state of Zheng apprehended but few criminals. Not enlisting officials of laws and punishments, observing the ‘government of threes and fives’ [a method of dividing the populace into manageable groups], not clarifying rules and measures, but depending entirely on shrewdness and working one’s wisdom and deliberation in order to know of crime—is this not a lack of technique? Now objects are many and wisdom is rare. What is rare does not vanquish what is manifold, and wisdom is not sufficient to know all things. Therefore one follows things in order to rule things. Inferiors are many and superiors are few. The few do not vanquish the many, that is to say, the lord [alone] is not sufficient to know all his subjects. Therefore one follows people in order to rule people. In this [way], one does not cause one’s form and body to toil, but affairs are ordered; one does not employ one’s wisdom and deliberation, and criminals are apprehended.”

Zichan’s method of rulership requires “many things,” Han Fei says, because it depends entirely on “shrewdness”—not to mention circumstances. Zichan had to pass by the woman’s residence on precisely the right morning, and had to possess, moreover, an uncanny ability to detect dissimulation, for her crime to be discovered. Han Fei pays Zichan a back-handed compliment: he is so talented and so wise that a typical minister cannot be expected to discern what he can. Zichan’s rulership lacks shu, “technique,” because it requires a genius like himself to catch all the villains in the state. With his sensitive ear, Zichan elevates criminology to an art form, but Han Fei is hardly interested in art. Han Fei is interested in technique, in procedures that can be reproduced by common ministers without extraordinary skills.

The father of shu is Shen Buhai, who is famous for the dictum “The sage ruler relies on standards and does not rely on wisdom; he relies on technique, not on persuasions” 聖君任法而不任智，任數而不任說. An
argument very much like Han Fei’s is attributed to Shen Buhai in the
Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lu:

韓昭侯視所以祠廟之牲，其豕小，昭釐侯令官更之，官以是豕來也。昭釐
侯曰：是非穀者之家邪？官無以對。命吏罪之。從者曰：君何以知之？君
曰：吾以其耳也。申不害聞之，曰：何以知其聲？以其耳之聰也。何以知其
官？以其目之明也。何以知其狂？以其言之當也。故曰：去聰無以聞則聰，
去目無以見則明，去智無以知則公，去三者不任則治，三者任則亂，以此言
耳目心智之不足恃也，耳目心智，其所以知識甚闊，其所以聞見甚淺，以淺
闊博居天下，安殊俗，治萬民，其說固不行，十理之間，而耳不能聞，惟臆
之外，而目不能見，三覠之宮，而心不能知。26

Marquis Zhaoxi of Han [r. 362–333 B.C.?]27 saw a sacrifice [about] to be
offered in the temple; the pig was small. Marquis Zhaoxi ordered an official
to replace it, [but] the official returned with the [same] pig. Marquis Zhaoxi
said, “Is this not the pig that was to be sacrificed?”28 The official had no
response, [so the marquis] commanded a deputy to punish him.

His followers said, “How did my Lord King know it?”

The lord said, “I used my ears.”

Shen Buhai heard of this and said, “How does one know that someone
is deaf? By the keenness of his ears. How does one know that he is blind?
By the clarity of his eyes. How does one know that he is mad? By the
appropriateness of his words. Therefore I say, if you discard listening and do
not use it to hear, you will be keen; if you discard looking and do not use it
to see, you will be clear; if you discard wisdom and do not use it to know,
you will be all-encompassing. If you discard [these] three things and do not
rely [on them], there will be order; if you rely on [these] three things, there
will be chaos. This is to say that the ears, eyes, mind, and wisdom are not
sufficient to depend on. That which can be known and recognized by the
ears, eyes, mind, and wisdom is very incomplete; that which they can hear
and see is very superficial. Using what is superficial and incomplete to dwell
[i.e., rule] broadly under Heaven, pacify divergent practices, and rule the
myriad people—this proposition will certainly not succeed. The ears cannot
hear [from a] space of ten li; the eyes cannot see [from] outside a curtain
or wall; and the mind cannot know every house of three mu.”29

What the ruler needs, then, is not keen eyes and ears but shu.

There are many ways in which the “Zhushu” chapter invites the
reader to consider Shen Buhai’s philosophy. First, and most obviously,
the chapter is titled “Zhushu,” which can mean not only “The Techniques of the Ruler,” as it is generally taken, but also (with zhu as a putative verb), “Taking Shu as One’s Ruler,” that is to say, “Esteeming Technique.” The author may even intend to allude to the famous chapter of the Han Feizi known as “Zhudao,” or the “The Way of the Ruler,” which can, similarly, also mean “Esteeming the Way.”

Second, “Zhushu” alludes in subtle ways to Shen Buhai’s writings. For example, the very first sentence in the text, quoted above, contains the phrase yinxun er renxia 因循而任下: “to follow and comply, and delegate responsibilities to one’s subordinates.” Yinxun was a term intimately associated with Shen Buhai in classical times. In the Xinxu 新序 (Newly arranged [anecdotes]), for example, Liu Xiang wrote: “Master Shen’s writings say that the lord of men should grasp shu and do away with punishments, and yinxun in order to supervise and hold responsible his vassals and subordinates” 申子之書言人君當執術無刑，因循以督責臣下.”

