Embodying the Dead: Ritual as Preventative Therapy in Chinese Ancestor Worship and Funerary Practices

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Abstract

The commemoration of one's ancestors is one of the central institutions of Chinese ritual culture. Early sources, such as the *Book of Rites* and the *Xunzi*, feature detailed prescriptions of mortuary procedures, as well as theoretical discussions on the meaning of ancestral sacrifices. This article offers a new reading of these sources against the backdrop of recent scholarship on the neurophysiology of trauma to argue that in early China, mourning and commemorative rituals were sometimes seen as preventative therapeutic measures designed to deal with the death of one's loved ones and foil the potential development of trauma that might follow their loss. It begins by examining the role of funerary rituals in providing structure during the immediate aftermath of death and suggest that part of their efficacy lies in their ability to flood the mourner's working memory thereby thwarting potentially hazardous thoughts and desires from setting in. It then proceeds to discuss two components of ancestral rites, the preparatory stage of ritual fasting (*zhai*) undertaken by the mourner, and the subsequent interaction between the mourner and the "personator of the dead" (*shi*). It concludes by demonstrating the impact of ritual in facilitating a therapeutic experience of contact with one's ancestors that can physically contradict the distress and helplessness associated with the trauma of their death by replacing the memory of the loss of one's parents with the life--affirming, and palpably corporeal, celebration of their life.

Introduction

Ancestor worship, the performance of rituals dedicated to the veneration of deceased members of one's lineage, is one of the most important and long-lasting institutions of Chinese religious culture. The cult of the dead, as it is sometimes called, features heavily in the earliest existing written sources, the Shang Dynasty oracle bones (c. 1200 BCE), and has been almost continuously performed, in different variations, throughout the Chinese cultural sphere until today (Ahern 1973). Modern life, however, present some significant challenges to traditional forms of ancestor worship. In an increasingly mobile society, family members who used to live in the same area are now spread across the globe, making it harder to visit the ancestral hall or the gravesite to perform the proper ancestral sacrifices. In addition, in dense urban centers, like Hong Kong, a lack of physical space to bury the dead has prompted significant changes in burial practices, namely a shift from individual graves to the storage of urns containing the cremated ashes of the deceased in niches located in large columbaria (Teather 1999).

One of the most innovative solutions to the challenging situation in Hong Kong has been the emergence of virtual cemeteries. In 2016, industrialist and inventor Yuen Se-kit and his son Anthony Yuen Sze-ming announced the launch of a new service called iVeneration, which combines a physical columbarium that houses the remains of the deceased with an online platform that offers multiple ways to commemorate and venerate them. According to the Yuens, the mass rituals held at cemeteries across the city during the Qingming and Double Ninth (*Chung Yeung*) Gravesweeping festivals create significant environmental harm—from traffic jams to air pollution caused by the burning of incense and ritual paper offerings. In order to reduce the damage, iVeneration's columbarium is equipped with multi-media rooms for family members to offer virtual tributes. But, while the notion of "green burial" has attracted avid support, the virtual element of the Yuens' service is proving to be more challenging. In her report, Shirley Zhao of *The South China Morning Post* quotes a 40-year old interior decorator named Ken Li, who calls online veneration pointless, saying that while young people might find it attractive, his generation "wants something real" (Zhao 2017). Yuen himself addresses this issue in an interview with Ng Sai-ning published in the weekly online newspaper *hk01*, where he admits that the current 2D interface, in which the worshipper can select from a variety of sacrificial offerings and play religious chants and prayers by clicking on them with a mouse, will eventually be re-

placed by a 3D virtual reality (VR) interface. This, says Yuen, will allow the worshippers to use a headset and gloves to "immerse themselves in the experience," walking through the graveyard, touching the offerings with their own hands, and smelling the burning of the incense, thereby resulting in a much more efficacious experience (Ng 2016).

Yuen's expressed desire to use VR technology to enhance the tactile, auditory, and olfactory elements of virtual ritual is significant. Ritual, after all, is something we do with our bodies. It involves hand gestures, bodily postures, and movements of the limbs, eyes, and mouth. Making sense of ritual thus requires engaging with its corporeal nature. Recent decades have witnessed a shift in the study of ritual from functional, structural, and linguistic theories to new models that focus on ritual as embodied action (Bell 2006). Drawing on new advancements in the field of cognitive science and combining them with insights from performance and sensory studies, the collection of essays included in the 2015 publication, *Ritual, Performance, and the Senses*, suggest that ritual action has the power to physically reshape the brains of its participants. According to Neuroanthropologist Robert Turner, the structure of our brain changes as a result of our interactions with the world. Experiences that are intensely memorable, emotional, and/or sufficiently frequent, such as rituals, are mapped into biologically predetermined cortical areas and in turn create a material change in our brain (2015). Turner's claim is echoed in the work of Greg Downey, whose study of the physical effects of prayer suggest that ritual is a "socially constituted technology of neurological self-manipulation," an acquired compensatory technique designed to obtain mastery over one's physical and emotional state, "especially in times of stress, existential fear, or moral conflict" (2015: 47, 55).

