

# Coping with Social Trauma in Ancient China



## The Healing Power of Meditation, Ritual, and Music

Ori Tavor

Traumatic experiences can have a significant and often debilitating impact on the life of an individual, especially when they remain unresolved. The effects of a traumatic event are not limited to individuals, however; they can have long-lasting repercussions on the wellbeing of an entire community. Drawing on her work with young children who suffered trauma as a result of the conflict in Northern Ireland over the last decades of the twentieth century, Julie P. Sutton argues that a single event can have a severe impact across many levels of society. The traumatised individual will never be the same, 'nor will the immediate community, and in this way society itself will be changed' (Sutton, 2002, p. 28). Throughout most of the twentieth century, trauma was often understood to be a mental condition, and therapists have relied on talk therapy and cognitive and behavioural techniques to offer relief to their patients. Recent developments in the fields of cognitive studies and neurophysiology now offer alternative theories of trauma that define it as an activation of the body's autonomic nervous system that creates a disruption in its state of balance. These new theories have led to the creation of new therapeutic techniques designed to alleviate the corporeal effects of trauma.

In this chapter, I focus on the growing popularity of music therapy as an embodied technique designed to offset the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects of trauma. Drawing on contemporary scientific studies on the impact of music in managing emotion dysregulation associated with intrusive memories, I present key passages from early Chinese texts that discuss the transformative power of meditation, ritual, and music. Formulated during the Warring States period (481–221 BCE), one of the most tumultuous and traumatic periods in Chinese history, these works argue that participation in multimedia ritual events that combine music, dance, and scripted modes of behaviour can have a transformative effect on

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O. Tavor (✉)

Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania,  
Philadelphia, USA

e-mail: [oritavor@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:oritavor@sas.upenn.edu)

the physical and emotional make-up of individuals while also bolstering group synchronisation and stimulating social conformity and compliance with social norms. These ancient Chinese texts can thus offer modern readers valuable insight into the therapeutic power of ritual and its efficacy in mitigating the effects of trauma on the individual and social body.

## The Neuropsychology of Trauma

Traumatic experiences can have a debilitating impact on our daily lives. Recent years have witnessed new theories regarding the cause and impact of trauma (Scaer, 2017). Throughout the course of evolution, they claim, certain psychophysiological mechanisms developed to aid humans and animals in dealing with life-threatening events. When faced with extreme danger, the sympathetic nervous system is activated and a ‘fight-or-flight’ response ensues. When self-defence or a hasty retreat is not possible, the corresponding parasympathetic system, which regulates digestion and procreation, is brought into play, resulting in a state of physical paralysis. This ‘freeze’ state, sometimes described as ‘tonic immobility’, is characterised by the slowing down of pulse and blood pressure, the emptying of the gut and bladder, and a release of endorphins that numb the body to the pain of the being’s imminent death.

In some cases, the activation of the parasympathetic system will result in death. In the event of survival, a ‘freeze discharge’ will be activated, purging the adversarial event from procedural memory and thereby restoring the natural state of balance, or ‘homeostasis’, between the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. If this safety mechanism fails to take effect, the memory of the event is stored in the brain and can be triggered by similar experiences. The results of this situation are often debilitating. If the nervous system does not reset and regain balance after an overwhelming experience, it can also have adverse effects on a variety of physiological functions such as the cardiovascular, digestive, respiration, and immune systems. Unresolved physiological distress can, in turn, lead to more cognitive, emotional, and behavioural symptoms (Scaer, 2017; Levine, 2015).

Drawing on this fresh data, therapists have been developing new therapeutic techniques designed to aid patients in coping with trauma. One of these methods, developed by Peter A. Levine, is Somatic Experiencing, a technique that aims to resolve the adverse effects of trauma by guiding the patient through their internal physiological sensations rather than through their cognitive or emotional experiences. Unlike exposure therapies, which involve the direct evocation of traumatic memories, Somatic Experiencing approaches memories in a gradual and indirect manner while simultaneously fostering the creation of new corrective experiences that physically contradict those of distress and helplessness. Levine argues that the ultimate goal of this technique is ‘to direct the attention of the person to internal sensations that facilitate biological completion of thwarted responses, thus leading to resolution of the trauma response and the creation of new interoceptive experiences of agency and mastery’ (Payne et al., 2015, p. 15).

Much like traditional Asian techniques of meditative movement, such as Yoga, T'ai chi (Taijiquan), and Qigong, as well as various forms of seated meditation, Somatic Experiencing is designed to foster a sense of internal awareness (Payne et al., 2015). The common thread that connects these practices is their ability to stimulate specific areas of the brain.