Finally, the administrative recommendations made in the “Zhushu” chapter square with Shen Buhai’s naturalistic philosophy. In order to rectify names and settle affairs, the “Zhushu” claims, one must not interfere with the natural tendency of names and affairs to manage themselves. “Each name names itself, each category categorizes itself. Things are so of themselves; [the ruler] lets nothing emerge from himself” 名各自名，類各自類，事猶自然，莫出於己 (L. 9.270; S 9.1a). This idea was also expressed, we remember, by Shen Buhai in “The Great Body”: “Names rectify themselves; affairs settle themselves. Thus he who has the Way grants names their autonomy but still rectifies them; he follows affairs but still settles them.” Because of this axiomatic naturalism—what is so ought to be so—Shen Buhai’s ideal ruler merely rests within the palace and allows the world around him to rule itself naturally.

Crucially, “Zhushu” agrees with Shen Buhai that the ruler must not use his own abilities, but should co-opt those of his subjects instead.

得用人之道，而不任己之才者也。故假[= 駕] 興馬者，足不勞而致千里，乘舟楫者，不能游而絕江海。（L. 9.294; S 9.12a-f.)

Whoever obtains the Way of Using People does not rely on his own ability. Thus, one who rides a carriage or horse makes his feet go one thousand li without making them toil; one who takes advantage of a boat and oars traverses rivers and oceans even if he cannot swim.
“Using people” (or “using the populace” 用眾) is one of the text’s favorite themes. Echoing Shen Buhai yet again, “Zhushu” asserts: “The flock of ministers are like spokes of a wheel coming together at the hub” 群臣幅湊 (L. 9.293; § 9.12a). And further:

勇力不足以持天下矣，智不足以為治，勇不足以為強，則人材不足任，明也。而君人者不下廟堂之上，而知四海之外者，物以識物，人以知人也。故積力之所舉，則無不勝也，眾智之所為，則無不成也。 (L. 9.279; § 9.5a--f)

Courage and energy are not sufficient to maintain all under Heaven. Wisdom is not sufficient for government; courage is not sufficient for strength. Thus it is clear that one’s [own] abilities are not sufficient to rely on. But the lord does not descend from the ancestral hall yet still knows what is beyond the Four Seas. He complies with things to understand things; he complies with man to understand man. Thus what is established through accumulated energies is not overcome by anything; what is created through the wisdom of the populace is not left incomplete in any respect.

As long as he harnesses the energies of his populace, the ruler can dwell in his ancestral hall, completely unmoving, and yet retain control over all the earth. He achieves this mastery by recognizing the particular talents of each of his subjects. For each person has a native specialty, which the lord must discover. By assigning duties commensurate with his vassals’ talents, the ruler can ensure the efficient running of the machinery of state.

鹿之山，澤不能踕也，其下，牧豈能迫之，才有所修短也。是故有大略者，不可貴以捷巧，有小智者，不可任以大功。人有其才，物有其形，有任一而太重，或任百而尚輕。(L. 9.292; § 9.11b)

When a deer goes up a mountain, the roebuck cannot tiptoe [there]; when it reaches the bottom, [even] a herd boy can chase it. Abilities have their advantages and disadvantages. For this reason, someone who possesses the great outline [i.e., someone of broad vision] cannot be charged with duties that [require] cleverness and agility; someone who possesses little wisdom cannot be placed in charge of large projects. Men have their abilities; things
have their forms. There are those who, delegated one responsibility, think it a magnificent burden; others, delegated a hundred, still find it easy.

However, it is not enough merely to entrust affairs of state to one’s ministers and then retire; the ruler must take care to establish his bureaucracy in accordance with the principles of the universe. His methods must be in line with the Way. “States may have vanquished rulers, but the Way never decays in the world. Men may have poverty and hardship, but principles are all-pervading” 國有亡主，而世無廢道，人有困窮，而理無不通 (L. 9.277; § 9.5a). And more explicitly:

古之置有司也，所以禁民，使不得自恣也，其立君也，所以剰有司，使無專行也，非法禮義者，所以禁君，使無擅斷也，人莫得自恣，則道勝，道勝而理達矣。故反於無為，無為者，非謂凝滯而不動也，以其言莫從己而出也。(L. 9.295; § 9.13a)

The ancients established officials in order to restrain the people—to make sure that they did not do as they pleased. They raised lords in order to goad the officials—to make sure that they did not act of their own accord. They standardized and recorded rituals and protocols in order to restrain the lords—to make sure that they did not adjudicate freely. When people do not do as they please, then the Way prevails. When the Way prevails, principles arrive. Thus they returned to nonaction. “Nonaction” does not refer to congealing oneself and not moving; it means that nothing emerges from the self.

