

LIVING WITH CONCEPTS

Anthropology in the Grip of Reality

ANDREW BRANDEL
AND MARCO MOTTA,
EDITORS

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York 2021

Copyright © 2021 Fordham University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Fordham University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Fordham University Press also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Visit us online at www.fordhampress.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brandel, Andrew, editor. | Motta, Marco, editor.

Title: Living with concepts : anthropology in the grip of reality / Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta, editors.

Description: First edition. | New York : Fordham University Press, 2021. | Series: Thinking from elsewhere | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021010945 | ISBN 9780823294268 (hardback) | ISBN 9780823294275 (paperback) | ISBN 9780823294275 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Ideals (Philosophy) | Concepts.

Classification: LCC B105.I3 L58 2021 | DDC 121/.4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021010945>

Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

7

CREATING WORLDS

Imagination, Interpretation, and the Subjunctive

MICHAEL J. PUETT

In twelfth-century China, a scholar named Zhu Xi developed a novel theory of reading and interpretation. In doing so, he rejected reading and commentarial practices that had dominated the tradition for well over a millennium, and he claimed to return to the views that had last been in practice in the fourth century BCE. The theory—later given the nomenclature of “Neo-Confucianism”—would ultimately come to dominate the scholastic traditions of East Asia for the next seven centuries.

Given both the claimed and perceived radicalness of his views, the readings that Zhu Xi gives to texts may seem somewhat unsurprising. A love poem from the *Book of Poetry*, for example, is read as, well, a love poem. A set of line statements from the *Book of Changes* concerning a ritual vessel falling over is read as just that. The texts, in other words, are read as being precisely what they would obviously seem to be.

Part of why this might be unsurprising is that Zhu Xi’s reading of these texts—and, indeed, the very nature of the texts as he transmitted them—had a tremendous influence. One can today pick up any number of world literature anthologies, turn to the section on love poetry from the ancient world, and find a section on love poetry from China—the very love poems that Zhu Xi read in the twelfth century as being simply love poems. Perhaps more important, one will also find statements in the anthologies that underline Zhu Xi’s critiques—statements along the lines that the reader of the anthology should feel blessed, for they are allowed to simply read the

love poems as love poems, unlike the way that countless generations of Chinese were forced to read them through the commentarial tradition—as statements, for example, about the relations between kings and ministers at specific moments in Zhou history.

But it is unsurprising not simply because of the influence of Zhu Xi. It is more significantly unsurprising because the way Zhu Xi is asking readers to read is an approach that has become dominant in recent Western history as well. Zhu Xi is asking us to read a text directly, without mediation, and to be moved by what the text itself says. Any mediation—say, given by a commentarial tradition that reads the text as being something other than what an unmediated reading would see—is by definition to be rejected.

To go back to the world anthologies mentioned earlier: the claim of the anthology is that, if the modern reader reads a love poem directly and without mediation, she will be able to see it as just that—a love poem. Sadly, generations of readers in traditional China were not allowed to do so, and were instead forced to read the poem through tone-deaf Confucian commentators who read the poems as political allegories. Zhu Xi was calling on the reader to do the same: reject the commentarial readings and simply read a love poem as a love poem.

Zhu Xi's vision of reading was directly related to his understanding of concepts. Why is it, according to Zhu Xi, that people can read a love poem as a love poem? It is because all humans have a mind that, used properly, allows them to grasp the fundamental principles of the cosmos—and hence of the various manifestations of it, including human activities like love.

The reason that this ability to read a love poem as a love poem had been lost for over a millennium is that a series of authorities, according to Zhu's reading of history, had intruded into the proper workings of the mind. Beginning in the third century BCE, a series of false understandings of ritual, reading, and learning entered the scene. Figures like Xunzi argued for the importance of artifice and of the use of rituals to transform a human nature seen as fundamentally limited. Such ideas were then institutionalized in the Han and Tang empires, which institutionalized as well a system of learning based upon the commentarial approaches discussed earlier. Such rituals and commentarial approaches to reading led to a loss of the Way that had been taught by Confucius and Mencius. Zhu Xi's pedagogy was thus to erase these false rituals and false modes of interpretation that served only to cloud the mind.

