

Sacred Kingship in World History

Between Immanence
and Transcendence

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and Alan Strathern

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Humanizing the Divine and Divinizing the Human in Early China

Comparative Reflections on Ritual, Sacrifice, and Sovereignty

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This chapter will explore the workings of ritual orders in regard to sovereignty, as well as the attempts to unmask such orders from a transcendental perspective—both in antiquity and in more recent scholarship. I will begin by sketching out the comparative categories that have been developed for these issues. I will then bring material from China into the discussion to see how our categories may be enhanced.

SACRIFICE AND REJECTIONS OF SACRIFICE

For much of human history, rituals of sovereignty were focused predominantly on the practice of sacrifice. Before turning to these rituals, however, it may be helpful to turn first to the recurrent attempts to unmask these rituals and, in many cases, reject sacrifice altogether. Such attempts have appeared throughout world history. But in Eurasian history, the move has been institutionalized at particular moments.

The first of these moments occurred in the first millennium BCE. This was a distinctive period in Eurasian history. The agricultural regions of Eurasia had been dominated for some two millennia by a Bronze Age aristocracy. Over the course of the first millennium BCE, these Bronze Age kingdoms collapsed. Because this



was a pan-Eurasian phenomenon, the reasons for the collapse are, not surprisingly, pan-Eurasian as well. The spread of iron technology throughout Eurasia made available for use a naturally occurring substance that could be mass-produced for agricultural implements as well as weapons. The mass production of agricultural implements led to a tremendous population growth, while the mass production of iron weapons, together with the growing population, encouraged the emergence of mass infantry armies. The latter in turn encouraged the growth of various forms of centralized states to build, arm, and train such mass infantry armies. The result was the gradual (and sometimes not so gradual) collapse of the Bronze Age kingdoms across the agricultural areas of Eurasia as well as a collapse of the institutionalized forms of rituals supported by these kingdoms.

Throughout these areas, the collapse also led to the emergence of new religious movements calling for even more radical transformations. Many were opposed to the emerging mass infantry states and formed alternate religious communities. This is the period that has come to be known as the Axial Age—roughly the fifth through second centuries BCE.¹ Some of the most famous examples of these movements include the Orphics, Pythagoreans, Platonic Academy, and Aristotelean Lyceum in Greece; the Jains and Buddhists in India; and the Mohists, the followers of Confucius, and the followers of Laozi in China.

Meanwhile, centralized states based on mass infantry armies continued to grow, and by the last few centuries of the common era, the agricultural areas of Eurasia had become dominated by a limited number of empires—the Roman empire in the western end of Eurasia, the Han in the eastern end, and the Mauryan in South Asia. In reaction to the success of these empires, a series of salvationist religions began breaking out in the first centuries of the common era. Many of these involved a radicalization of the earlier religious movements of the Axial Age. Among these include Christianity and (later) Islam in the western end of Eurasia, Mahayana Buddhism in South and later East Asia, and the Celestial Masters (the beginning of the Daoist religion) as well as the Great Peace movement in China.

The movements in both of these periods—the Axial Age movements of the first millennium BCE and the salvationist religions of late antiquity—involved some common claims that we will explore below. Alan Strathern has proposed a general terminology to mark this distinction in religious orientations: immanentist versus transcendentalist.² *Immanentist* refers to the dominant forms of religious practice throughout much of the world, and *transcendentalist*, as the name implies, refers to those movements—institutionalized strongly in the Axial Age and the subsequent salvationist religions—that appeal to transcendental sources of truth. But one generalization that holds with few (and telling) exceptions

is that almost all of these movements rejected sacrifice and worked to unmask earlier sacrificial ritual according to transcendental claims. No longer would the world depend on ritual relations with a wide range of divine powers.

With these general themes in mind, let us turn to the different ways these tendencies became manifest in different areas of Eurasia, as well as the historical ways these differences played out. As we will see, in some areas of Eurasia, the salvationist religions gained state support, thus leading ultimately to the eradication of sacrifice as well as the forms of sovereignty based on the practice, whereas elsewhere we see the emergence of hybrid regimes. These different permutations had tremendous historical implications.

COMPARATIVE FORMS OF SOVEREIGNTY

Let us begin with the world of sacrifice—the immanentist practices, as Strathern has called them. And let us do so by turning to the work of Georges Dumézil. Although Dumézil's main concern was with reconstructing Indo-European mythology, he occasionally pointed to moments when the issues he was discovering had larger comparative significance. One of these issues was the set of rituals concerning the installation of a king. Dumézil pointed out that the rituals he was discovering concerning the installation of rulers in Rome, Persia, and India had clear analogues from a larger anthropological perspective with those seen in Polynesia and Africa.³