“Nothing emerges from the self” because names and affairs simply regulate themselves if the Way is allowed to flourish. The ruler must let all things be so of themselves; he must not force his private motives onto the delicate system.

法者，天下之度量而人主之準繩也。縣法者，法不法也，設賞者，賞當賞也。法定之後，中程者賞，詐術者誅，尊貴者不輕其罰，而卑賤者不重其刑，犯法者雖賢必誅，中度者雖不肖必無罪。是故公道通而私道塞矣。(L. 9.295; § 9.13a)

Standards are the measure of all under Heaven and the level and marking line of the ruler of men. Standards are assembled in order to make standard those who are not standard. Rewards are established in order to reward those who should be rewarded. After standards are settled, those who conform to the regulations are rewarded; those who fail to reach the
marking line are punished. Punishments are not lessened for the honorable and noble or increased for the lowly and base. Those who violate the standards, even if they are virtuous, must be punished. Those who conform to the measures, even if they are ignoble, must not be judged guilty. In this manner, the all-encompassing Way passes through [everywhere] and private ways are stopped.

And similarly:

夫民之好善樂正，不待禁誡而自中法度者，萬無一也。下必行之令，從之者利，逆之者凶，日陰未移而海內莫不被繫矣。[L 9.304; S 9.16b]

There is not one in ten thousand among the people who loves goodness and delights in rectitude, conforming to the standards and measures without having to be restrained or punished. There are commands that inferiors must carry out. Who follows them benefits; who opposes them encounters disaster. Before the shadow of the sun has moved [i.e., immediately], there is no one within the seas who is not brought in line with the mark.

But what about the claim that names name themselves and affairs regulate themselves? Is this harsh and rigorously prescriptive theory of government not wholly incongruous with the quietist inaction of Shen Buhai? Not according to “Zhushu.” We have already seen that “non-action” is not pacifism or know-nothingism; it refers in this text to the conscious suppression of private action. Indeed, 无为 may have had this connotation from its very beginnings, even in Shen Buhai, but “Zhushu” raises the element of forcible repressio to a new and perhaps unimagined level. “Standards are assembled in order to make standard those who are not standard.” In creating its ideal kingdom, Liu An’s text severs influential keywords from their original philosophical contexts and reveals its utter disdain for the independent virtue of agents not beholden to the state.

Moreover, the text takes pains to point out that “standards” and “marking lines” are not unnatural. On the contrary, the Way prevails, we remember, only after people “do not do as they please.” Implementing strict measures is as natural as yoking an ox and using its natural strength to one’s own advantage. It is pointless to try to pull an ox if it is standing still, but “if one directs it with a length of mulberry strung through its nose, then a small boy can pull it around the four seas, because he is following [the nature of things]” 若指之桑條以貫其鼻，則五尺童子牽而
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The benefits of harnessing the resources of the world were known to the legendary charioteer Zaofu 造父. This hero took the image of piercing the bull’s nose to its logical conclusion.

The rule of the sage king is like the charioteering of Zaofu. He unites and harmonizes [the horses] through the edge between the reins and the bit; he speeds them up and slows them down through the harmony of the corners of their lips. He regulates the measures within his breast and grasps the whip in his palm. What he attains inside his mind accords on the outside with the will of the horses. For this reason they can move along a marking line in advancing and retreating, and [can] trace a compass as they turn. He makes use of the Way and brings [the horses] far; they have *qi* and energy to spare, because he has perfectly attained such technique.

The express purpose of government, however—the reason why such awesome “techniques” are justified—is not to maximize the power of the ruler but to confer benefit on the people, as many commentators have pointed out. “Standards are born of righteousness; righteousness is born of what is appropriate to the populace; what is appropriate to the populace accords with the hearts of men. This is what is essential in government” 法生於義，義生於眾適，眾適合於人心，此治之要也 (L. 9.296; S 9.13a). The commentary of Gao You (“‘Essential’ means covenant” 要約也) suggests that the phrase “essentials of government” implies a social covenant: the ruler is granted the power to determine his terrible
“standards,” but these must in turn conform to the “hearts of men.” Be that as it may—nowhere does the text assert this explicitly—it is clear that the ruler, according to “Zhushu,” ought not to indulge his senses to the extent that his populace is impoverished.