Some of these names might sound foreign, but the reading strategy, form of critique, and even understanding of rituals and concepts is anything but. Zhu Xi's critique of rituals and commentaries that interfered with a direct and unmediated access to texts that would otherwise be able to transform the reader has a close parallel with the critiques made by Protestants of Catholic ritual and interpretation. The Protestant claim was that Catholic ritual and modes of interpretation had created a dangerous form of mediated, priestly authority that prevented the individual's direct access to scripture and direct contact with God.

As many scholars have noted, many of the assumptions concerning reading and interpretation that have come to dominate the humanities and social sciences over the past few centuries are basically Protestant in their orientation (see, e.g., Asad 1993). But Protestantism was hardly a unique phenomenon in world history.

Some colleagues and I have elsewhere argued that much of contemporary theory operates in the mode of sincerity—a focus on direct, unmediated readings, with an implicit emphasis on conceptual coherence (Seligman et al. 2008). From the point of view of sincerity claims, traditional ways of reading involve the imposition of authoritative modes of interpretation that block the individual's being moved direct access to the clear meaning of a text or the world around them. The sincere mode thus involves an unmasking of what, from such a perspective, is presented as traditional concepts that otherwise mediate that access.

The most influential version of such sincerity claims on modern Western theory has certainly been the Protestant reaction against Catholicism. But Protestantism is but one of many sincerity movements that have arisen. Neo-Confucianism is another example (see Ivanhoe 2010 for a comparison of Neo-Confucianism and Protestantism). The impact that Protestantism had on subsequent Western theory is directly paralleled by the impact that Neo-Confucianism had on subsequent East Asian theory. This is why, returning to the poem, we can so easily laugh with Zhu Xi when he ridicules a commentarial tradition that would read a love poem as a political allegory. Zhu Xi's move vis-à-vis the Chinese tradition is directly comparable to one that has become common in the West as well.

The goal of this essay will be twofold. I want first to explore the implicit understandings of concepts that have become dominant in the world. Several scholars have done so through a genealogy of Western theory,

demonstrating its reliance on Protestant assumptions. My goal will be similar, but I will do so through an exploration of a comparable development in China. Seeing a conceptual approach elsewhere that makes intuitive sense may help us to see and question some of the modes of interpretation that have become so common in contemporary theory.

My second goal will then be to look at what Zhu Xi was reacting against. If many of our theoretical assumptions are developed out of what I am calling the sincerity mode, it may be helpful to ask about what might happen if we took seriously the theoretical approaches that we have come to characteristically reject.

CONCEPTUAL COHERENCE

But let us begin by exploring Zhu Xi's theory of concepts in more detail. As noted previously, the concepts themselves will sound foreign, but much of the framework and its implications for reading and interpretation will not.

The world, according to Zhu Xi, is fundamentally coherent. The key term for Zhu Xi is *li*, which can be translated as principle or pattern, or even as coherence itself (Bol 2010). This principle pervades and defines everything. Such a commitment to the fundamental unity of everything is considered a fundamental article of faith—as Peter Bol puts it, “a belief in unity and coherence as the fundamental nature of all things in the universe” (ibid., 5).

The stuff of the world that this principle resides within is *qi*, which includes both energy and matter. This interplay of pattern and matter defines all that exists in the cosmos—including, of course, humans. Insofar as humans partake of the same qualities as the rest of the cosmos, they can also intuitively understand it. And this too is an article of faith. To quote Bol again: “the core of the Neo-Confucian self is belief—a conscious commitment of faith—rather than a philosophical proposition or unarticulated assumption (2010, 195).

Zhu Xi's larger philosophical position is already becoming clear. An inherent principled coherence underlies the world and all things within the world. This principled coherence can be grasped directly by the unmediated mind. The work of learning is thus one of clearing the mind to allow it to so grasp this coherence. The mind will thus work with concepts that are coherent, just like the world. As long as they arise directly from the

mind, concepts will perfectly cohere, both with each other and with the world. As such, contemporary humans can perfectly align with the ideas of the distant sages of the past—Confucius and Mencius—who did exactly as we are being called upon to do now. The danger is that the artificial teachings that emerged since Mencius—including commentaries and improper rituals—have clouded this understanding (see in particular Gardner 1986, 2003).