The work of cognitive scientists and neuroanthropologists has enriched the field of ritual studies by offering new theories and models that highlight the corporeal nature of ritual and its ability to induce physical, mental, and emotional change. Drawing on recent studies on the somatic nature of trauma and the role of ritual in re-shaping and augmenting cognitive and physical processes, this article will offer a fresh perspective on the role of embodiment and sensory experiences in early Chinese funerary and ancestral rites. These two type of rituals stand at the opposite ends of the ritual continuum that deals with the passing of a family member. Funerary rites deal with the immediate aftermath of death, while ancestral rites offer an opportunity to commemorate and venerate ancestors long after their death (Watson 1988: 204). I will argue that in early China, ritual participation was seen as an important preventative therapeutic technique designed to deal with the grief and potentially traumatic impact of losing a close family member. After a brief overview of the contemporary scholarship on the neurophysiology of ritual and trauma, I will offer a close reading of key passages from the *Xunzi* and the *Book of Rites*, two texts that contain some of the most influential theoretical discussions on ritual in early China. I will argue that for the authors of these works, ritual was a technique that could induce a physical, emotional, and cognitive transformation and for those reasons, has an important therapeutic properties. Analyzing funerary and ancestral rituals against the backdrop of contemporary scientific and therapeutic approaches can thus provide us with important insights regarding the anticipatory role of ritual in preventing the adverse effects of the loss of one's parents.

Theoretical Framework: The Neurophysiology of Ritual and Trauma

Traumatic experiences have a significant, and often debilitating, impact on the life of an individual, especially when they remain unresolved. Throughout most of the 20th century, trauma was understood to be a mental condition and therapists have relied on talk-therapy and cognitive and behavioral techniques, such as exposure therapy, to offer relief to their patients, with somewhat limited success. Recent developments in the fields of cognitive studies and neurophysiology, however, offer alternative theories of trauma that define it as an irregular activation of the body's autonomic nervous system that creates a disruption in its optimal state of balance. Throughout the course of evolution, certain psychophysiological mechanisms developed to aid humans and animals deal with life-threatening events. When faced with extreme danger, the sympathetic nervous system is activated and a "fight-or-flight" response ensues. When either option, self-defense and a hasty retreat, is untenable, 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 characterized 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 its imminent death. In most cases, the activation of the parasympathetic system will result in death. In the unlikely event of survival, a "freeze discharge" will be activated, purging the adversarial event from procedural memory, and thereby restoring the nat-

ural 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. In addition to mental distress, 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, immune, and sleep systems. Such unresolved physiological distress can, in turn, lead to more cognitive, emotional, and behavioral symptoms (Scaer 2017; Levine 2015).

Drawing on this fresh data, therapists have been developing new therapeutic techniques designed to aid patients dealing with their trauma. One of these methods, developed by Peter A. Levine, is Somatic Experiencing, a technique that aims to resolve the adverse effects on trauma by guiding the patient through their internal physiological sensations, rather than their cognitive or emotional experiences. Unlike exposure therapies, which involve the direct evocation of traumatic memories, Somatic Experiencing approaches them in a gradual and indirect manner while simultaneously fostering the creation of new corrective experiences that physically contradict those of distress and helplessness. The ultimate goal of this technique, argues Levine, is to "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, Levine, and Crane-Godreau, 2015).

In order to develop a sense of internal awareness to bodily states, Somatic Experiencing utilizes exercises inspired by traditional Asian techniques of meditative movement, such as Yoga, T'ai-Chi (Taijiquan), and Qigong, as well as various forms of seated meditation. 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: 59–60).

Individual meditational practices, however, are not the only efficacious tool for stimulating the brain and nervous system. Barbara Lex compares the effects of meditative and ritual practices and argues that both forms have similar neurophysiological effects. In meditation, the reduced sensory output monopolizes 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 utilize alternating stimulation of the bihemispheric brain that prompt a neurological and physiological response (Lex 1979).