高臺榭榭，接屋連閣，非不麗也，然民有掘穴 доволь所以託身者，明主非樂也。（L. 9.305 f.; S 9.17a)

It is not that lofty terraces, storied kiosks, connecting chambers, and linked pavilions are not beautiful; but when the people have hollowed caves and narrow huts in which to dwell, the enlightened ruler does not enjoy them.51

The great Sage King Yao 堯 exemplified the correct attitude of the ruler:

堯之有天下也，非為萬民之富而安人主之位也，以為百姓力征，強凌弱，眾暴寡。於是堯乃身服節儉之行，而明相愛之仁，以和鬰之。是故茅茨不翦，采椽不斫。又不輕，越席不擇，大羹不和，粢粱不饾，巡狩行教，勤勞天下，周流五嶽。豈其奉養不足樂哉？舉天下而以為社稷，非有利焉。（L. 9.290; S 9.10b)

When Yao possessed all under Heaven, he did not covet the wealth of the myriad people or remain at peace in the ruler’s position. He considered the common people to be aggressive in their energies: the strong mistreat the weak and the many violate the few. Therefore Yao personally submitted to moderate and frugal behavior, and made clear the humanity of mutual love, in order to harmonize [the populace]. For this reason, his grass thatch was not trimmed, his patterned53 rafters not hewn, his royal chariot not adorned, his knotted54 mat not hemmed, his Great Soup not seasoned,55 and his millet meal not refined. On his inspection tours he disseminated his teachings, diligently laboring for all under Heaven, meandering to the Five Peaks. How could his virtuous way of life56 not be joyous enough? He took up all under Heaven and treated it like the Altars of Soil and Millet; he did not profit from it.

Yao “diligently labored for all under Heaven,” while himself leading a humble existence, because he knew that a virtuous ruler must use the advantages of his station in order to profit the people. Yao’s conduct, however, is praiseworthy for another reason as well: by furnishing a model of correct behavior, he influenced his people. For the ability to change popular customs is a natural consequence of the ruler’s exalted position.
King Ling [of Chu, r. 540–529 B.C.] was fond of slim waists, and the people reduced their food and starved themselves; the King of Yue [i.e., Goujian 句踐, r. 496–465 B.C.] was fond of courage, and the people all placed themselves in danger and contended [with one another] for death. From this we see that the handle of power and authority is that by which [the ruler] changes customs.

The consequence of this view is that the ruler must act in the manner that he wishes his people to act, for they will inevitably look to his example and modify their own conduct accordingly. Yao drinks unseasoned soup and eats unrefined millet in order to encourage frugality in his own people. The classical philosophy with which this particular point of view is most compatible is that attributed to the so-called nongjia 農家, or “School of the Tillers.” This school of thought saw its cultural hero in Shennong 神農, the Divine Farmer, whose teachings include the tenet that the ruler must share in the labors of his subjects. One “practitioner of the words of Shennong” 為神農之言者, named Xu Xing 許行, appears in Mencius 3A.4, saying, “The worthy [ruler] plows and eats together with his people; he governs while he prepares his morning and evening meals” 常者與民耕而食，簸而治.

The authors of “Zhushu” know of this tradition and ostensibly display their approval of it in the form of a paean to Shennong (L. 9.271; S. 9.1b). But we should not interpret references to Shennong as an indication that “Zhushu” necessarily espouses the Tiller ideal as articulated by Xu Xing. The ruler of the “Zhushu,” after all, far from tilling in the fields, is encouraged to remain screened off in his palace, aloof from the world, governing it through the peculiar brand of “nonaction” that we have examined above. The text alludes to Shennong when it is rhetorically convenient, immediately disposing of him when his egalitarianism proves incompatible with the other theories that the authors wish to put forward.

This rhetorical opportunism is apparent in the golden eulogy of Confucius toward the end of the chapter.
The insight of Confucius—his wisdom exceeded that of Chang Hong [d. 492 B.C.], his courage that of Meng Ben. His feet stepped like a wild hare’s; his strength could raise the portcullis of a fort. His abilities were many. But his courage and strength are not heard of, his skill and agility not known. Solely through his practice of teaching the Way, he became the Uncrowned King. His activities were few. . . . When he was surrounded in Kuang, his color did not change; his strumming and singing did not cease. When he approached the land of death and destruction, meeting with worrisome and difficult perils, he relied on righteousness and practiced the pattern [of the Way]; his will was not cowed. His lot was clear. And when he heard litigation as minister of justice in Lu, he always came to [the correct] decision; in compiling the Springs and Autumnns, he did not speak of ghosts and spirits and did not dare focus on himself.

Elsewhere too, the authors have peppered the text with phrases that can only have been intended as allusions to Confucius and Confucianism: “The ruler of men prizes uprightness and esteems integrity” 人主貴正而尚忠 (L. 9.286; S 9.8a). In particular, the latter sections contain so many references to “humanity” and “righteousness” that a number of scholars are inclined to see in “Zhushu” the acceptance of basic Confucian ideals.

Some passages even refer directly to the Confucian classics. “What one has in oneself one does not oppose in others; what is not present in oneself one does not require in others” 有諸己不非諸人，無諸己不求諸人 (L. 9.296; S 9.13b). This sentence appears, almost verbatim, in the commentary to the Great Learning attributed to Zeng Can: “The gentleman requires it of others only after he has it in himself; he opposes it in others only after it is no longer present in himself” 君子有諸己而后求諸人，無諸己而后非諸人. That is to say, the gentleman cannot be a hypocrite, demanding a higher level of virtue in others than he has attained himself. In the context of the Analects, this principle is understood as an element of shu 恕, “reciprocity”; “not treating others as one would not want others to treat oneself” is one of the most important concepts in Confucius’ philosophy.