We know through brain-imaging techniques that specific areas of the brain 'light up' with specific activities. When a person perceives, remembers or addresses a traumatic event, the right limbic system—the part that deals with threatening experiences—'lights up', and the left prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) and Broca's area (speech expression) 'shut down'. Conversely, when we are meditating, (left frontal cortex) or verbalizing non-traumatic information (Broca's area, left frontal lobe) the right limbic system (arousal) is relatively shut down. Alternating stimulation of the left-right cerebral hemispheres, counting (left) and humming (right) hemispheres, and following a visual stimulus from right-to-left, and in-and-out are all methods of inhibiting the right limbic area. These tasks inhibit and down-regulate the amygdala through the patient/therapist bond, and the activation of both hemispheres, much like the process of attunement. (Scaer, 2017, p. 60)

Techniques such as Somatic Experiencing have grown in popularity in recent decades as alternatives to verbally intensive modes of treatment. Another regimen that has gained enthusiastic support among trauma researchers and clinicians is music therapy. Many of the current interventions used to treat cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among adults, such as trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR), and prolonged exposure therapy, have proven effective. Unfortunately, they are also extremely time-consuming, demand a high level of clinical training, and may cause fatigue due to their intensity. Music therapy, on the other hand, is not only more accessible and less stigmatising but has also been shown to 'reduce emotional distress, foster social connectedness, and improve overall wellbeing' (Landis-Shack et al., 2017, p. 335).

Clinical studies have demonstrated that trauma is closely associated with intrusive memories that interfere with the natural state of homeostasis between the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. Individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress often invest a great deal of time and energy into evading distressing memories, thoughts, feelings, or cues associated with their initial trauma, which can exert a dramatic negative impact on their physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. 'Through ritual, the visual, auditory, vestibular and tactile stimulation regulates, induces, promotes and establishes a state of. . .autonomic homeostasis' (Scaer, 2017, p. 56). Participation in group musical therapy is also believed to address the emotion dysregulation caused by trauma, by serving as a 'stand-in social process [designed] to address avoidant behaviour and provide positive corrective experiences' (Landis-Shack et al., 2017, p. 336). Communal music-making, after all, requires coordination and collaboration. Engaging in this project allows patients to partake in social activities in a safe space, thereby negating the feelings of isolation and distress caused by trauma. Moreover, studies have shown that music stimulates the mesolimbic dopaminergic system, an area of the brain that facilitates experiences of pleasure, reward, and arousal, and may also prompt the release of certain

endorphins to the brain, boosting positive feelings while reducing negative ones. Thus, much like Levine's Somatic Experiencing, music therapy is now considered by clinicians to function as a 'resilience-enhancing intervention', a technique that 'can help trauma-exposed individuals harness their ability to recover elements of normality in their life following great adversity' (Landis-Shack et al., 2017, pp. 337–338).

## Social Trauma in the Warring States

While modern therapeutic techniques such as Somatic Experiencing are based on empirical research and draw heavily on scientific terminology, the meditative exercises they utilise have been practiced in Asia for more than two millennia. The origin of the modern regimens of Taijiquan and Qigong, for example, can be traced back to a practice known as *Daoyin* (literally, 'guiding and stretching'), which combined breathing exercises, slow movement, and guided circulation of blood and *qi*<sup>1</sup> through the network of conduits inside the body (Kohn, 2008). In this section, I will argue that the emergence of therapeutic regimens such as *Daoyin* and seated meditation during the Warring States period in ancient China can be understood as a reaction to a state of social trauma, an attempt to restore a sense of harmony and equilibrium to both the individual and social body.

The Warring States period was one of the bloodiest and most turbulent eras in Chinese history. Following a few centuries of sociopolitical stability and economic growth under the centralised Zhou regime (est. 1045 BCE), the declining power of the royal court resulted in the fragmentation of the empire into multiple regional states led by local rulers vying for control. Motivated by the increasing brutality of everyday life, early Chinese thinkers took it as their mission to offer possible solutions to this state of chaos. Figures affiliated with the Confucian school of thought, for example, argued that the only way to regain sociopolitical stability was through a combination of moral government and an adherence to a strict regimen of individual self-cultivation. Other schools of thought, such as the Mohists and the Legalists, rejected the basic premises of Confucianism and instead advocated a system of government based on utilitarian economic principles or the mechanics of reward and punishment, respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), *qi* is defined as the vital energy within matter that keeps it organised and makes growth possible. Within the human body, *qi* circulates in a system of channels that runs parallel to the blood vessels and is stored in major internal organs such as the heart, liver, lungs, spleen, and kidneys.