Ritual's neurophysiological efficacy—its ability to restore a state of homeostasis, might explain the prevalence of ritual across different civilizations and its frequent association with the ability to heal trauma (Scaer 2017: 61). In their study of ritualized behavior, Pascal Boyer and Pierre Liénard define ritual as a "highly successful cultural gadget" that makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. Ritualized behavior, they argue, has four features that differentiate it from regular action: rigidity, redundancy, compulsion, and goal demotion (i.e. its desired effects are not as clear and straightforward as "regular" behavior). Ritual actions are governed by strict rules and restrictions, they often feature an atypical level of repetition, they are seen as compulsory in the sense that refraining from its practice might bring danger, and even though it has a specific objective, the set of procedures entailed in it are not connected to that goal in the same way sub-actions connect to sub-goals in ordinary behavior. The first two items, rigidity and redundancy, have long been identified in anthropological literature as key contributors to the efficacy of ritualized action (Lévi-Strauss 1981: 672–673). Boyer and Liénard's contribution lies in their analysis of the second pair of features, compulsion and goal demotion, as part of natural response to the activation of a "hazard-protection system." Faced with an adverse situation, the activation of certain neurocognitive systems might lead into the aforementioned state of freeze, as described by Scaer and Levine. Ritual-

ized behavior, according to Boyer and Liénard, helps to counter this "tonic immobility" as it turns automatic or routinized behavior, such as walking or getting dressed, into highly controlled actions that require sustained attention. The heightened level of reflexivity and focus and the combination of positive and negative prescriptions in ritualized actions flood our working memory and make it difficult to perform absent-mindedly. Ritual thus functions as a fairly efficient form of thought suppression, driving potentially harmful thoughts and desires away from consciousness, and preventing them from resulting in long-term trauma. The most efficacious forms of ritualized behavior are culturally remembered and preserved as compulsory collective rituals that are then performed in times of potential social trauma to provide relief (Boyer and Liénard 2006).

Ritual as a Technology of the Body in Early China

While the insights offered in the previous sections are based on empirical research and couched in scientific terminology, their assertions about the power of ritual are not new. As early as the 3rd century BCE, Early Chinese literati and liturgists have acknowledged ritual's ability to help deal with potentially hazardous emotional and physical responses to experiences of trauma, augment social cohesion, and even alter one's physical and cognitive make-up. Responding in part to the emergence of individual self-cultivation practices, such as seated meditation and "guiding and stretching" (*daoyin*) calisthenic regimens, they devised a comprehensive theory of ritual that stressed its corporeal nature and potential therapeutic benefits.

The 4th century BCE is often described as the "bodily turn" in Chinese intellectual history, a period in which discussions on the human body, its internal mechanisms, and its well-being began to feature heavily in the received literature. Until the last few decades, attempts to outline the emergence of this discourse and the actors involved in its production were limited by the nature of the available primary sources. Recent archaeological excavations have revealed that in addition to a flourishing philosophical discourse, this time period also witnessed the emergence of a parallel literary tradition comprised of technical manuals and guidebooks. These texts reveal the existence of a flourishing religio-medical marketplace comprised of masters actively disseminating their individual self-cultivation regimens designed to achieve the cultivation of the body and the attainment of longevity (Tavor 2016).

The growing popularity of these self-cultivation regimens among the elite 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. This sense of alarm is best manifested in the work of 3rd 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, as well as an early ritual theorist, Xunzi took it upon himself to repackage moral self-cultivation as a "technology of the body" superior to the meditational and calisthenics regimens advocated by his rivals. Ritual participation, according to this theory, is the ultimate tool of self-cultivation as it allowed the practitioner to gain individual bounties, such as good health, sensory and emotional satisfaction, and moral edification, but at the same time promote a sense of communal identity, enforce social hierarchies, and maintain political order (Tavor 2013).

Xunzi's visceral descriptions of early Chinese rituals suggest that these performances were audiovisual multimedia affairs that featured well-rehearsed choreographed sequences accompanied by music. The aesthetic quality of ritual ceremonies is in fact identified by Xunzi as one of the key contributors to its efficacy. Ritual, he argues, involves a highly routinized and regulated mode of action accompanied by sensory gratification conducted in a controlled setting. It produces a corporal experience that in turn brings forth a total emotional, physiological, and spiritual transformation, as suggested in the following passage:

> The Confucian exemplary person (*junzi*) utilizes the bells and drums to create correspondence between their consciousness and the Way (*Dao*) and the zithers and lutes to gladden their mind. They move wielding the shield and battle-axe. Adorned with oxtails and plumes, they follow the rhythm of the chime stones and pitch pipes. In their purity and brilliance, they model themselves after Heaven. In their greatness and vastness, they model themselves after Earth. In their posturing and movements, they model themselves after the Four Seasons. Thus, when music is performed, their intentions becomes pure, and when ritual is cultivated their conduct is perfected. Their hearing becomes acute and their vision clear, the flowing of his blood and *qi* harmonious and uniform, their practices altered, and their customs changed. All

> under Heaven is made tranquil and everybody join together in the joy of beauty and goodness (Watson 1963: 116–117, with some alterations).

The physiological and cognitive impacts of ritual participation are made clear in this description.

Moreover, unlike mundane behavior, ritual action is akin to a scripted dramatic performance. These performances, argues Xunzi, are highly symbolic. Much like the actions of an actor in a theatrical play, they are subjunctive, a form of contingent or hypothetical action that creates an alternative version of reality, an order that is self-consciously different from other possible worlds (Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon 2008). By following the ritual script, modeling their movements on cosmological processes or playing the part of a deity, natural force, or a cultural hero, the practitioners are able to identify with them and enter into a relationship with the divine (Tavor 2013: 326).