All of this, as Peter Bol has captured beautifully, is a topic of belief:

There was the belief in the possibility of *consistency* in the theory of learning, that contemporary Neo-Confucians could perfectly rearticulate the ideas of the sages of antiquity, thus establishing the *dao tong*, the “Succession of the Way.” There was the *identity* and unity of coherence, *li*, itself. There was the belief in a state of perfect integrity or sincerity (*cheng*), in which emotional responses (*qing*) are fully consonant with the innate coherence of “heavenly *li*,” and the mind always vanquishes selfish desires and controls the *qi* of the physical constitution. (Bol 2010, 198)

Properly done, then, ritual and reading simply involve bringing out what is internal and thus allowing it to correctly be unified with the coherent world. From this perspective, improper commentaries and improper rituals create artificial barriers to this connection with the coherent world. Hence the work that Zhu Xi had to undertake to break down these barriers.

But Zhu Xi’s work did not stop there. For all of his emphasis on direct, unmediated reading, Zhu Xi had to do a great deal of work to give us the texts that we could so read directly. With two of the texts that he would define as the four key works in a future educational curriculum—the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*—Zhu Xi had to alter them such that they could yield the kind of clear and proper reading experience that he was seeking. He had to reorganize the *Doctrine of the Mean*, and he actually had to add a key character in the *Great Learning* upon which his clear reading was based.

The texts, in other words, were not written to be read as the coherent, clear works that Zhu Xi’s hermeneutics required. They needed to be rewritten to become so.

Moreover, Zhu Xi himself wrote commentaries. The clear, direct reading that a coherent vision would give were hardly the most obvious ways to

read the texts in question—even after the editing. Yes, a love poem was just a love poem, but reading the *Analects* of Confucius as a clear, coherent text written about a coherent cosmos required an extraordinary amount of work.

Indeed, the entire conceptual apparatus that Zhu Xi developed—including the complex metaphysics of *qi* (energy, matter) and *li* (principle, pattern, coherence)—include both terms and metaphysical articulations that do not even appear in these texts. Many of the key terms (with very different meanings) are first developed in texts from the third century BCE and after—precisely the period that Zhu Xi labeled the beginning of the loss of the Way. When they were developed in the late Warring States and early Han (third and second centuries BCE), several of these terms were used self-consciously as what I have called “violent misreadings” of the earlier texts. The imperial authors were overtly constructing a grand, systematic understanding of the cosmos—just as they were constructing an unprecedented empire in the political realm—that would also incorporate earlier texts—texts that were read as limited in their scope (Puett 2000, 2014b).

Zhu Xi’s move was to take this conceptual terminology, claim that the cosmos really was inherently coherent and that the concepts accurately mapped this coherence, and claim further that the earlier texts simply embodied such a coherence—and thus did not need the complex conceptual framework. Thus, the earlier texts—the *Analects* of Confucius, the Mencius, the *Great Learning* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*—were correct, and the five Classics, including the *Book of Odes*, were necessary to study as well. The fact that they did not utilize this complex metaphysical conceptualization was simply because they did not need it; they spontaneously exemplify the key moral principles of the cosmos. Zhu Xi’s concepts simply explain why they were able to do as they did, and to explain for those coming over a millennium later how this understanding can be recovered from the early texts. The texts (radically reworked and reinterpreted) exemplified what the theory explained.

It takes a lot of work to create the conditions for clear, unmediated readings. From an outside perspective, of course, what Zhu Xi was doing was constructing a conceptual order based upon coherence, using rituals and commentaries to inculcate that vision, and creating a set curriculum organized to appear seamless and to yield clear, direct understandings—all of

which would lead to a belief that the self was coherent and could live seamlessly in a coherent world.

Perhaps now this is beginning to sound a bit less foreign.

With Protestantism, too, the focus was on belief, with a claimed direct access of each individual to God. This was in turn linked directly to calls for direct, unmediated reading of scripture, rejecting the rituals and commentarial traditions of Catholicism that mediated access to God through artificial authorities. Rejecting these rituals and commentarial traditions would allow one to return to the early communities of simple believers.