Inspired by Dumézil, Marshall Sahlins has since undertaken such a comparison of these installation rituals, with a particular focus on the Fiji Islands.⁴ Sahlins follows Dumézil in analyzing the ways in which different social groups are placed in the installation rituals and the ways in which the monarch is presented as ultimately encompassing them all—noting throughout the parallels with Rome, India, and Persia. In an endnote, Sahlins remarks in passing on the parallels historically between this ritual sequence and historical sequences in antiquity and modern Europe: “And should we not notice the longer historical duration in which monarchy is superseded by republic, to be replaced in turn by a totalitarian imperialism—or even the repetition of the cycle in modern European history?”⁵

For Sahlins, paralleling both the ritual complex explored by Dumézil as well as this larger historical pattern are myths of the origins of the state, myths that often revolve around what Sahlins has termed a “stranger-king”: a transgressive, usually foreign figure who breaks into the world of the indigenous populace, introducing violence into a previously peaceful world. In many of these narratives, the

populace then kills the stranger and domesticates his transgressions. The result is a hierarchical social order that partakes of both the initial, peaceful population and the transgressive introducer of violence.⁶

In Dumézil's terminology, that hierarchical social order consists of the populace below (the third function); the military, now defined as a particular function (the second function); and the priests of the indigenous gods (the first function). But in Sahlins's reformulation, such a hierarchical structure is just one possible outcome of the dynamic described. On top is a kingship that partakes of both of the initial founding principles and thus encompasses the entire social order. This can result in a diarchic kingship in which the one ruler represents the more warrior-like transgressive figure, and the other ruler represents the claims of gravitas associated with the priests. It can also result in a kingship in which both claims exist simultaneously, with the ruler partaking of each at particular moments. And the degree to which a given royal lineage traces itself back to a founder in the form of a stranger-king or in the form of a domesticated sacerdotal ruler has tremendous implications for the nature of the claimed sovereignty.⁷

Two of the mythic founders of Rome that Dumézil discusses fit this larger pattern as well: Romulus, who is associated with violence (*celeritas*), and Numa, who is associated with sacerdotal status (*gravitas*).⁸ Sahlins builds on this point, analyzing the narratives from Livy, Plutarch, and Dionysius of Helicarnassus that discuss the war between the followers of the militaristic Romulus and the peaceful Sabines. The Roman state is then presented as a result of this war, with a resulting tension between violence and fertility.⁹

Strathern has discussed this distinction as well and proposed a more broadly comparative terminology of heroic kingship and cosmic kingship. Heroic forms of rulership would involve the more active portions, while cosmic forms would involve the sacerdotal portions.¹⁰ Such a broader terminology allows for the inclusion of more examples than those that fit into a framework specifically derived from—as we shall see—a particular type of ritual order.

Let us say a bit more about that ritual order and the forms of sovereignty found therein.

VITALITY AND VIOLENCE

The variations we have touched on so far derive from Indo-European and Polynesian materials. In both cases, we see a world of vitality, understood as the generative processes of the land and the indigenous inhabitants who oversee it, and

on the other hand, an introduction of violence that shatters this world of vitality. The transgressive dimensions of the founding figure are then symbolically sacrificed, as he is remade by and remakes the domestic order. The result is a new hierarchical social order that links the vitality of the land with the militaristic violence of the outsider, overseen by a sovereign that encompasses both.

Ritual in both cultural areas demonstrates the logic clearly. Sacrifice in both Indo-European and Polynesian societies was often a ritual instantiation of this violent appropriation of vitality for the sake of humanity—a ritual equivalent of the transgressive stranger-king breaking into the world of nature and appropriating its fruits for himself. The world prior to sacrifice would often be posited as continuous, with everything interrelated and often derived from a common ancestor. The goal of sacrifice was to break humanity from this continuity and thus allow humanity to appropriate some of the vitality of that continuity for itself. For many Polynesian cosmologies, for example, everything prior to sacrifice was claimed to be linked in genealogical lines of continuity.¹¹ Humans would then break from this continuity, achieving both autonomy for humanity as well as the ability to appropriate the natural world for human consumption.¹²

Or, to return to the Indo-European world, a clear example is Vernant's famous reading of the myth of Prometheus as given by Hesiod. According to Hesiod, sacrifice recapitulates the transgressions of Prometheus, transgressions that won for humanity autonomy from the gods, but at the cost of a life of deprivation and ultimately death. Sacrifice recapitulates this as both an act of submission to the gods and a ruse of stealing at least some vitality from them.¹³

Many of the dominant strains of sacrificial theory come out of the study of rituals along these lines. As many scholars have argued, what allows this double act to occur in sacrifice are processes of identification. I will use Maurice Bloch here as an example. The sacrificer first identifies with the victim—representing, for Bloch, the purely vital element of the cosmos. The symbolic death of the victim then represents the death of vitality, with the sacrificer identifying with the divine powers. In the resulting feast, the sacrificer returns to the world of humanity but now, empowered by the divine, as a full consumer of the world of vitality.¹⁴

In short, from myths of the origin of the state to myths of the origin of sacrifice, a very similar dialectic recurs. The original world is one of continuity, with humans living in an undifferentiated state and in harmony with the divine and natural worlds. A transgression—an act of violence—breaks this continuity. The resulting order is one in which humanity has gained both a limited autonomy from that continuity and an ability to appropriate the vitality of that former continuity for its own uses.