The subjunctive nature of ritual participation is also emphasized in Xunzi's description of funerary and mourning rituals. His most well-known essay on ritual, the "Discussion on Rites" (*Lilun*), concludes with a lengthy and highly detailed description of the various ritual prescriptions that follow the death of a close family member: the washing of the corpse, its placement in the coffin, the arrangement of the deceased's personal effects in the tomb, and the precise procedures that regulate the funeral procession. The subjunctive nature of these procedures, argues Xunzi, is clear—in funerary rites, "one adorns the dead as though they were still living, and sends them to the grave with forms of symbolic life. . . they are treated as though dead, and yet as though alive, as though gone, and yet as though still present. . . this is all done in order to give form to one's feeling of grief" (Watson 1963: 103–4).

Ritual, according to Xunzi, is a tool that allows the living to come to terms with the potential traumatic aftereffects of loss by giving them a proper outlet to express their feelings of grief. The effectiveness of these prescriptions hinges upon their theatrical nature—while the mourners are aware that their loved ones are gone, they choose to treat them as if they were still living, thereby allowing them to express their emotions in a proper way that can prevent long-term trauma. All living beings, argues Xunzi, have strong emotional bonds with their family members, especially their parents. Their death brings intense emotions of pain and grief. For this reason, the sages, exemplary figures that lived in the ancient past, designed detailed ritual prescriptions that "can neither be circumvented nor changed" (106). Chief among them is the three-year mourning period that follows the death of a parent. During this period, which actually lasts for only 25-months (i.e. one month into the third year), the mourner is separated from society and follows an ascetic regimen. They reside in a tomb-side dwelling, wear simple unadorned robes, subsist on a plain diet, and sleep on the ground. Read against the backdrop of the previously discussed neurophysiological studies, the detailed nature of this ritualized behavior makes sense—faced with the intense sorrow and prolonged mourning that follows the death of one's parents, which some scholars describe as the single most traumatic event in the life of a Confucian in ancient China (Olberding, 2011: 154), the mourner focuses on ritualized prescriptive behavior and flood their working memory thereby avoiding potentially hazardous thoughts and desires from setting in.

Dealing with Death in the *Book of Rites*

The funerary rituals described by Xunzi also feature heavily in what is considered to be the main repository of classical Confucian ritual—the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*), a collection of essays compiled and edited in the early 2nd century BCE. In addition to theoretical essays that discuss the origin, nature, and role of the Confucian ritual system, the *Book of Rites* provides us with detailed descriptions of a wide variety of rituals, including funerary, mortuary, and commemorative ancestral rites. The "Rules on Hurrying to the Mourning Rites" (*Benseng*), for example, offers comprehensive prescriptive instructions for the mourner, from the way they are supposed to wail in grief at moment they are told about the death of one of their relatives to their expected behavior during their travel to the funeral. Another chapter, "The Lesser Record of Mourning Garb" (*Sangfu Xiaoji*), provides ritual instruction for mourning the death of non-immediate members of the patrilineal lineage, such as concubines, maternal relatives, and distant cousins. Due to the prescriptive nature of the *Book of Rites* and other early ritual texts included in the Confucian canon, there is no way to know whether these highly detailed liturgical instructions reflected common practice or a desired ideal. The theoretical framework they provide, however, did play a crucial role in shaping both the state and family ritual systems that prospered throughout Chinese history until the modern era (Ebrey 1991).

One of the key theoretical themes of the *Book of Rites* is ritual's ability to streamline human emotions. In a recent study of this work, Michael Ing argues that many this work presents rituals as "tools for providing direction and cultivating a habituated sense of proper performance"

(2012: 33). People react differently to the death of a loved family member depending on their own emotional make-up. While some might forget themselves in their grief, others find it hard to express their feelings. Funerary rites, with their detailed and precise prescriptions for correct behavior, make sure that the sentiments of grief are neither excessive nor deficient. This sentiment is best expressed in the following passage from "The Four Principles of Mourning Garb" (*Sangfu Sizhi*) chapter, which explains why the death of one's parents is accompanied by a series of gradual steps: it begins with three days of wailing, followed by three months of wearing symbolic mourning garb, and concludes with three years of extended general bereavement. The ritual scheme, argues the author, corresponds with our natural emotional make-up:

> The sages, in accordance with that diminution of the natural feeling, constructed their system of ritual regulations. It was on this account that the mourning rites were limited to three years. The worthiest were not permitted to go beyond this period, nor those who were inferior to them to fall short of it. This was the proper and invariable time for those rites, what the (sage) kings always carried into practice (Legge 1885, Vol. II: 468, with some alterations).