But how seriously are we to take this phraseology? Is the ruler of “Zhushu” expected to practice the Confucian virtues of loyalty and reci-
proximity even as he harmonizes all under Heaven with his “techniques” and “standards”? There are several reasons why this is unlikely to be the message that the authors wish to convey. The first indication appears in the repeated juxtaposition of Confucius and Mozi as ancient paragons of wisdom. I am not aware of any text of Confucian origin that praises both Confucius and Mozi in the same sentence; on the contrary, well into the third century, the Confucian and Mohist lineages saw in each other their most sophisticated intellectual opposition. Certainly the term ru-Mo 儒墨 (Confucians and Mohists) existed long before the Huainanzi, but it was typically used by thinkers who did not consider themselves members of either group in passages ridiculing both. Zhuang Zhou, for example, speaks of the “Confucians and Mohists” in his “Discourse on Making Things Equal” (Qiwu lun 齊物論) as hairsplitters who are blind to his own great insight, namely, that all argumentation is useless, because both participants in a philosophical discussion are equally right from their own point of view—and hence equally wrong from the impartial perspective of the Way.

More important, the context in which “Confucius and Mozi” appear in “Zhusu” reveals a distinct attitude toward traditional scholarship and its place in the proper world order.

湯武聖主也，而不能與越人乘幹舟而浮於江湖，伊尹賢相也，而不能與胡人駱駝馬而服騖騖，孔墨博通，而不能與山居者入榛薄險阻。（L. 9.278; S 9.5a)

Tang and Wu were sage rulers, but they could not compete with the men of Yue in navigating little boats and sailing on the rivers and lakes. Yi Yin was a worthy minister, but he could not compete with the Hu people (i.e., steppe nomads) in riding horses from Yuan and breaking wild steeds. Confucius and Mozi had broad understanding, but they could not compete with mountain dwellers in entering overgrown thickets and hazardous defiles.

Despite their broad expertise, the value of Confucius and Mozi is not limitless. Like all other subjects, they have their talents. They may be good at whatever it is they are good at (and the text prefers not to elaborate on this issue), but they are not good at tracking and mountain climbing, and to employ them in such tasks would be foolish. Confucius and Mozi, then, are just two more of the ruler’s many tools, which he must learn to use appropriately. Their philosophical interests are politically irrelevant and their teachings valuable only insofar as they facilitate the ruler’s rulership; their legacy must remain subordinate to the interests of state.
Confucius and Mozi are important, then, not because of their profound ethical teachings, but because their knowledge might prove useful to a ruler. In a sense, this claim should not be surprising, for the authors of “Zhushu” have already made it plain that they regard moral excellence with sheer ambivalence. Virtuous men are, if anything, a threat to the undisputed sovereignty of the ruler in his palace. The only way to judge someone, as we have seen, is by his or her performance with regard to the “standards”: “Those who violate the standards, even if they are virtuous, must be punished.” Of course, no orthodox Confucian could ever make such an argument, as this manner of thinking is, at root, irreconcilably anti-Confucian, as well as anti-Mohist. But “Zhushu” is not a Confucian or Mohist text—nor a syncretism of the two.

On the contrary, one of the fundamental premises of the text is that the ruler must make the best use of his resources by taking advantage of their particular strengths and weaknesses. Confucius and Mozi are resources too, and the ruler who uses them improperly—for example, by thoughtlessly adopting their teachings in government—is using the wrong tool for the wrong task. Assigning duties to people with inappropriate talents is “like using an axe to split a hair or using a knife to chop wood: in both cases, you fail to use what is appropriate” 猶以斧櫛毛，以刀抵[＝伐] 74 木也，皆失其宜矣 (L. 9.293; S. 9.12a).

But if even Confucius and Mozi deserve no special consideration, how much less do the ruler’s typical subjects? These passages depict philosophy, ethics, and scholarship as material to be exploited by the ruler, placing the concept of “bringing benefit to the people” in an entirely new light. Limin may entail shepherding the people (as in the phrase mu- min 牧民), but only in the sense that one shepherds sheep. The ruler must treat the people kindly and instruct them in the ways of agriculture and animal husbandry, but only because these occupations bring prosperity to the state. Specifically, what is absent is any concern whatsoever for the life of the mind. Man lives by bread alone.75

食者民之本也，民者國之本也，國者君之本也，是故君者，上因天時，下盡地材，中用力也。(L. 9.308; S. 9.18b)

Food is the basis of the people; the people are the basis of the state; the state is the basis of the lord. For this reason, the lord follows the Heavenly seasons above and makes the most of the Earth’s riches below; he employs the energies of the people in the middle.
We remember the following apophthegm: “Standards are born of righteousness; righteousness is born of what is appropriate to the populace; what is appropriate to the populace accords with the hearts of men.” But what “accords with the hearts of men” is merely a beneficent ruler who provides regular food and shelter. Indeed, we must retain the translation “hearts of men” for renxin 心—that is, rather than “minds of men”—because it is clear that “Zhushu” does not recognize the existence of “minds” in the sense to which readers are accustomed through the writings of Mencius and other classical thinkers.