This is the same ritual logic that, as seen above, Sahlins has noted in sovereign installation rituals in Fiji and Hawaii: the ruler, in his transgressive persona, would be symbolically sacrificed so that he could then be reborn in his sacerdotal form. This ritual interplay of transgressive and sacerdotal roles could be appropriated in historical practice, as both Sahlins and Valeri note across Polynesia.¹⁵ Sovereignty is thus both transgressive and sacerdotal, both heroic and cosmic, and hence the variants that play out in various forms across the Indo-European and Polynesian worlds.

TRANSCENDENTAL SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty as conceptualized—and in many places in Eurasia put into practice—from the point of view of Axial Age movements and the subsequent salvationist religious movements involved a radical reformulation of these ideas. In many cases, the claim was made that a higher, transcendental order existed, and the goal was to accord with that order. Many of the movements explicitly rejected the practice of sacrifice. Adherents were called on to have faith that the world is coherent, organized according to normative principles, and in many cases even governed by a moral divinity. The entire basis of sacrificial activity, and the social world constructed through that activity, was rejected.

These ideas came to the fore in the Axial Age movements of the fourth and third centuries BCE and were radicalized in the subsequent salvationist religious movements of the first few centuries of the common era. The salvationist religions of Mediterranean late antiquity provide a clear example of the latter. In Christianity, and later in Islam, the world was seen as having been created by a benevolent deity who also revealed scriptures on how to live properly within this world. The world itself was coherent and moral, and its creator of that world provided the guidelines for proper behavior. Sacrifice was explicitly rejected, and in its place was put the importance of faith in the precepts of the creator deity.¹⁶

While such transcendentalist movements involved rejections of earlier immanentist cosmologies, they often built on key elements of those cosmologies. As Strathern notes, transcendentalist claims tend to fall back into the immanentist practice. Thus, the specific forms of ritual and sacrifice that are prevalent in various places have a tendency to continue in different forms, even after the transcendentalist eradications have been attempted.¹⁷

To give an obvious example: in Christianity, the transgression that breaks the earlier unity is read, via earlier Jewish sources, as a fall from grace, requiring

the intercession of a salvationist figure (in this case, the son of the transcendent deity) to offer redemption. Instead of the transgressive figure being sacrificed, it is the salvationist redeemer who sacrifices himself to erase the transgression. Christianity is thus an antisacrifice movement, but it is so because it reverses the earlier sacrificial rituals and places them into a transcendental framework: instead of humans sacrificing transgression to the gods, the transcendent God sacrifices his own son to cleanse human transgression.

Sovereignty was altered through such transcendental frameworks as well. As Strathern and Azfar Moin have argued, transcendental frameworks call for a righteous kingship. The distinction between active and sacerdotal sovereignty continues, but the distinction is no longer between heroic and cosmic forms of sovereignty; rather, it is between zealous kingship (actively converting the faithless) and doctrinal kingship (following the precepts of the higher deity).¹⁸ A clear example in later European history would be the dialectic between kings and popes.

RITUAL AND THE DYNASTIC CYCLE IN CHINA

Let us now finally turn to China, where one finds different permutations on many of these themes. Here too, we will begin with the immanentist practices and then turn to the transcendental ones.

The Bronze Age kingdoms in the north China plain came to be known as the Three Dynasties—the Xia, the Shang, and the Zhou. Materials from the latter part of the Shang Dynasty and the subsequent Zhou Dynasty allow us to reconstruct at least parts of the sacrificial system. The world was dominated by a series of spirits and governed by a higher deity—Di for the Shang, Heaven for the Zhou. The spirits required constant sacrifices. The offerings to them included humans, animals, grains, and wine. The sacrifices were given to appease a very clearly volatile and unpredictable set of spirits.

The Shang divinatory record reveals a clear hierarchy in the divine pantheon. Recently deceased ancestors tended to be actively involved with the living, and these ancestors were often highly capricious. A number of divinations involve attempts to see if the illness of a member of the royal family, for example, was in fact a curse by one of the recently deceased ancestors. If it was believed to be a curse, divinations would then be given to determine what sacrifices might appease the ancestor. Sometimes the sacrifices would work; sometimes they would not. The sense was clearly that the spirits were more powerful than the rituals that were being used to control them.

The more distant ancestors tended to be even more powerful yet also increasingly removed from the living. They too were capricious, but not in the sense of attacking the living. They were capricious rather in the sense of being indifferent. If the recently deceased were actively involved—and often in a dangerous way—with the living, the distant ancestors tended to be removed and uninterested. By the same token, the recently deceased ancestors were far more responsive to human ritual. In the divination record are examples of a hosting (*bin*) ritual, in which the living would host the recently deceased, who would in turn then be called on to host the next generation above—ultimately all the way to the founding ancestors and the high deity Di.