Funerary rites are thus designed to help the mourner deal with the immediate aftermath of the loss of their parents. The strict regulations created by the sages provide the mourner with a ready-made template for the proper expression and function as a preventative measure for a potential traumatic reaction. It is important to note, however, that according to the *Book of Rites*, ritual cannot, and should not, completely eliminate the feeling of loss. Even after the assigned three-year mourning period, some sentiments of grief and anxiety still remain, as such loss "leaves a permanent scar" (Ing 2012: 195). One of the main tools for dealing with this residual grief is the annual performance of commemorative ancestral rites.

The term ancestor worship, sometimes known as ancestor veneration or the ancestral cult, refers to rituals designed to commemorate and venerate the spirits of one's deceased forebearers. While it is often associated with the Confucian notion of filial piety, ancestor worship crosses the boundaries of religious traditions, geographical regions, and socio-economic groups, and is still practiced in East Asia and among diasporic communities around the globe today. Recent archaeological studies of burial sites in the Yellow River valley show suggest that rituals designed to venerate special individuals with high social status date back to the Neolithic period (Li 2000). Appeals to the ancestor also feature heavily in Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions, the oldest existing documents written in Chinese script. In the Shang religious system, the spirits of deceased humans were seen as potentially malevolent beings who can inflict bodily harm on the living, but can also be pacified, controlled, and turned into benevolent ancestor through the proper sacrificial rituals (Puett 2002). Ancestor worship remained one of the central institutions in the religious system of the subsequent Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and was eventually incorporated into the official state religion in the Qin (221–206 CBE) and Han (206 BCE—220 CE) Dynasties. The theoretical discussion and liturgical descriptions found in the *Book of Rites* can be seen as part of the overarching project of creating a standardized and unified ritual system that highlighted ancestor worship as one of its key institutions.

In two recent studies of early Chinese ancestor worship practices, Martin Kern and K.E. Brashier explore the link between ancestral rites and the creation and preservation of a shared sense of cultural memory and identity. The veneration of a common ancestor through ritual and its accompanying hymns and prayers, argues Kern, played a central role in the production of an accepted narrative of communal memory, thereby stabilizing the social structure and providing justification for the political authority of the ruler as the descendent of royal ancestors (2000). Moreover, as multi-media events, which involved "converging patterns of song, music, dance, fragrance, speech, material artifacts and sacrificial offerings," these rituals "embodied the cultural practices of elite life" (153). Much like Kern, Brashier also emphasizes the performative elements of ancestral rites, defining them as "an orchestrated dance between the what was present and what was absent." In early China, he argues, the posthumous souls of the ancestors were not conceived as immortal but as slowly-fading energies that require humans to nourish them through sacrifice. These rituals involved "focused thinking about the ancestors, with structured mental effort on the part of the living that reached out to absent forebears. . . giving them shape and existence. . ." (2011: 2). Ritual, in this sense, was seen as the most efficacious artificial tool designed to compensate the natural process of the fading of memory of the ancestors (347).

Drawing on these two studies, I would like to argue that ancestral rites can be understood not only as rituals designed to keep the memory of one's deceased parents alive, but also as preemptive techniques that can help off-

set potential trauma by renewing the vows of filial love and duty. Much like Levine's therapeutic method, ancestral rites create an overarching sensory somatic experience. But, while Somatic Experiencing can be seen as a curative measure aimed at reversing the effects of trauma, these rituals are more akin to a preventative measure designed to preemptively thwart the somatic effects of potential trauma. In the remaining pages I will demonstrate that by focusing on two elements of ancestral worship—the preparatory stage of ritual fasting (*zhai*) undertaken by the ritual agent and the role of the "personator of the dead" (*shi*) in the subsequent rite.

The Fast

Ancestral sacrifices are best seen as attempts to reconnect with the spirits of the deceased. Both Xunzi and the authors of the *Book of Rites* stress that for this experience to be effective, one must almost see, hear, smell, and even touch the spirits as if they are standing right in front of them. According to Roel Sterckx, this idea might explain why the ritual literature focuses on the materiality of the offerings, as "the physical surroundings in which such procedures take place and the sacrificial offering itself become the most important media in establishing sensory contact with the spirit world" (2011: 115). A critical component in the creation of this experience is the initial stage of the sacrificial process—a purification ritual known as the fast, which is described in following excerpt from the "Genealogy of Sacrifice" (*Jitong*) chapter of the *Book of Rites*:

> When the time to offer a sacrifice arrives, the exemplary person undergoes a fast. . . If one does fast, their response to (external) things will know no restraint and his desires will never cease. Thus, when (the exemplary person) is about to perform the fast, they guard against all perverse things and terminate their desires. . . Because they allow no irreverent thoughts in their mind, they are certain to conform to the (patterns of the) Way. Because they allow no irreverent movement of their hands or feet, they are certain to conform to the ritual. . . By fasting, they can perfect their quintessential clarity and, as a result, come into contact with the (ancestral) spirits (Legge 1885, Vol. II: 239–240, with some alterations).