Minus the specific issues of content, this is a framework that has become very common. I begin by filling out a bit the earlier passing reference to anthologies of world literature. The work taken to create such an anthology replicates (and, in the case of love poetry from classical China, directly builds upon) the work of figures like Zhu Xi to pull the texts out of complex traditions of interpretation and alter them to provide clean versions that can seemingly be read without overt mediation. These versions are then provided to the reader with the claim that they can be read directly and sincerely, and that so reading them will allow the reader to grow as an individual.

The specifics of how the resulting normative self is defined certainly differs from that of Zhu Xi. In the case at hand, the reading is part of a larger pedagogy aimed at allowing each reader to find their true self, develop into a unique individual, and see that all other individuals, stripped of the artificial cultures that create boundaries, are really the same all the world over. A coherence, in other words, based upon a neoliberal vision rather than the workings of *li* and *qi*.

I certainly do not mean to imply that there is no difference between building a coherent order on claims of *qi* and *li* and building them on claims of a unique self, not to mention the types of coherent worlds each curriculum is trying to realize. But I do want to point out the similarity in approach—a similarity that is all the more apparent when we turn to social scientific theory.

Having made the comparison with Protestant modes of critiquing earlier ritual and calling for direct access to texts, and having as well mentioned the degree to which more recent approaches in the humanities and social sciences replicate these Protestant assumptions, let me now turn to

common assumptions concerning concepts in more recent Western theory to draw out the comparison more fully.

To begin with a framework common in social theory from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the goal of the social theory was to develop a coherent account of the world. This coherence is, of course, only understood by the social scientist, but it nonetheless explains all human behavior. Traditional rituals and myths are presented as inculcating participants with a false consciousness that the social scientist can then unmask. The natives, for example, believe that they are controlled by higher gods, while the social scientist can see that the hierarchies in question are simply products of human social processes. The hermeneutical move here is the same as what we saw earlier with the reading of a love poem. The anthropologist is called upon to unmask the false ideas that the natives have of what they do. The anthropologist, in other words, can directly read what is really going on, without the mediation of rituals, commentaries, and so on. The latter form a false consciousness that the modern social scientist can see through.

The basis for the claimed unmediated access certainly varies. For the early Protestants, it consisted of direct access to God. For Zhu, it consisted of the inherent ability of the mind to access the fundamental patterns of the cosmos. For a nineteenth- and twentieth-century social scientist, it consists of the ability of the rational mind to explicate the fundamental workings of social practices. But in all three cases the direct access allows the reader to reject the rituals and commentarial interpretations that otherwise cloud the thinking of those controlled by them.

A more recent anthropology would of course claim to overcome the dangers of this approach by taking the ideas of other cultures seriously. Instead of trying to unmask the concepts of the culture in question, the goal instead is to explore the concepts of the participants and to see how their concepts cohere to form a particular vision of the world.

There have been many forms of this vision of culture-specific conceptual coherence, from Geertzian interpretive approaches to more recent ontological approaches. There are, of course, many significant differences between these approaches, but they do share a series of (related) implicit claims, both with each other and with earlier social sciences as well.

The key here is coherence: the culture—or the ontological framework—is a coherent one that defines how the participants see, understand, and

experience the world. Unlike the characteristic moves of much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theory, the goal with these more recent approaches is not to unmask the native conceptual world. Instead, the coherence is found within each culture. And the goal of the analyst is to read that coherence directly, taking ritual statements as statements of belief and taking concepts as assumptions.

But the move is the same. Someone in Bali, for example, is seen as simply believing that time is cyclical, because Balinese concepts and rituals have so socialized him to think that way. In contrast, the social scientist knows that time is not really cyclical; Balinese simply believe this because their concepts and rituals have so socialized them to think that way.

And, of course, the analyst claims the ability to read clearly, without mediations of ritual and concepts. The culture, in other words, becomes the equivalent of the love poem, which the social scientist can read directly.

What is shared in all of these views is that rituals and concepts socialize humans into certain behaviors and ways of acting. This can be something to unmask or something to take seriously. Either way, rituals and concepts are seen as representing the normative vision of a given culture. Hence, much of the scholarship from these paradigms tends to focus on analyses of concepts and rituals—with the assumption that these are telling of the thinking and normative behaviors of the culture in question. A study of the concepts and rituals of a given culture are, once fully explored, keys to the conceptual universe of the participants, the assumptions that guide their lives.