The implications of such a sacrificial system become clear in the subsequent Zhou Dynasty, from which we have far more evidence. In the eleventh century BCE, the Zhou overthrew the Shang and founded a new dynasty. The Zhou recognized Heaven as the highest divinity. The ruler's title was the Son of Heaven. This was a ritual title: he was not seen literally as a descendent of Heaven but rather as ritually Heaven's supporter on earth.

The founders of the Zhou Dynasty were kings Wen and Wu. In subsequent sacrifices, Wen and Wu were seen as residing with the high deity Heaven. As subsequent generations came to the throne, that also meant Wen and Wu, and thus access to Heaven, were farther and farther away. This resulted in an inherent decline in the dynasty: as the generations passed, the founders and Heaven became more distant and more removed.¹⁹

The political theory of the Zhou replicated these ritual workings. The Shang were seen as a dynasty that had superseded the Xia, just as the Zhou had superseded the Shang. In each case, the dynasty would begin with a great founder, and then the dynasty would gradually decline until a new dynasty would be started. History consisted of an endless cycle of rising and falling dynasties.

In their public statements, the Zhou further read this cycle in terms of virtue—the first introduction of an ethical calculus to the workings of the relationship between humans and the divine in China. The dynastic founders were of high virtue and thus received the support of Heaven. The ensuing decline of the dynasty was the result of a decline in this virtue. The dynastic cycle was thus read as a Mandate of Heaven, with Heaven granting the Mandate to virtuous rulers and withdrawing it from the unvirtuous.

Heroic and cosmic forms of kingship were built into this cycle as well. The heroic ruler would be the one who defeated the former dynasty in battle, while the cosmic ruler would be the one who either preceded or succeeded the heroic founder. With the Zhou, the cosmic ruler was Wen, who received the Mandate of Heaven, and the heroic was his son Wu, who then conquered the Shang in battle.

Although these proclamations of a moral Heaven would later play a significant role in Chinese political theory, the proclamations should be thought of for the Zhou as—to use a term to which I will return below—ritual statements. Within the ritual, Heaven is a moral entity, and humans are moral beings. Outside the ritual, Heaven is a capricious deity requiring recurrent sacrifice. The Chinese Bronze Age very much fits Strathern's definition of immanentist: constant sacrifices were required to work with a highly capricious set of divine powers.

THE AXIAL AGE

What sorts of transcendental movements emerged in opposition to such forms of sacrificial practice and attendant sovereignties? In the fourth century BCE, a charismatic figure named Mozi emerged. He started a movement based on the claim that the world was coherent and rationally structured. It was created by a perfectly moral deity for the sake of humanity, and that deity—Heaven—ruled it according to a clear system of rewards for the good and punishments for the bad. Heaven also ruled over a pantheon of ghosts, who were themselves purely moral, working to reward good behavior and punish bad behavior among the living. Sacrifices were acceptable, not to transform the ghosts into beneficent spirits or ancestors but rather to inculcate the proper feelings of reverence for the divine and the proper belief in their existence. The divine powers—Heaven itself and the ghosts underneath—were purely beneficent and did not need to be transformed through sacrifices. The move here consists of taking the Zhou ritual statements concerning the Mandate of Heaven, reading them as statements of fact, and then generalizing them to read Heaven as a moral creator deity. The result is a complete rejection of the notion of capricious spirits and the attendant sacrificial system.²⁰

Also in the fourth century BCE a series of self-divinization movements emerged. These too were antisacrifice movements: instead of trying to influence spirits through divination and sacrifice, humans were called on to undertake self-cultivation practices that would allow them to become spirits directly. The movements made explicit claims that the cosmos was continuous and generated from a single source—variously called the One, the Way, or the Great One. This source was more primordial than and more powerful than the divinities (Heaven, ghosts, and spirits) who were the objects of sacrifice. The self-cultivation techniques would allow humans not only to become spirits but also to move closer to the Great One—thus gaining powers over those divinities that humans otherwise had to resort to sacrifice to influence.²¹

However, one of the distinctive aspects of China is that yet another of these Axial Age movements—those traditions that trace themselves to Confucius—developed its practice out of a rereading of, yet active support for, the earlier ritual traditions. Instead of asserting the importance of believing in a coherent, stable order created by a beneficent deity or demiurge, and instead of rejecting sacrifice in particular and the rituals of working with divinities more generally, the traditions coming out of Confucius, on the contrary, built directly on the claim that the world was governed by capricious deities and fully embraced the earlier ritual traditions developed to work with such capricious deities. Unlike so many Axial Age movements across Eurasia, these traditions continued to emphasize the importance of ritual in general and sacrifice in particular.