As a preparatory stage in the ritual, the goal of the fast is to purify the sacrificer by removing them from the mundane world, thus allowing them to come into contact with the sacred. Additional depictions of this ritual, which can be found in the "Meaning of Sacrifice" chapter, suggest that it was comprised of two stages. During the first seven-day stage, the sacrificer is required to follow a set of general prohibitions, such as abstaining from receiving guests and engaging in wailing. This is followed by a more intense three-day period of reflection (*si*), during which the sacrificer invokes the memory of the deceased in great detail: their daily behavior, the way they laughed and talked, their preferences and aspirations, and even their wants and desires. By conjuring these minute details, the sacrificer will eventually be able to enter the state of emptiness (*xu*) and reverence (*jing*) needed to reconnect with their loved ones (211–214).

The use of phrases such as "reflection," "emptiness," and "quintessential clarity" (*jingming*) is particularly important here, as these are technical terms that appear quite frequently in descriptions of meditative practices in early China. In the *Inward Training* (*Neiye*), a 4th century BCE meditation manual, obtaining a state of emptiness through reduction of sensory input and elimination of bodily desires is seen as a crucial step in embarking on a complete cognitive, physiological, and spiritual transformation. Known as "sweeping the mind," this technique allows the practitioner to create a state of internal vacuity, which in turn enables external powerful spiritual essence to take lodge in their body and mind, bestowing them with divine power (*de*) (Roth 1999). In the *Huainanzi*, a text that was compiled around the same time as the *Book of Rites*, the term "quintessential clarity" is depicted as the end result of a meditative regimen that involves controlling the flow of *qi* in one's body and eliminating carnal desires. This process alters the practitioner's sense perceptions and allows them to experience the world in a clearer and more reified way (Major, Queen, Meyer, and Roth 2010: 243).

The most palpable and direct link between the ritual fasting depicted in the *Book of Rites* and the practice of seated meditation, however, can be found in the *Zhuangzi*. The "The Human World" (*Renshi*) chapter contains a fictitious dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Yan Hui. When the latter asked his master for a method to improve himself, Confucius, in response, recommends purificatory fasting (*zhai*). Yan Hui then inquires if he means abstaining from eating strong-smelling vegetables such as onion and garlic and consuming alcohol, and the master replied:

> "This is fasting suitable for sacrifice, but it is not the fasting of the mind." "I venture to ask what pu-

> rification of the mind is," said Hui. "Maintaining the unity of your consciousness," said Confucius—"listen not with your ears but with your mind. Better yet, listen not with your mind but with your *qi*. The ears are limited to listening; the mind is limited to tallying. *Qi,* however, awaits things emptily. It is only through the Way that one can gather emptiness, and emptiness is the fasting of the mind. . . Let your senses communicate within and rid yourself of the machinations of the mind. Then even the spirits will take shelter in you. . ." (Mair 1998: 32–33, with minor alterations).

The meditative technique described in this passage bears a strong resemblance to the ones featured in the *Inward Training* and the *Huainanzi*. As Michael Puett convincingly demonstrates, the internalization of ritual procedures and their incorporation into regimens of individual self-cultivation designed to achieve divine-like powers has been a dominant feature of Chinese religious culture from the 4th century BCE onward (2002). In response, ritual experts sought to rearticulate their communal rites and sacrifices using the technical terms employed in meditation manuals. From the descriptions of the fast offered in the *Book of Rites*, we can see that much like meditative practices, this ritual involves separating oneself from everyday reality and emptying one's body and mind. The idea that we must expel old *qi* in order to replace it with new and improved *qi*, for example, featured heavily in early Chinese self-cultivation literature (Tavor 2016: 55). The major differences between the two practices, however, is that in the fasting ritual, vacuity is created in order to be filled not with invigorated *qi* or divine power, but with the memories of one's ancestors. Much like Levine's technique of Somatic Experiencing, the goal of this preparatory ritual is to develop a sense of internal awareness to bodily states in order to facilitate a therapeutic experience of contact with one's ancestors that physically contradict the distress and helplessness associated with the trauma of their death. Moreover, when read against the backdrop of contemporary cognitive research, we can see how conjuring the memories of our deceased loved ones can assist in purging the traumatic memories associated with the trauma of their death from procedural memory and restoring the natural state of homeostasis. But, imagining the ancestors is not enough—one has to see, hear, smell, and even touch them for the experience to be memorable and therapeutic. This is achieved by another component in the ritual of ancestral sacrifice, communing with the personator of the dead.