And why not? Because human beings are made of matter (which the text calls qi 氣), and all matter obeys certain physical rules. It is an argument that anticipates, in its way, a strikingly modern idea. For “Zhushu,” moreover—as for the rest of the Huainanzi—the primary physical rule is that of “stimulus and response” (ganying 感應): if qi is stimulated in one place, the qi elsewhere responds sympathetically.76 The idea is especially well illustrated in music:

今夫調弦"者，叩宮宮應，彈角角動，此同聲相和者也。(L. 6.200)

Now when the string tuner strikes the note gong, the gong [string on other instruments] responds; if he plucks jue, the jue is set in motion. This is because of the mutual harmony of the same sound.77

Sound represents excited qi, and when the vibrations are heard by a human being, they inevitably stimulate his or her own qi in like manner. Therefore, in the presence of music, the listener’s mood necessarily conforms to the emotions expressed by the performer.

甯戚商歌車下，桓公嘆然而寤，至精入人深矣！故曰：樂聽其音則知其俗，見其俗則知其化。(L. 9.275; S 9.3b f.)

When Ning Qi79 played a song in the key of shang80 beneath his cart, Lord Huan [of Qi, r. 685–643 B.C.] was aroused with a sigh: the utmost essence [of music] enters man deeply! Therefore it is said: In music, when one listens to the sound, one can know the [people’s] customs; when one sees their customs, one can know their transformation.

Sincere music affects the emotions of the listener for the same reason that it reflects the genuine internal state of the performer: everyone is made of qi.
古之為金石管弦者，所以宣樂也；兵革斧鉞者，所以飾怒也；鶴鳴俎豆，酬酢之禮，所以教善也；衰絰菅屦，辟踊哭泣，所以諭哀也。此皆有充於內，而成像於外。（L. 9.306f.; S 9.17b）

The ancients used bells, chimes, pipes, and strings in order to proclaim their joy; weapons, cuirasses, axes, and halberds in order to adorn their rage; [ceremonial] goblets, beakers, stands, platters, and the rituals of pledging with wine in order to make their goodness effective; hempen mourning dress, grass sandals, beating the breast, leaping about, and wailing, in order to indicate their grief. In all these [cases], there is a fullness on the inside that is given a manifestation on the outside.²¹

Music, in other words—like weeping and offering sacrifice—is the external manifestation of a person’s internal emotional state; in the words of the text, it is the “manifestation on the outside” of the “fullness on the inside.” This view builds on the classical conception of music examined in connection with Xunzi in chapter 2.²² The authors of “Zhushu” even allude to Xunzi’s essay directly. The passage above, about the ancients who proclaimed their joy and adorned their anger, is itself an adornment of a remark along the same lines by Xunzi.²³

A similar theme, articulated in similar language, is taken up in the Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü, another text that the authors of “Zhushu” would have expected their readers to know.

凡音者，生乎人心者也，感於物而形乎聲，音成於外而化於內，是故聞其聲而知其形，觀其形而知其志，觀其志而知其德，盛衰賢不肖，君子小人，皆形於樂。²⁴

Since all tones are produced in the hearts of men, a stimulus in the heart causes agitation in a tone; when tones are completed outside, they transform [the hearer] inside.²⁵ For this reason, when one hears [someone’s] sounds, one knows his habits; if one inspects his habits, one knows his will; if one observes his will, one knows his virtue. The prosperous and the fallen, the worthy and the ignoble, the gentleman and the lesser man are all formed by music.²⁶

The several essays on music in the Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü, however, add a dimension that Xunzi had only hinted at.²⁷

音樂之所由來者遠矣。生於度量，本於太一，太一出兩儀，兩儀出陰陽。陰陽變化，一上一下，合而成章，渾渾沌沌，離則複合，合而復離，是謂天
The source of tones and music is distant. They are born in measures and based on the Magnificent Unity. The Magnificent Unity emits the two attitudes [i.e., Heaven and Earth],90 the two attitudes emit yin and yang. Yin and yang change and transform: one rises; one sinks. They unite and create transformations. In primordial chaos, they separate and then unite again; they unite and then separate again. This is called Heaven’s Constancy. Heaven and Earth [turn like] the wheel of a chariot: the end is again the beginning; [having reached] the highest point, it returns again. Everything is as it should be. The sun, moon, stars, and constellations—some are fast and some are slow. The sun and moon are dissimilar in their orbital period.91 The four seasons arise one after the other. Some are hot and some are cold; some are short and some are long; some are soft and some are hard. As for the origin of the Myriad Things: they are created by the Magnificent Unity and transformed by yin and yang. Once the germs are excited, they congeal into a form; the form is embodied in a place, and nothing is without sound. The sound comes from harmony; harmony comes from accord. When the Former Kings established music, it was born of this.92