The ethical imperative seen in so many Axial Age traditions thus came to be focused not on a rejection of sacrifice but rather on a rereading and reorientation of the practice. This reinterpretation involved a rejection of the claim that the sacrifices should be undertaken in a transactional way—to give offerings to the spirits in order to get benefits in return. On the contrary, the goal should be the ethical transformation of the participants through the ritual process. The outcome of such ritual work would be that humans would learn to live harmoniously with each other and in relationship to the divine powers.

The primary focus is on the ethical transformation of the *human* participants. The degree to which the divine powers themselves are actually transformed by the rituals is often unclear. It was hoped that they would be transformed and develop ethical dispositions toward humanity, but that is not a given: the spirits often continue to be capricious. However, humans should strive to be ethical regardless. And, in direct opposition to the Mohists, Confucians strongly opposed the claim that ethical action on the part of humans would necessarily result in divine reward. The goal is for humans to act as ethically as possible, even if the divine powers continue to act capriciously. Because the focus was on the ethical transformation of the participants, the earlier rituals were also altered, and particular aspects of the sacrifices were dropped altogether. For example, human sacrifice was strictly rejected.

Given the later prominence that this movement would come to have on forms of sovereignty in subsequent centuries of Chinese history, it will be worth discussing the arguments of this movement in more depth. The focus on ritual would mean that the movement developed one of the most sophisticated bodies of ritual theory in world literature—a body of theory that, as we will see, adds some interesting permutations to the theories of ritual and sacrifice that have become dominant in Euro-American approaches.

RITUALS OF DOMESTICATION

Confucian ritual theory involved a rereading of Bronze Age sacrifices. Many of these texts on ritual theory were written during the fourth through second centuries BCE. They were then collected during the second century BCE into a work called the *Book of Rites*, which would become the most influential work on ritual theory in China.

We begin with narratives concerning the emergence of the state and the emergence of sacrifice. Of particular note is the world presented as existing prior to the creation of sacrifices and the state. There was certainly vitality in that world, but not the vitality of a continuous, generative order. On the contrary, the world was, from the point of view of humanity, one of discontinuity—of discrete things interacting poorly and often violently. For humanity, this meant a world of being eaten by wild animals, freezing to death in the winter, and starving for lack of food. The turning point was not the disruptive introduction of violence—the stranger-king, a transgressive act—into this continuous world of vitality. The turning point was rather the introduction of human domestication. Through domestication, we are told, a world of discontinuous things was transformed into a world of continuity.²² Once plants and animals were domesticated, the otherwise seemingly random and often extremely dangerous shifts of weather and temperature became part of a larger, integrated system: the shifts were termed “seasons,” and, far from being dangerous, they became a key aspect of the forces that allowed the domesticated crops to grow. Continuity and coherence were products of domestication. And once the world was properly domesticated, humanity was at the center, with the rest of the cosmos hierarchically defined around humanity.

Rituals were introduced as part of this same domestication and with the same goal: to domesticate the world by transforming the dangerous interactions that usually dominated relationships—in this case, human and divine relationships—into a proper series of hierarchical ones in which humans could flourish. Here, too, the domestication would result in humanity—and particularly the ruler—being at the center. More explicitly, the human and divine worlds would be connected through chains of patrilineal relationships. Humans would be organized into lineages; deceased humans—ghosts—would be transformed (at least in terms of human dispositions toward them) into ancestors of these lineages; the ruler would become the father and mother of the people, linking the myriad lineages through himself; and the ruler would also become the Son of Heaven. Through sacrifice, the ruler would connect the human and divine realms and forge it into a single patrilineal lineage, from Heaven to himself as Son of Heaven, and then through his children, the myriad lineages.

These rituals would allow the human participants to train their dispositions, with the populace treating the ruler as their father and mother, and the ruler treating the populace as his children. If the divine powers participate (always a question), they too would develop these same dispositions, with Heaven treating the ruler as his son and the deceased supporting living humans as their descendants. The goal of the rituals was thus to link a discontinuous series of figures into lines of continuity, with sacrifice domesticating the human and (perhaps) divine worlds just as agriculture domesticates the natural world. But in the case of ritual, the result would be a moral world: by performing the sacrifices in which these genealogies are ritually constructed, the participants would develop the proper dispositions of how to act ethically toward everyone else.

But the ethical transformation is never complete, and so the negative emotions and desires that usually underlie human relations with each other and with the divine always return. Hence the need to continue undertaking the rituals again and again.

The focus of this theorization was the hosting ritual. In these rituals, the living would serve as a host to the deceased. Within the ritual space, the living would become descendants, serving their ancestors, and the deceased would become ancestors, supporting their descendants. In the center, the ruler would serve Heaven, becoming the Son of Heaven to Heaven, who would support the ruler as his descendant.

Substitutions were integral to the ritual, but the ritual substitutions focused not on identifications with the victim but rather on substitutions and role reversals between the participants.²³ In ancestral sacrifices, for example, the grandson would play the role of his deceased grandfather, and the father would play the role of the son to his own son. The substitutions would help inculcate into each the proper dispositions of these different roles within a patrilineal system.