The Personator as a Living Transitional Object

In her analysis of the secular mourning rituals developed in the Netherlands, Joanna Wojtkowiak identifies the "ritual emptiness" of the second half of the 20th century as the main reason for the ritual revival of the 1980's and 1990's. Disillusioned by the rituals of traditional religion, practitioners began to devise their own rituals, particularly in the realm of funerary rites. Wojtkowiak notes that the main objective of these procedures, the creation and maintenance of a symbolic relationship with the deceased, can only be achieved and augmented through sensorial experiences. Ritual mourning, she argues, is an embodied activity—mourners often experience the strongest connection to their deceased loved ones through visual, auditory, and tactile contact with transitional material objects that symbolize the dead. These objects, together with other well-studied features of ritual, such as its attention-grabbing nature and the efficacy of its repetitiveness, help to cultivate a stable relationship with the dead, embed them in our memory, and alleviate the trauma of loss (2017).

The notion of transitional object can offer us an important insight into understanding the role of the personator of the dead (*shi*), which is one of the most unique components in early Chinese funerary rites and ancestral sacrifices. Literally translated as "corpse," the role of the personator is often played by a living descendant of the deceased, acting as a proxy for the ancestral spirits during the ritual in order to give physical form to the "invisible yet omnipresent" spirits (Sterckx 2011: 119). The origin of this practice seems to date back to the second millennium BCE, as it is mentioned in the Shang oracle bones and in inscribed proclamations dedicated to the spirits of the dead found on Zhou Dynasty ritual bronze vessels. In the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing*), one of the five Confucian canonical classics, the personator is described as playing a central role in a communal ritual feast that features the consumption of delicacies and alcoholic beverages, shared by the ancestors and their living descendants (Carr 2006: 369). These depictions have led some scholars to argue for the shamanic origin of this ritual, in which a possessed and intoxicated personator, in a state of trance, speaks on behalf of the dead. According to Jordan Paper, early Chinese rituals often relied on the consumption of alcohol to induce a state of trance. Drawing on his own mathematical calculations based on the size of Western Zhou ritual goblets and the alcohol content of fermented liquor at that time, Paper hypothesizes that the personator consumed between 2.4 and 3.9 ounces of pure

alcohol during the ritual. This level of inebriation, combined with the preparatory fast and the sensory stimulation of the musical performance, led to an altered state of consciousness similar to that produced by hallucinogenic substances used in shamanic possession rituals in North Asia and the Amazon Basin (Paper 1995: 112–114).

By the compilation of the *Book of Rites*, however, the ritual has evolved to a more somber dramatic event that involved the offering of food and alcohol but no elements of ecstatic spirit possession or trance (Falkenhausen 1995: 297). As the following dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Zengzi suggests, by the 2nd century BCE, the role of the personator has transformed to become a symbolic representation of familial bonds:

> Zengzi asked: "Is it necessary that there should be a personator in sacrifice? or may he be dispensed with as when the satisfying offerings are made to the dead?"
>
> Confucius answered: "In sacrificing to a full-grown person for whom there have been the funeral rites, there must be such a personator, who should be a grandson. If the grandson is too young, someone must be employed to carry him in his arms. . . To sacrifice to a full-grown person, for whom there have been the funeral rites, without a personator, would be to treat them as if they had died prematurely" (Legge 1885, Vol. I: 337–338, with some alterations).

Confucius' insistence in this dialogue is significant, as it suggests that by this time, some were beginning to doubt the need to have a personator in the ancestral sacrifice. It also points to the fact that with the gradual fading of the shamanic components of the ritual, liturgists had to provide a new justification for the role of the personator. They responded by stressing that its function as a corporeal symbol of family ties. According to Confucius, sacrificing to one's ancestor without physically representing him in the ritual is an act of impropriety. The death of a parent who played a central role in the life of the sacrificer can be a traumatic event. While funerary rituals can certainly help them deal with the immediate emotional and somatic aftermath of their parent's death, this must be augmented by a periodic ceremony of remembrance in which the dead are given physical form. During the funeral, the mourners still have access to the corpse of the deceased—they dress it up, carry it in a coffin, and provide it with sacrificial offerings. Once its entombed, however, they lose their immediate access to it. The physical presence of the deceased, whose spirit ascends to the heavens, is replaced with an ancestral tablet, which is placed in the family shrine inside the household (Puett 2009: 708). But, as previously suggested, for the ritual to have the desired effect, homeostasis, the sacrificer must undergo a complete sensory experience. This type of resolution can only be achieved through an interaction with the living transitional object of the personator, as described in the following passage from the *Comprehensive Institutions* (*Tongdian*):

> The personator stands for the spirit of the deceased. It participates in the ceremony wherein sacrifice is offered to ancestors. Since the soul (of the dead) emits no perceptible sounds and has no visible form, the loving sentiment of filial piety finds no means of displaying itself. Hence, a personator is chosen to whom meats are offered, after which he breaks the bowls, quite rejoiced, as if his own father had eaten plenty. The personator, drinking abundantly, imparts the illusion that it is the soul which is satiated (Doré, 1914: 100, quoted in Carr 2007: 385–386, with some alterations).