## *The Rise of Individual Self-Cultivation Regimens*

Not all Warring States thinkers were motivated by political concerns, however. While some responded to this state of communal trauma by formulating plans to restore social order, others turned their attention to individual concerns. The Warring States philosopher Yang Zhu, for example, famously argued that he would not sacrifice even a single hair of his body for the benefit of the society. Often referred to as a radical individualist, Yang Zhu took the individual as the basis of his philosophical programme and stressed the nourishment and preservation of one's life and physical body over ethical or social concerns (Emerson, 1996).

Yang Zhu's emphasis on individual wellbeing appears in other Warring States sources as well. Recent archaeological excavations reveal the existence of a flourishing marketplace comprised of masters actively disseminating their individual self-cultivation regimens aimed at the prolongation of life and the attainment of spiritual, physical, and mental benefits (Tavor, 2016).

While some of these practices, such as *Daoyin*, involve a combination of breathing exercises with slow movements based on standardised bodily poses, others resemble what modern practitioners know as seated meditation. One of the earliest descriptions of this practice appears in the *Zhuangzi*, a late Warring States text often associated with the philosophical school of Daoism. This passage features a fictitious dialogue between Confucian and his disciple Yan Hui, who informs his master of a new self-cultivation technique he has been developing, which he calls 'sitting and forgetting'. It begins with relaxing the body and limbs and dimming sensory perception (especially sight and sound), eventually leading to a sense of transcendence from one's physical body and consciousness, and a unity between the individual and the entire universe (Mair, 1998, p. 64).

When viewed against the backdrop of recent scientific studies of trauma, 'sitting and forgetting' can be understood as a therapeutic technique aimed at purging certain adversarial events from procedural memory in order to restore the natural state of homeostasis. Living in a chaotic world filled with violence, political uncertainty, and social instability can result in a sense of helplessness from the perspective of the individual unable to control their own destiny.

Practicing seated meditation can thus facilitate the creation of a new, corrective experience that physically contradicts feelings of distress by stimulating the left hemisphere of the brain while decreasing the activity in the right hemisphere, where traumatic memories are stored, resulting in a curative state of 'forgetting'. This is further attested to in another Warring States work titled *Inward Training*. While this text is not a meditation manual, it includes multiple references to a self-cultivation technique that involves breathing exercises, sensory regulation, and attempts to control the flow of *qi* inside the body through a combination of physical and cognitive means. According to the metaphysical framework of the text, everything in the world is animated by the same basic energy: *qi*. Flowing around the universe, it lacks a fixed position, entering and exiting all living things in a manner that looks random to the occasional observer. The goal of the text is simple: to allow the

practitioner to understand the patterns of *qi* circulation, giving them the power to accumulate it inside their bodies, resulting in a complete cognitive, physiological, and spiritual transformation.

The author of *Inward Training* argues that the key for the success of this endeavour is reaching a state of stillness (*jing*) and emptiness (*xu*). Sensory perception, as well as strong emotions such as excessive anger and sorrow, occupy and overstimulate our minds, preventing us from achieving a state of balance. The only solution is a technique called ‘sweeping the seat of consciousness’. It begins with assuming a fixed seating position in which the limbs are squared and properly aligned, followed by a concentrated effort to reduce sensory input, eliminate desire, and cut off all mental cogitation. Once this state of stillness and emptiness is achieved, vital *qi* will enter the body of the practitioner and take up residence within it, resulting in an emotional and mental experience of oneness and harmony with the universe. This mental state is accompanied by distinct physical boons such as improved perception and physical wellbeing (Roth, 1999).

## The Therapeutic Power of Ritual and Music

The meditative regimens described in the *Zhuangzi* and *Inward Training* represent an individualised therapeutic solution to the social trauma that followed the collapse of the Zhou order. Recently excavated manuscripts suggest that a significant number of educated elites responded to this situation by tending to their personal wellbeing, sometimes at the expense of public engagement. This posed a threat to Confucian thinkers, who believed that the only viable route to social and political harmony depended on the active participation of educated elites in the work of government. These sentiments are perhaps best manifested in the work of third-century Confucian thinker Xunzi, who, like his intellectual forefather Confucius (551–479 BCE) before him, was not only an educator and an advisor, but also a ritual master, a curator, and preserver of ancient rites. As a ritualist, Xunzi took it upon himself to rearticulate the Confucian project of moral self-cultivation as a therapeutic technique superior to the meditational and calisthenics regimens advocated by other Warring States masters (Tavor, 2013).