The significance of this argument is spelled out at the very end: “Nothing is without sound.” At the time of the creation, the movements of yin and yang and the rotations of Heaven and Earth were all accompanied by sounds that marked the harmony and accord of the world and the Way. The consequence is that when we make music today, we are recreating the patterns of the universe. This is why so much space is devoted in the Springs and Autumns of Mr. Lü to the task of distinguishing proper music from perverse music. Music is a representation of the universe, and an improper rendition can only have inauspicious consequences.93

These “links between numerology, measures, cosmogony, and astronomy”94 clearly appealed to the authors of the Hsuananzi, who produced a similar genealogy of the cosmos in chapter 3 of their collection:
The text continues in this vein for several tedious sections.\textsuperscript{100} The most important claim is made only in passing: the dimensions of the Yellow Bell correspond to the Earth Phase of \textit{qi}. Each of the five notes in the pentatonic scale corresponds to one particular aspect of \textit{qi}. The consequence is essential: since everything—including humanity—is made of \textit{qi}, music can be used to regulate the entire cosmos.\textsuperscript{101}

This is the background of the use of music in “Zhushu.” With skillful tuning and performance, one can make the audience experience any emotion one wants it to:

The lord—oh how he is like an archer! A minute [error] here [counts] for feet and yards\textsuperscript{102} there. Therefore [the lord] is cautious about how he stimulates [the people]. When Rong Qiqi plucked [his instrument] once, Confucius was joyous for three days; he was stimulated by harmony. When

\begin{quote}

而九之，九九八十一，故黃鐘之數立焉。黃者，土德之色，鐘者，氣之所和也，日冬至德氣為土，土色黃，故曰黃鐘。律之數六，分為六音，故曰十二鐘，以期十二月，十二各以三成，故置一而十一，三之，為積分十七萬七千一百四十七，黃鐘大數立焉。 (L. 3.112 f.)

The Way begins\textsuperscript{95} with the One, but the One does not give birth. Thus it divides into \textit{yin} and \textit{yang}; \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} unite in harmony, and the Myriad Things are born. Thus it is said: “The One bore the Two; the Two bore the Three; the Three bore the Myriad Things.”\textsuperscript{96} In Heaven and Earth, three months make one season. Thus in a sacrifice, the ritual calls for a threefold presentation of food; the mourning period is measured by three years; armies are controlled by emphasizing the three flags. If we use threes to make things three, three threes is nine; thus when the pitch pipe of the Yellow Bell is nine inches long, the tone \textit{gong} is tuned. If we continue to make things nine, nine nines is eighty-one; thus the number of the Yellow Bell is established by this. Yellow is the color of the virtue of Earth; a bell is where \textit{qi} is sown.\textsuperscript{97} At the instant of the winter solstice, the \textit{qi} is in its Earth Phase,\textsuperscript{98} since the color of Earth is yellow, it is called the Yellow Bell. The number of the pitch pipes is six, subdivided into male and female; thus we say that the Twelve Bells are the assistants of the twelve months. Each twelve is made up of threes. Thus if one takes one and triples it eleven times [i.e., \textsuperscript{3}11], one accumulates 177,147 parts; the great number of the Yellow Bell is established by this.\textsuperscript{99}
Zou Ji strummed once wildly, King Wei [of Qi, r. 357–320 B.C.] was sorrowful all night; he was stimulated by melancholy.\(^{103}\) If one moves them with the lute and cithern, and forms them with tones and sounds, one can make the people grieve or be joyous. (L 9.275; S 9.3b)

As the *Huainanzi* puts it elsewhere: “Everything is an image of its *qi*: everything responds to its kind.” 皆象其氣，皆應其類 (L 4.141).

Like so much else in “Zhushu,” the passages on music employ language from classical sources that would have been well known to contemporary readers. We should be on our guard, however, lest we be misled into thinking that, by borrowing such familiar terminology, “Zhushu” intends to invoke the same argument as its source texts.\(^{104}\) The chapter transfigures Xunzi, for example, into an apologist for a kind of materialistic determinism. But that thinker has a very clear concept of mind and could never accept, despite the frequent allusions in “Zhushu” to his work, the idea that human beings are simply containers of *qi*. In one of the very rare instances where he even uses the term, Xunzi takes care to emphasize that the mind can always function, regardless of the physical state of one’s *qi*. This occurs in the middle of a discussion about abdication:

曰：老衰而擅，是又不然。血氣筋力，則有衰，若夫智慮取舍，則無衰。\(^{105}\)

They say: “When [the king] is old and decrepit, he should abdicate.”\(^{106}\) This is also not so. In his blood, *qi*, sinews, and energy, there may be decay; but in his wisdom, deliberations, choices, and rejections, there is no decay.\(^{107}\)

Xunzi’s world view may not be any less problematic, philosophically speaking, than that of the *Huainanzi*; for he has introduced at this point something that comes very close to the arch-vexation of Western philosophy, the “mind-body problem.” In Xunzi’s system, the *qi* and the mind appear to flourish and decay independently of each other. He does not address the evident difficulty: what material, then, is the mind made of?