Such understandings of culture, rituals, and concepts have, of course, been the object of repeated criticism in anthropology for the past few decades. The concern has been to demonstrate the degree to which all of these are contested, embedded in configurations of power, and ever-changing. But there may still be more to explore in the world of concepts, poetics, and interpretation by taking seriously not just other cultures and other concepts, but to look at the differing ways that relationships to concepts have been theorized and put into practice.

To do so, let us turn to what it was that Zhu Xi was reacting against.

LIVED CONCEPTS

The poetic and ritual practice that was clearly occurring by the fourth century BCE, and that was theorized as well by many of the figures that so

concerned Zhu—including Xunzi—was certainly not focused on unmediated reading, nor was it focused on a realization of preexistent internal principles. But it was also not aimed at socializing participants into a coherent worldview.

The key term here was *qing*—variously translated as “emotion” or even “essence.” But the best way to think of *qing* is in terms of dispositional responsiveness. In a certain situation, we will tend to respond in certain ways. The *qing* of a plant, for example, is that it will tend to turn toward the sun. The dispositions of humans, however, are based largely on our emotions. (Hence the possible, if overly restrictive, translation of *qing* as “emotions.”) Various stimuli will bring out different responses—anger, sadness, happiness. More specifically, various stimuli will drag out from us the energies (*qi*) of anger, sadness, happiness. Our *qing*, in short, is to be pulled passively by immediate stimuli around us.

Given such a condition, one of the concerns is to train ourselves to start responding well, instead of according to our inherent dispositional responsiveness. This is the work of ritual training and learning. The goal of such work is, first, to refine our dispositional responses and, second, to learn to act in ways that will alter situations (i.e., the inherent dispositional responses of all participants) for the better. More specifically, the goal of the pedagogy is to train one to sense situations—both mundane situations and larger social and political situations—and to sense what actions could be taken that would alter the situation for the better (Puett 2004).

Such a learning occurs by working through the remnants of the tradition. This is where poetry and ritual come in. Ritual in this part of the tradition is aimed not at socializing one into a particular mode of being but rather at forcing one to see the world from a different perspective, and to become, for a brief moment of time, a different person—someone with different dispositional responses. Hence the importance of role reversals, which force the participants to break out of their usual perspectives. For example, in one ritual a son would become his own deceased grandfather, and the father would play the son of his own son. The son would thus be the father, and the father the son (Puett 2005).

The goal of the rituals is not to socialize the participants into a pre-given worldview. The rituals, as the examples of role reversal imply, operate in the subjunctive mode: one acts as is if one were a different person, or had a different role position—not in order to be socialized into being the

person in the ritual but rather to break from one's habitual way of acting in the world. The focus is thus on the transformative work that occurs when one goes back and forth from the ritual to the world outside (Puett 2014a).

To return to Geertz: if one were to do a close reading of a ritual organized in this way, and to then read it as exemplifying a coherent worldview, one would fundamentally misread the ritual, and, more important, misread the work that is intended to occur through ritual practice.

The work of reading is similar. Let us return to the poetry, or rather to the poetic practice.

Reading, or hearing, a line of poetry will bring out responses from the reader or listener. A line about loss will inherently bring out the energies of sadness. Here, too, the concern is to move this to an active approach—both in how one reads and in how one refers to poetic lines.

An active utilization of the ways poetic lines bring out different energies will involve quoting or alluding to particular lines in particular situations in order to bring out particular responses. If, in a given situation, a particular set of dispositional responses are playing out, a line quoted at a particular moment will alter that situation (Puett 2017). If, for example, a line of poetry brings out certain energies of anger or sadness, then quoting that line in a certain context will bring out those energies, thus shifting the situation and giving a different dispositional perspective to those listening. To give a hint at the commentaries that so infuriated Zhu Xi: a line of poetry that brings out the dispositions of anger and disappointment of a jilted lover can be quoted to a ruler who has rejected his favored minister, thus allowing the ruler to see the world from the emotional perspective of one who feels unfairly thrown aside.

Quotations done effectively, in short, will shift situations. They work like rituals, even when there is no ritual telling one what to do.

Such a practice also creates over time a texture for the various poetic lines based upon the sedimented history of previous usages. A powerful utilization of a particular quotation will become known in the tradition, and subsequent utilizations will play off the associations from that earlier usage.