It is important to note that Xunzi did not question the efficacy of individualised therapeutic regimens in coping with trauma. His writings suggest that he was well acquainted with these practices and the philosophical and medical terminologies employed by their proponents. Xunzi’s main critique was based on economic and sociopolitical grounds, in that individual self-cultivation requires a substantial financial investment (hiring the services of professional masters and purchasing their manuals) and often distracts educated elites who might otherwise employ their skills to help the entire community recuperate from the traumatic events of the Warring States period. Instead, Xunzi opted to promote his own therapeutic regimen, which allows people to gain individual bounties such as good health, sensory and emotional satisfaction, and moral edification, while at the same time promoting a sense of

communal identity, enforcing social hierarchies, and maintaining political order. The core of this regimen involves participation in choreographed ritual events (*li*) that were accompanied by a musical performance (*yue*).

The last two decades have witnessed a rapid rise in cognitive and neuroscientific research on music. Biomusicologists such as Steven Brown study the evolutionary origins of music and argue that it is a cooperative device designed to enhance group survival, as it enhances the ability of individual humans to coordinate with each other and act in synchronicity. Brown asserts that recent studies show that the human brain has specific neural areas that control and regulate harmony and meter, which are also connected to two of the key cognitive systems of attention and reward. From an evolutionary perspective, we may surmise that these mechanisms developed to facilitate cooperation and coordination. Music and ritual thus evolved as cultural devices, or ‘generalized emotive manipulators’, which enhance the memorability of certain events, augmenting them in our collective consciousness (Brown, 2003, p. 16–17).

Music’s homogenising effect and its ability to stimulate social conformity and compliance with social norms are based on two important elements. First, on a basic level, participating in musical group events such as religious ceremonies, festivals, and raves is often presented as an important criterion for membership in a community. Second, musical devices such as rhythm, repetition, and polyphony ‘act to increase the meaning and memorability of linguistic messages’ (Brown, 2006, p. 4). It is important to note that Brown’s adaptationist views, which depict music an evolutionary mechanism that was useful to the survival of the human species, are not shared by all. Cognitive psychologists such as Aniruddh D. Patel argue that music is a biologically powerful human invention that builds on diverse, pre-existing brain functions, rather than a trait that originated via processes of natural selection and biological adaptation. Music does not change our brains on a genetic level; instead, it is a technology that ‘has to be learned anew by each new generation of human minds’ (Patel, 2010, p. 43).

Regardless of the exact cognitive and neurological mechanisms that enable it, the realisation that ritual and music have the power to foster group cohesion and enhance compliance to social norms and values has been widely acknowledged in ancient China and actively championed by Confucian thinkers such as Xunzi. In the ‘Discourse of Ritual’ chapter of the book bearing his name, Xunzi hails ritual as the perfect tool for guaranteeing sociopolitical stability, claiming that ‘those under Heaven who follow it will have good order; those who do not follow it will have chaos; those who follow it will have safety; those who do not follow it will be endangered; those who follow it will be preserved; those who do not follow it will perish’ (Hutton, 2014, p. 205).

In Xunzi’s philosophical vision, human beings are born with innate tendencies towards selfish behaviour and an unquenchable thirst to satisfy their most basic desires for food, sex, wealth, and fame. Given the chaotic world into which Xunzi was born, two centuries into the collective social trauma of Warring States era, this bleak view of humanity is understandable. It is important to note, however, that Xunzi’s acceptance of the inherent faults of human nature is not pessimistic. In fact,

his philosophy is predicated on a deep belief in the human ability to change, learn, and overcome trauma in order to re-establish the harmonious society of an imagined ancient past. This can be achieved by an adherence to a life-long regimen of moral self-cultivation that draws on external social institutions and cultural devices, such as education, textual study, and participation in communal ritual events that feature choreographed musical performances.