Here, the theories open up interesting lines of comparison with the understandings of sacrifice that have become dominant in Euro-American theory. As we have seen, the dominant understandings of sacrifice take the victim of sacrifice as a substitute for the sacrificer in his disordered state. The focus of the theorization, in other words, is on rituals of expiation. Is it possible that the prevalence of sacrifices of expiation in our theories comes from reading these practices through Christian frames? As we noted, Christianity involved taking particular themes of sacrifice and reversing them. But such a move required focusing on particular aspects of the sacrificial practice that could then be reversed—in this case, taking the symbolic sacrifice of the transgressor and reversing it so that the higher God's son sacrifices himself to expiate the transgressions of humanity. Could it be that

the predominance of expiation in our theories of sacrifice comes from a secularization of this Christian emphasis?

Sacrifices of expiation were performed throughout the world, most certainly including China. But these are not the focus of the body of ritual theory that is picked up in the texts pulled together in the *Book of Rites*. On the contrary, the *Book of Rites*, as we have seen, is focused primarily on theorizations of hosting rituals. In the lengthy discussions in the *Book of Rites*, it is telling that there is not a single discussion of the victim as a substitute for the sacrificer. The substitutions are focused on the substitutions of the participants in a hosting ritual.

The work of the sacrifice is thus not to expiate the transgressions (or, in the Christian term, sin) of the sacrificer. It is rather the ethical work that comes from the play of role substitutions. The result, when successful, would be the construction of a world in which the entire human, natural, and divine elements would be connected into a cosmic patriline. Genealogical continuity, in other words, is the constructed product of sacrifice, rather than, as we saw in the models of Indo-European and Austronesian materials developed by Sahlins and Bloch, the world that preexisted sacrifice.

In a related theme, the overall framework is not one of a continuity that is being restored, at a higher level, by sacrificing and then incorporating the transgressive introduction of discontinuity. On the contrary, the concern is that the world consists of things—humans, ghosts, and so on—that are interacting poorly. The problem is one of discontinuity. And the work of sacrifice involves creating the continuity—a continuity that will then incorporate all of these different elements, pulled together into a continuity that then incorporates all of these elements and within a hopefully productive set of relations.

Are we dealing, then with a radical distinction between Indo-European and Polynesian worldviews, based on beliefs in a fundamental continuity that is broken by a transgression that needs to be expiated and incorporated, and a Chinese worldview based on beliefs in a fundamental discontinuity? On the contrary, it is more likely that we are dealing here with different theorizations. As we have seen, the Christian rejection of sacrifice also involved a transcendental rereading of earlier expiation sacrifices. And recent theorizations of sacrifice have often been based on a secularized version of these same practices.

But we have in China one of the most complex indigenous theorizations of ritual and sacrifice that we possess. Utilizing these theories as theories—utilizing them to explore sacrificial rituals around the world—may yield insights that we have missed by utilizing so exclusively theories coming from secularized Christian readings. Just as using these largely secularized Christian readings has proven to be highly insightful for specific aspects of sacrificial practice in early

Indo-European and Austronesian societies, so would it likely be productive to utilize theories that arose in China to explore sacrificial practices around the world—including for Indo-European and Austronesian materials that may have otherwise missed our attention. The ultimate goal should be to work toward a more generalized theory of sacrifice, as opposed to the more restrictive views that we have been working with, derived from Christian readings of particular earlier Mediterranean practices.²⁴

We develop the point by way of an example mentioned above. Interpreting ancient Greek sacrifice according to the generalized theory of sacrifice proposed by figures like Bloch requires reading the offerings of the sacrifice as being a substitute for the transgressive aspects of the sacrificer. But such a substitution is never mentioned in Hesiod's reading of Prometheus—nor is it clear that Hesiod's reading of Prometheus should be so strongly privileged in interpretations of Greek sacrifice anyway.²⁵ Reading Greek sacrifice through other lenses—say, from theories that arose in China—may open up a number of insights that the expiatory reading coming through a secularized Christianity may have missed.

EMPIRE

The Warring States period in China came to an end in 221 BCE, when the state of Qin defeated the other kingdoms and created the first empire in Chinese history. The new ruler immediately sought to distance himself from the forms of sovereignty that had been dominant in the Three Dynasties. As noted above, the ritual system from the Bronze Age ensured that each generation would become further removed from the founders, thus creating a self-perceived decline in the dynastic system. The ruler of the first empire tried to break this ritual system. His goal was to destroy the past and create a completely new order. That new order would be a never-ending empire—a dynasty that would never die. To accomplish this, the ruler tried to become a god himself. He declared himself the first “August Thearch” (“Emperor”) and associated himself with the Great One—a deity more primordial and more powerful than Heaven or the various ghosts and spirits. The First August Thearch (usually translated as “First Emperor”) also sought immortality to avoid becoming a ghost and becoming part of the (endlessly declining) sacrificial systems. His successors would not become further removed from him because he would still be there, continuing to rule over them, and he would also continue to exercise direct control

over his successors. He would destroy the past, supersede the sacrificial system, and create an enduring empire. It was, in many ways, the first major millenarian movement in Chinese history, although begun not by a transcendent deity but rather by a divinized sovereign.