It will also involve rereadings of the poem that will play upon these responses and move them into other realms. To alter a current political moment, for example, an effective technique is to take a poem that, given the history of its previous uses, has a particular set of associations, and

read it into a previous historical period that also, by implications, has resonances with a current moment. An effective such reading thus plays upon the dispositional responses of the poetic lines and the associations that the poem has acquired through the history of previous utilizations, and plays upon these in response to a current moment.

As should be clear by now, the concern of these quotations, allusions, and readings was not to discover an original meaning behind the poem. As Steven van Zoeren correctly notes when discussing a passage of Confucius in the *Analects* interpreting a line of poetry, Confucius's reading "has to do not with any claim concerning the meaning of the Ode, but rather with sentiments expressed by its quotation in the particular circumstances" (Van Zoeren 1991). The concern was with utilization, appropriation. Far from being interested in clearing away mediation, the goal was precisely to mediate and to build upon previous mediations to alter the trajectories of existing situations. It was, in a sense, mediation all the way down.

And hence the commentaries that so disturbed Zhu Xi. Were the commentators incapable of seeing that they were reading a love poem? Of course not. But the goal of the reading was not to explicate what the poem was originally about. The goal was to build upon a series of associations that had become sedimented in previous usages of poetic lines and to read those associations into a different time. The commentary would then be quoted to provide a different perspective on current situations—a current situation at the court, for example, would thus be likened to a moment from the Zhou dynasty, as read and interpreted through the dispositional associations of a series of poetic lines from what was at one point a love poem.

It functioned, in other words, very much like a ritual. If the goal of a ritual was to place the participants into different subject positions and to alter their relationships, the work on poetry that we are discussing does much the same: altering our understanding of a situation by analogizing it through the prism of a poem sedimented with layers of associations and read into a different historical period.

Like a ritual, then, the interpretation operates in the subjunctive mode. The claim is not that the poem was *really* written in the Zhou dynasty about a king and a minister. The interpretation works only if the counter-intuitive rereading is seen as effective—just as a ritual is seen as effective if the "as-if" scenarios (the grandfather-father-son reversals, for example)

work against tensions outside the ritual. The concern, again, is what happens in the tensions and disjunctions created by going back and forth.

From the point of view of a Zhu Xi, reading a love poem as being about the relations between a king and a minister could only be the result of the reader being so socialized into a political worldview that everything—even a love poem—would be read within it. But what if the reader knew perfectly well that it was a love poem? The goal of reading the poem into a new frame was not to claim that this was the proper way of reading the poem or even the best way of reading the poem. The goal was rather to appropriate the poem, working with the dispositions that had come to characterize the various earlier appropriations of the poem, in order to bring about yet another set of effects on the next set of readers. Effective readings were counterintuitive, building upon previous readings and previous appropriations in surprising ways.

The concepts in play thus also work like the poetry and ritual we have been discussing. They do not provide a coherent worldview, and when they are read as such they lead to a fundamental misunderstanding (a problem that has plagued Western scholarship on Chinese philosophy from before Zhu Xi). If the concepts are working effectively, they are working counterintuitively to alter our normal modes of being in the world and to refine our ability to work with the world.

An example will make the point. One of the most powerful attempts to build upon these ideas of poetic perspective and ritual is the *Zhuangzi*. As one reads the book, the work takes one through the perspectives of different historical and fictional humans, different animals, different portions of the cosmos. The historical figures are often given counterintuitive perspectives and are quoted making counterintuitive statements. The entire work, in other words, operates like a ritual (along the lines we have been discussing) and a counterintuitive reading of a poem, constantly working to expand one's perspectives, break down one's tendency to see the world as stable and one's pre-given views as natural, and refine one's ability to see and work with the endless changes and transformations around one.

Intriguingly, the *Zhuangzi* utilizes some of the same concepts that Zhu Xi will later employ. But the goal is the opposite. If Zhuangzian concepts work, they work because they are counterintuitive, emphasizing the constant movement and flow of the cosmos and the ways of connecting to

these movements, instead of creating the sense of a coherent, patterned cosmic order.