The musical component of these philosophies is particularly important, as Warring States thinkers often associate music with the regulation of emotions. Xunzi opens his ‘Discourse on Music’ chapter with the claim that music is an intrinsic part of human existence. ‘Music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition; people cannot be without music, if they feel joy, they must express it in sound and give it shape in movement’ (Hutton, 2014, p. 218). Moreover, much like Brown, Xunzi also sees music as an ‘emotive manipulator’ that can be used to unify a group of people in a non-coercive manner by marking certain events and augmenting them in memory. When music is performed in public, argues Xunzi, each member of the community, from the ruler to the lowliest subordinate, listens to it together, resulting an increased sense of cohesion and harmony:

[M]usic observes a single standard in order to fix its harmony, it brings together different instruments in order to ornament its rhythm, and it combines their playing in order to achieve a beautiful pattern; it can thus lead people in a single, unified way, and is sufficient to bring order to the myriad changes within them. (Hutton, 2014, p. 218)

It is clear from these passages that Xunzi sees the participation in ritualised musical events as a key component in resolving the sense of helplessness and anxiety brought on by an extended period of war and the resulting collapse of the sociopolitical order. What makes ritual and music unique, and in some ways superior, to more verbal forms of education and governance is its embodied nature. ‘The sounds of music enter into people deeply and transform them quickly,’ Xunzi argues. ‘It has the power to make good the hearts of people, to influence deeply, and to reform their manners and customs with facility’ (Hutton, 2014, p. 219–220). Drawing on the terminology used by the proponents of the *Daoyin* calisthenics regimens and the techniques of seated meditation, Xunzi traces the efficacy of ritual and music to their ability to control the flow of blood and *qi* within the human body. Earlier in his work, he criticises those who attempt to prolong their lives using individual self-cultivation regimens and instead advocates an adherence to a strict regimen of ritual prescriptions as the superior technique for achieving a state of physical, mental, and spiritual harmony and equanimity (Hutton, 2014, p. 10).

In the chapter ‘Discourse on Music’ Xunzi elaborates on this statement, arguing that while lavish, excessive, and lurid musical performances cause ‘perverse *qi*’ to take form within one’s body, participation in proper musical events produces ‘compliant *qi*’ that brings forth harmony within the entire social body but also induces individual physiological effects such as a balanced flow of blood and *qi* and improved sensory perception (Hutton, 2014, p. 221).

In her recent book on music in ancient China, Erica Brindley demonstrates that musical metaphors played a central role in Warring States political, philosophical,



and medical discourse. Her reading of the *Xunzi* supports many of the points made earlier in this chapter, particularly her claim that Xunzi acknowledges music as a ‘powerfully influential, manipulative, and fool-proof device’ for eliciting certain responses in the human body (Brindley, 2012, p. 108). In addition, Brindley also draws our attention to the centrality of terms such as harmony and equilibrium in Xunzi’s discussion of the physiological effects of participating in ritualised musical events. Reading his discussion on ‘compliant *qi*’, Brindley suggests that in Xunzi’s eyes, proper music ‘takes on the role in the body of what we would now describe as serotonin or endorphins’ (Brindley, 2012, p. 138).

Recent clinical studies among patients who suffered a stroke seem to support the general sentiment of this claim. These studies connect music’s efficacy to its ability to stimulate a variety of non-musical brain functions, enhance neuroplasticity, and most importantly, impact the limbic system. The findings of these trials suggest that regular exposure to music helps to lower the levels of the hormone cortisol, thereby improving the function of the hippocampus, a region in the brain that forms part of the limbic system and is primarily associated with memory and spatial navigation (Patel, 2010).

For Xunzi, ritualised musical performances can be seen as an aesthetic training ground, a unique mode of practice different from everyday activity. Within ritual time and space, routine gestures and movements take on special meanings precisely because they are performed outside of a regular context. Far from being a frivolous satisfaction of desire, ritual and music provide meaningful experience that induces a bodily transformation and is accompanied by a sense of pleasure greater than simple carnal joy (Tavor, 2013). Moreover, when read against the backdrop of contemporary scientific literature on trauma, we can also see that for Xunzi, the therapeutic value of ritual and music lies in their corporality and their ability to promote a message of harmony and wellbeing in a non-verbal way.

In a society plagued by violence and precariousness, participation in such events offers a respite for the harsh everyday reality and can function as a remedy to the state of social trauma by fostering cooperation and enhancing in-group harmony. At the end of the ‘Discourse on Music’ chapter, Xunzi offers a description of dance (*wu*), which refers to the choreographed component of the ritual event accompanied by music. He argues that this performance aims to represent the ideal pattern of a well-ordered universe. The beat of the drums represents Heaven,<sup>2</sup> the bells represents Earth, the stone chimes represent water, the various wind instruments represent the sun, moon, and stars, and the smaller percussion instruments represent the myriad creatures. When the dancers move their bodies to the music, they do not necessarily comprehend the idea behind it. As Xunzi puts it:

[H]ow does one know the meaning of the dance? The eyes do not themselves see it, and the ears do not themselves hear it; nevertheless, it controls their postures, gestures, directions,

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<sup>2</sup> While the term Heaven (*tian*) often refers to a high deity, in Xunzi’s philosophical system it does not have religious connotations and instead indicates something akin to the phenomena and processes of the natural world.

and speed; when all the dancers are restrained and orderly exerting to their utmost the strength of their bones and sinews to match the rhythm of the drum and bell sounding together, and no one is out of step, then how easy it is to tell the meaning of this group gathering! (Hutton, 2014, p. 222)

Musical performances and ritual dancing, according to Xunzi, require a great deal of attention to detail, restrained control, and rigorous practice, and this is not something that can be learned in theory or through observation. The artists have to go through the experience by themselves, dedicate a long time to practice and rehearsal, and only then will they be able to understand the importance of it. Ancient Chinese ritual performance, much like modern applications of music therapy, are thus a means for coordinating the rhythm of one's body not only with other dancers but with the universe itself, resulting in a sense of harmony, balance, and overall wellbeing that can counteract the memories of past traumatic events. These events reshape the bodies and minds of the participants by activating non-musical brain functions and stimulating the limbic system to promote the restoration of homeostasis while enhancing group synchronicity and cohesion to counteract the effects of social trauma.

## Conclusion

In her study of meditation and ritual practices, Barbara Lex demonstrates that both individual meditation and communal ritual have similar neurophysiological effects. In meditation, the reduced sensory output monopolises the left hemisphere, creating a trophotropic response—the relaxing of the muscles. In ritual, on the other hand, the repetitive physical stimuli and musical rhythms bombard the nervous system, overtake the right hemisphere, and create an ergotropic response—an increase in muscle tonus. The cumulative dominance of one hemisphere, however, causes the other to increase its own activity in compensation. Thus, while stimulating opposite sides, both communal ritual and the individual practice of meditation utilise alternating stimulation of the bihemispheric brain that prompts a neurological and physiological response (Lex, 1979).

The growing popularity of individual techniques such as the seated mediation of the *Inward Training* and the ritualised musical performances described in the *Xunzi* demonstrate that the therapeutic potential of such regimens was well known to early Chinese philosophers, who promoted them as a cure to the social trauma of the Warring States period. Threatened by the success of individual therapeutic techniques, Confucian thinkers created a new theoretical framework that emphasised the physical, cognitive, and spiritual effects of ritual and music, stressing that participation in such events can bring forth the same therapeutic benefits of meditation, namely the restoration of homeostasis, but on a much larger scale—promoting harmony and ensuring the wellbeing of the entire social body.

The therapeutic regimens that emerged during the Warring States period continued to develop and flourish throughout Chinese history, especially during periods of

social trauma. It is thus hardly surprising that a variety of individual and communal practices began to resurface in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), a period that is widely believed to have left a permanent scar on the collective psyche of the Chinese nation. For example, the 1980s were marked by a resurging interest in Qigong, an individual regimen that combines seated meditation with ritualised movement, which was touted as a ‘somatic science’, or a secular therapeutic practice for the modern age (Palmer, 2007).

Recent years have also witnessed the revival of Confucianism and its communal ritual practices. With the support of the state, new rituals designed to mark important occasions such as births, weddings, and funerals have begun to grow in popularity (Billioud & Thoraval, 2015). Dissatisfied with the public school system, parents in China are now sending their children to traditional Confucian academies where they are exposed to a strict regimen of musical education designed to aid in their ‘natural emotional, moral, and spiritual growth’ while encouraging socialisation and group harmony in the face of what is believed to be a rampant individualism plaguing contemporary Chinese society (Ji, 2008, p. 113). These examples demonstrate that, far from being seen as relics of the past, the therapeutic techniques developed during the Warring States period to deal with social trauma are still considered valuable. These regimens might therefore serve as a potential source of inspiration for contemporary clinicians and ritualists searching for effective ways of coping with social trauma in the modern world.

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**Ori Tavor**, PhD, is a senior lecturer in Chinese Studies and the director of the MA programme in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on the history of Confucianism and Daoism, the relationship between religion and medicine, and ritual theory. His work has been featured in *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, *Body and Religion*, and the *Journal of Ritual Studies*.  
*Website:* [ealc.sas.upenn.edu/people/dr-ori-tavor](http://ealc.sas.upenn.edu/people/dr-ori-tavor) *E-mail:* [oritavor@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:oritavor@sas.upenn.edu)