The effort failed. The Qin fell soon thereafter. The subsequent Han Empire, however, attempted to resurrect many of these efforts. The rulers maintained the Qin title of August Thearch and in the second century of the common era, Han Wudi re-created much of the ritual of the Qin First Emperor. Using Strathern's terminology, the First Emperor was the heroic divinized sovereign and Han Wudi the cosmic sovereign, working to consolidate the innovations of the first Thearch.

But this would be the height of the imperial system with a divinized ruler. The empire began to decline over the subsequent century. By the end of the first century BCE, the rulers abandoned the divinization claims of the Qin and early Han rulers and turned to a claimed reconstruction of the Bronze Age sacrificial system. The five classics purportedly compiled and edited by Confucius became the primary texts for the education of the elite. One of these classics was the *Book of Rites*, the body of ritual theory mentioned above. The ruler once again took the title of Son of Heaven, once again undertook sacrifices to Heaven and Earth and his ancestors, and once again defined himself as a human within a dynastic cycle. The Han was simply a dynastic follower of the Zhou rather than an empire breaking from the past. The Bronze Age sacrificial system, as reread through Confucius, was fully embraced, as was a rejection of self-divinization movements.

MILLENARIAN MOVEMENTS

In the second century of the common era, a series of millenarian movements emerged in opposition to the imperial court. The movements explicitly made claim to the self-divinization practices that had been rejected by the court, but they did so under calls for faith in a benevolent creator deity rather than a divinized ruler—a merging, in other words, of Mohist visions along with the self-divinization movements. They also accordingly called for a complete rejection of sacrificial practice.

One of these millenarian movements, the Movement of Great Peace, led a revolt against the Han Empire. Although the revolt was put down, the Han was greatly weakened and fell soon thereafter. Another, called the Celestial Masters, broke from the Han and formed an autonomous community in the southwest.

All later Daoist movements would trace themselves back to the Celestial Masters. I will focus here on the Celestial Masters as a telling example of these millenarian movements.

The Celestial Masters began in 142, when the Way took human form as the god Laozi to give revelations to humanity.²⁶ The cosmos, as the revelations made clear, had been created by the Way. But Laozi was not only a creator deity. Laozi was also a moral deity, ruling over a hierarchical pantheon of deities who rewarded the good and punished the bad. The overall cosmology is thus directly reminiscent of the Mohists: a benevolent creator deity has formed a just cosmos that flawlessly rewards moral conduct. In addition, the populace was called on to have faith and to believe that the high deity and the spirits below were beneficent and rewarding the good. Sacrifice was also rendered irrelevant because the spirits are already benevolent.

But sacrifice for the Celestial Masters was more than just irrelevant. In order for the cosmos to be healthy, Laozi needed spirits to be generated. According to the revelations of the Way, spirits can only be generated through the cultivation of energies within bodily forms. Indeed, the Way had created human bodies for precisely this purpose: to produce spirits. Humans were thus called on to generate spirits—the very things that sacrifices were trying to do as well by transforming ghosts. But humans had failed to listen to these revelations and had instead started undertaking this work through sacrifices—practices that actually only fed and thus empowered ghosts. The result was that the world was being overrun with ghosts, and the entire cosmos was in danger of collapsing. The further revelations from Laozi included calls on practitioners to begin nourishing spirits within their bodies again. Those who did so would become divinized and become the seed people for the cosmos to come.²⁷

In other words, instead of humans using sacrifices to transform ghosts into spirits, humans needed to use their own bodies to cultivate spirits. This involved appropriating the same techniques practiced by the self-divinization movements beginning in the fourth century BCE. Only now the self-divinization movements were not being undertaken by humans to empower themselves but were rather being undertaken at the behest of a creator deity to help the cosmos. And the result of the self-divinization would not be autonomy from the social world but rather promotion within a divinely guided bureaucracy.

As with Christianity, the Celestial Masters opposed sacrifice, but they also appropriated the sacrificial logic—in this case, the forming of spirits. Also like Christianity, the Celestial Masters reversed the orientation: the practices (whether sacrifice itself or self-divinization) were not undertaken by humans to empower themselves vis-à-vis the divine but rather were directed from a beneficent high deity to redeem the world.

In short, the Celestial Masters developed an extraordinary synthesis of the Mohists and the self-divinization movements. The cosmos is monistic, does not therefore require sacrifice, and involves humans at their best cultivating themselves to become divine and generate spirits. And yet the Way is also read as a deity along the lines of the Mohists—a deity who has created a perfectly moral cosmos and who rewards the good, that is, those who properly follow the dictates of the high deity.