The *Zhuangzi* is a play in imagination, and it is one that is very telling for the questions at hand. The modes of reading, interpretation, and ritual that we have been discussing, when taken to their extreme in a text like the *Zhuangzi*, are about opening possibilities by breaking from a sense of a pre-given order. In other words, rituals, poetic lines, and concepts themselves in this tradition are self-consciously seen as constructs that one is working through and working past. They do not socialize one into a coherent worldview. Indeed, one of the goals is precisely to prevent such a sense of coherence. The remnants are ideally fragmentary and not cohesive.

Concepts, like rituals, and like any act of domestication, construct worlds that are always inherently fragile, and always also create dangers themselves. The goal is not to stop using concepts—unmediated experience being neither obtainable nor desirable. The goal is rather to develop a set of practices—an ethics—based upon working with, training oneself through, and obtaining new possibilities precisely by working with the endless and endlessly fragile construction of worlds.

This is the theory of concepts and the set of practices that Zhu Xi wanted to end. It is now becoming clear why Zhu Xi would so hate the earlier commentarial traditions, the earlier ritual practices, and the earlier conceptual workings—and why he would so misread them. For Zhu Xi, the key for learning, for reading, for rituals was to bring out something internal that would allow for a full conformity with the inherent coherence of the world. Gone, therefore, are the role reversals in rituals, the attempts to shift perspective, and (needless to say) the attempts to break down any tendency to see the world as perfectly patterned. Indeed, as we have seen, a fundamental article of faith for Zhu Xi was that the world is coherent and that human dispositions (*qing*) align with it. Much of the concern underlying the commentaries, reading, and ritual practices under discussion here—with their focus on transforming the dispositions and breaking down a sense of coherence—runs precisely against Zhu Xi's goals.

On the one hand, the practices are everything Zhu Xi claims they are: they are artificial constructs that construct new worlds. Indeed, Xunzi, one of the theorists that Zhu Xi sees (correctly) as theorizing much of this, explicitly calls the ritual and conceptual traditions being generated through this work as “artificial” (Puett 2001). But they are not seeking to socialize

people into a coherent worldview, and they are not seeking to convince people to believe that these coherent worldviews are real. One of the explicit goals is precisely to break down such a danger. Ironically, at least from an outside perspective, Zhu Xi is the one who is doing this, despite his overt claims to oppose any such socialization vision.

IMPLICATIONS

There have been many movements—what I am here calling “sincerity movements”—that focus on inculcating a sincere belief in a coherent world. We have already seen several of these—early Protestant communities, Neo-Confucian movements, neoliberal forms of education. I have argued elsewhere that in the Chinese tradition, the list would include as well early Mohist communities and early millenarian movements like the Celestial Masters (Puett 2015). But we are in danger of seriously misreading other communities when we apply such a hermeneutic to them. We become the equivalent of Zhu Xi’s reading of earlier ritual and poetic traditions.

To go back to Geertz: when he argues that ritual is both a model of and model for the cosmos, it means that a deep reading of the ritual will provide the normative vision in that culture of the workings of the cosmos and the proper role that humans should fill within it. But what if all of this is precisely what should be questioned? Perhaps it is precisely the disjunction between the lived experience outside of the ritual and the work that occurs within the ritual that is of interest. What happens when people go back and forth? The sort of intensive analysis of a ritual that a Geertz will give assumes that the goal of the work of ritual is to socialize participants into the worldview found in that ritual. This of course might be the case. But it also might not. Perhaps the Balinese were really operating under a sincerity model. But it is also possible they were undertaking the kinds of work theorized by figures like Xunzi. By assuming largely one model of how rituals and concepts work, anthropologists may be at risk of missing out of one of the key issues occurring in the workings of concepts and rituals in societies.

But I would like to ask a further question here. If we are enthralled by a generally sincerity vision—if, putting it more directly in the vocabulary of the figures under discussion here, we are, analogically speaking, followers of Zhu Xi—then we are in danger not only of missing the complexities of

the concepts and rituals that we are studying, but we are in danger as well of failing to take seriously the ethics embedded in modes of reading and interpreting that we take for granted.

We have learned as anthropologists to take seriously other (cultural or ontological) concepts. But we can also learn to take seriously other ways of thinking with, working with, and building relationships with concepts as well.