Nevertheless, to struggle with a terrific problem must count as more noble than to ignore it. Failing to engage the concept of mind is, ultimately, the *Huainanzi’s* greatest defect. According to Xunzi, two of the human abilities that endure until the very end are the power to “choose and reject.” These are precisely the qualities that are denied by the *Huainanzi’s* conception of human nature. In that blissfully regulated world, the sovereign simply strikes the appropriate chord, and his subjects assume perforce the intended attitude. These claims are all presented
without any consideration of the people’s ability or even their will to resist this form of control. The text grants only that the people may be disaffected and cause trouble if they are maltreated. “Zhushu” refuses to accept the notion that people may have any kind of spiritual life, that they may have likes and dislikes that are not motivated solely by their five senses, that they have the capability and obligation of moral development.

Moreover, if human beings are no more than conglomerations of qi that respond to stimuli in predictable ways, why is the ruler himself any different? There must be something about the lord that distinguishes him from the rest of humanity; otherwise, the text would have to take into account the possibility that the people might start to control the ruler by playing influential music of their own!

The solution to this paradox is found in an argument borrowed from Shen Buhai, who said:

上明見，人備之，其不明見，人惑之，其知見，人惑之，不知見，人匿之，
其無欲見，人司[不]108之，其有欲見，人餙之。故曰：吾無從知之，惟無
為可以規之。109

If the superior’s enlightenment is apparent, the people will prepare for it; if his lack of enlightenment is apparent, the people will delude him. If his knowledge is apparent, the people will delude him; if his lack of knowledge is apparent, the people will keep [affairs] hidden from him. If his lack of desires is apparent, the people will spy on him [i.e., to find out what his desires are];110 if his desires are apparent, the people will entice him. Therefore he says: There is nothing I can follow in order to know them; only through nonaction can I regulate them.

The point is by now familiar: the ruler must not reveal himself, because his ministers can take advantage of his weaknesses. “Zhushu” brings this argument into line with its own manipulative ontology by combining it with the concept of qi. “The rarefied essence of the ancient sage kings was formed on the inside, but their likes and dislikes were not shown on the outside” 古聖王至精形於內，而好憎忘於外。111 And most explicitly:

昔者，齊桓公好味，而易牙烹其首子而餌之，虞君好寶，而晉獻以璧馬釣
之，胡王好音，而秦穆公以女樂誘之，是皆以利見制於人也，故善建者不
拔。夫火熱而水滅之，金剛而火銷之，木強而斧伐之，水流而土湮之，惟
造化者，物莫能勝也。 (L 9.300; S 9.15b)
In former times, Lord Huan of Qi was fond of flavors, so Yiya boiled his firstborn son and enticed him. The Lord of Yu was fond of treasures, so [Lord] Xian of Jin [r. 676–651 B.C.] hooked him with jade and horses. The King of Hu was fond of tones, so Lord Mu of Qin [r. 659–621 B.C.] seduced him with women and music. These [men] were all controlled by others, because the profit was apparent. Thus: “What is well constructed cannot be uprooted.” Fire is hot, but Water extinguishes it; Metal is hard, but Fire melts it; Wood is strong, but [metal] axes chop it; Water flows, but Earth stops it. Only the Creator and Transformer cannot be overcome by things.

The passage concludes by enumerating each of the Five Phases of qi. Each overcomes one phase but is itself overcome by another. By the “Creator and Transformer” we are meant to understand the Sage, who removes himself from the eternal cycle of matter by stopping his own emanations of qi. That godlike state is the goal of the ruler. How it is to be achieved is not explained in “Zhushu,” but the text returns to the issue in other chapters.

To revisit, in closing, the question that opened this study: to which school does the “Zhushu” chapter belong? This is a text that intends to subvert all of them. Some of the motivations and strategies encountered in “Zhushu” also appear in Sima Tan’s summary of the House of the Way:

其為術也，因陰陽之大順，采儒墨之善，撮名法之要，與時遷移，應物變化，立俗施事，無所不宜。  

In their techniques, they follow the great flow of yin and yang; they pick what is good among the Confucians and Mohists; they grasp the essentials of the Names and Methods [schools]. They shift and move with the seasons, responding to the transformations of things; they establish customs so that they reflect affairs. There is nothing that is not appropriate.

Sima Tan might well have had the Huainanzi in mind when he drafted this account. In “picking what is good” and “grasping the essentials” of the other houses, the House of the Way insidiously repudiates all its predecessors. Its syncretism does not simply take ideas from every conceivable corner. It takes ideas that sound as though they come from every conceivable corner but melds them into the justification of a body politic that subdues all philosophical disputation. The Huainanzi is a “school” all to itself: it is the autistic-paternalistic anti-intellectual school.