Compiled in the 8th century CE, almost a thousand years after the *Book of Rites*, the author of this passage does not try to mask the fact that the personator is a mere actor in a ritual drama and not a mouthpiece possessed by the spirit of the deceased. The goal of this event is not to communicate with the dead but to enter a symbolic communion with them designed to reassert familial bonds and alleviate the trauma of their loss. The role of the personator is to give form to the invisible soul of the deceased, acting as the transitional material object described by Wojtkowiak. As an embodied activity, ritual mourning is the most efficacious when it allows mourners to reconnect with the dead through visual, auditory, and tactile contact with transitional object that symbolize them. The personator is particularly suited for this purpose as it is played by the son of the sacrificer, the grandchild of the deceased. During the ceremony, the mourner treats their own child as if he was their own deceased parent, but when it is over, the child returns to being their son. According to Victor Turner, this temporary role reversal is an integral part of the dialectical structure of ritual. The revitalizing sense of *communitas*, or social cohesion, which is achieved by the breaking of hierarchical roles and statuses, must be followed by a return to the reaffirmed *status quo* of structure (1969). In the case of ancestor worship, the temporary reversal of the parent-child relationship serves to reinforce the bonds of familial love and care, reassert the continuation

of the lineage, and help the mourner to come to terms with their loss.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that Early Chinese ritualists were well aware of ritual's ability to deal with the potentially hazardous emotional and physical responses to experiences of trauma. As an embodied activity designed to alter the practitioner's physiological, cognitive, and emotional responses to reality, funerary and ancestral rituals were often depicted as powerful cultural devices designed to help the individual to come to terms with loss while simultaneously promoting social stability and cohesion. Contemporary cognitive and therapeutic approaches to ritual and trauma only serve to reaffirm these assertions. Boyer and Liénard's analysis of ritualized behavior, for instance, can be used to explain the rationale behind the extremely detailed ritual prescriptions that need to be followed after the death of one's parent. Faced with the intense sorrow and prolonged mourning that follows this traumatic event, focusing on ritualized prescriptive behavior can help flood the working memory and prevent potentially hazardous thoughts and morose desires from setting in. Lex, Levine, and Scaer's assertions about the neurophysiological effects of bi-hemispheric stimulation, on the other hand, can help us understand the efficacy of ancestral worship, and especially the roles of the fast and the personator of the dead. The shift between the sensory deprivation of the fast and the stimulation the takes place in the ensuing sacrificial event, in which food and drink offerings satiate the palate, sweet fragrances satiate the olfactory system, music and choreographed performances provide auditory and visual stimulation, and the personator offers a palpable tactile presence, are all combined to offer a preventative therapeutic experience. While funerary rituals offer immediate response, ancestral rites are designed to thwart the long-term effects of potential trauma by replacing the memory of the loss of one's parents with the life-affirming, and palpably corporeal, celebration of their life.

Analyzing the theoretical discourse on funerary and ancestral rituals in early China against the backdrop of the contemporary cognitive and therapeutic literature is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that the conclusions drawn by modern scientists about ritual's ability to transform our physical and cognitive make-up were shared by thinkers and liturgists for more than two millennia. Early Chinese theories of ritual have conceptualized ritual as an embodied practice that can elicit the same physical and spiritual benefits as other individual self-cultivation practices from the very beginning (Tavor 2013). Reading the essays contained in the *Xunzi* and the *Book Rites* as theories of ritual, can thus help broaden the perspective of modern scholars of ritual studies. Lastly, the gradual decline in the popularity of traditional organized religion in the West in the last few decades has also given rise to the creation of new secular rituals. As noted by Herbert Fingarette in the early 1970's, classical Confucianism is particularly relevant to this endeavor, as it contains a humanist philosophy that emphasizes the spiritual elements of profane ritualized behavior and portrays ritual participation as a sacred act that augments social cohesion and communal identity (1972). Getting a clearer picture of Chinese death rituals is thus not only important for historians or scholars of religion. It can also provide inspiration and potential source material for contemporary ritologists involved in the design of new ways of ritualized mourning in the modern world.

Endnotes

1. The term technology of the body has been coined by Michel Foucault, who defines it as practices that "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (1988: 18). For a more detailed application of this term on early Chinese self-cultivation practices, see Tavor 2013.

2. The Way (*Dao*), Heaven (*Tian*), Earth (*Di*), and the Four Seasons (*Sishi*) are key concepts in the system of correlative cosmology that began to develop around the 3rd century BCE. In this passage, the Way refers to the normative patterns of the universe. Heaven, Earth, and the Four Seasons refer to the natural world and all its phenomena and processes.

3. For another take on the performative and dramatic elements of ritual mourning in the Xunzi and its link to modern Western acting techniques, see Radice 2017.

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