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## Liu Xin, Creator and Critic \*

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Living in the uneasy time of the reigns of Han Chengdi 成帝 and his two successors, and Wang Mang's establishment of his own dynasty, Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 B.C. to A.D.23) contributed basically to what would become China's intellectual tradition and heritage. Best known for the part that he played in the collection and classification of literature, he wrote with a greater degree of initiative and with a more radical frame of mind than his father Liu Xiang 劉向 (79-8 B.C.). A supporter of Wang Mang 王莽 (45 B.C.-A.D.23) in intellectual terms, he may well have composed the latter's formal pronouncements, but he died by his own hand after involvement in a plot to overthrow him.

Author of several *fu* 賦, Liu Xin wrote the treatise on Pitch-pipes and calendar (*Lü li zhi* 律曆志) that is now incorporated in the *Han shu* 漢書, where he treated astronomy, harmonics, mathematics and history as aspects of a single cosmic system. Recognising the value of some newly found texts, he propounded the virtues of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and criticised some of his contemporary scholars for their obdurate adherence to their own ideas, irrespective of newly found evidence. His own historical record, the *Shi jing* 世經, varies from other accounts, both in the sequences of China's mythological rulers and in matters of dating. He argued for the retention of the honorary title conferred on Han Wudi 武帝 on the grounds that he had merited it, and thereby assured the continuity of that emperor's reputation. Against some, Liu Xin wrote in favor of addressing the cults of state to Heaven rather than to other deities. Calling on the *Zuo zhuan* to explain the occurrences of abnormalities of nature, he was also ready to identify the moral issues that were involved.

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Our primary sources for the history of Western Han, and many of the modern secondary writings that are based upon them, leave a general impression of a century of success followed by one of loss of purpose.<sup>1</sup> The reign of Wudi 武帝, from 141 to 87 B.C., is seen as an age in which the dynasty rose to a position of unprecedented strength, marked by forward looking enterprise and brave achievement; there followed a century of decline and weakness culminating in the closure of the dynasty and its replacement by the Xin 新 dynasty of Wang Mang 王莽 (45 B.C.–A.D. 23). In fact the situation was by no means as simple as it may sometimes be represented. For the first half of the dynasty, there were several occasions up to 90 B.C. when the security of the house of Liu 劉 was subject to threat and its survival was in question. For the second half, the last decades of Western Han witnessed major intellectual movements, changes in religious practice and the appearance of scientific ideas, all of which reflected differing views of cosmic reality. Some historians may deem such developments to be of lesser account than the strengths or weaknesses of an emperor, the victories and defeats of a general on a field of battle, or the extension or contraction of territory where officials implemented an emperor's commands. Others see the developments of those final decades as forcibly affecting the character of China's later dynasties and therefore being of more enduring significance.

In such circumstances it is proposed here to examine the achievements of Liu Xin 劉歆 (46 B.C.–A.D. 23), an outstanding figure whose influence affected many different issues of public life during the last fifty years of Western Han and the succeeding few years of Wang Mang's rule from 9 to 23. His family background is of significance; unlike others, such as Gongsun Hong 公孫弘 (ca. 200 – 121 B.C.),<sup>2</sup> Liu Xin did not rise from a humble background but came from a privileged way of life. His father Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 B.C.)

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- 1 References that are given below to the Thirteen classics are to Ruan Yuan 阮元 *et al.* eds., *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (1815); for *Shi ji* 史記, *Han shu* 漢書 and *Hou Han shu* 後漢書, they are to the punctuated editions of Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959, 1962 and 1965.
- 2 Gongsun Hong started life as a farming labourer and rose to become Chancellor (*Chengxiang* 丞相) in 124 B.C.