RITUALS OF SOVEREIGNTY

The types of sovereignty that would be endlessly appropriated and played on in later Chinese history are already becoming clear. The dominant public position was of the ruler as distinctly human but ritually occupying the position of Son of Heaven. That ruler would offer sacrifices to Heaven, Earth, and his ancestors, and oversee the sacrifices to the pantheon of spirits. He would rule within a dynasty that would maintain its control based on its claim of governing with virtue. When the dynasty failed to rule with virtue, it would be overthrown and another dynasty would take its place. Each dynasty would claim to be simply continuing the dynastic cycles that had begun in the Bronze Age. The fact that the ruler was now overseeing a grand imperial bureaucracy was not a problem to the framework: this was simply one more thing that the Son of Heaven needed to incorporate and oversee.

The contrast with much of the rest of Eurasia is striking. Unlike the kingdoms that converted to Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism, in which sacrifice was strictly forbidden, sovereignty in China continued to be predicated on the importance of sacrifice, with the sovereign as the primary sacrificer, making offerings to Heaven and Earth.

Very much like these antisacrifice sovereignties, however, the Son of Heaven would claim his rule to be based on ethical criteria. This was a form of doctrinal kingship, even though in this case the precepts being followed were those refined by a human sage, Confucius, instead of revealed by a divine power.

At the same time, however, rulers would also keep the title of August Thearch, thereby making implicit calls to the divinization legacy of the Qin and early Han. They would also patronize the Daoist lineages that traced themselves back to the revelations of Laozi in 142, and, with the Daoist priests, undertake esoteric and nonsacrificial rituals. They would thus connect themselves to the divinization practices last seen at the imperial level in the Qin and early Han dynasties, but they would be interpreted through the lens of the transcendentalist framework



of the Celestial Masters. Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty (1082–1135) is a clear example of someone who strongly played up these divinization sides.²⁸

Millenarian movements would also continue to emerge throughout Chinese history, with calls for faith in a salvationist, beneficent creator deity and for a rejection of sacrifice.²⁹ Such movements would rarely become dominant, but several played key roles in bringing down dynasties.

HISTORICAL DYNAMICS

As noted above, Sahlins links the historical sequence of republic, monarchy, and empire to rituals of sovereignty. He sees the sequence more specifically as the result of a dynamic in which a transgressive stranger-king breaks into an otherwise peaceful indigenous population. That dynamism then plays out historically. It can certainly result in a rigid, static hierarchy—the relatively static tripartite structure, emphasized by Dumézil, of three functions governed by a sovereign. But it can also result in radically transgressive figures—an Alexander, a Napoleon. For a Sahlins, this would be one of the many ways that the mythic structure could be built out in historic time.

In the very different set of political rituals in China, a similar dynamic is at play. A monarchical dynastic cycle comes to be seen as the norm, but with millenarian movements emerging repeatedly to challenge the order. The most historically significant millenarian movement was led by Mao, who also explicitly compared himself to the First Emperor and declared that he was destroying the past and creating a completely new order. His perceived failure opened the way for a later Xi Jinping to style himself implicitly as a Han Wudi, consolidating the First Emperor's creation into a new institutional order.

Myths and rituals of sovereignty need not result in static hierarchies. They instead open a constant array of permutations in the practice of sovereignty, with an endless interplay between the active and sacerdotal forms.

TRANSCENDENTAL UNMASKINGS

Transcendental critiques of rituals and myths, and sacrifice in particular, are found throughout the world. As we have seen, they became particularly pronounced in Eurasia in the religious movements of the first millennium BCE and

the salvationist movements of late antiquity. A recurrent tendency in these transcendental critiques is to unmask the rituals as doing something other than participants are being led to think the rituals accomplish.

One of the key moves made in these unmaskings is to deny the world of ritual substitutions and read the activities in the ritual literally. We have seen how, for millenarian movements in China, making offerings to ghosts did not entail transforming them into spirits or ancestors; it simply meant one was feeding them and thus empowering them.

Once the unmasking occurs, it is revealed that the sacrifice is really serving to reify and mystify existing social hierarchies, to justify the existence of sacrificial experts who are really charlatans, to justify a priestly class that supports a particular elite social structure, to convince a naive populace that they can control things like sickness and weather, and so on.

A great deal of Euro-American social theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries operates in this mode as well, with the social scientist unmasking the beliefs instantiated through ritual and demonstrating them to be nothing other than products of human activity. In looking back at early Indo-European sacrifice, for example, Bruce Lincoln argues that they should be unmasked for what they are: attempts at “ideological legitimation for an exploitative and oppressive—and exceedingly stable—social hierarchy.”³⁰ For Lincoln, unmasking these rituals as simply attempts to legitimize hierarchies would allow humans to see the world as contingent. The more we can see rituals as simply legitimation, the more we can reject rituals and allow humans to make their own history.

In Lincoln’s case, the unmasking is being done for humanistic reasons—ultimately from a Marxist perspective. For transcendental movements like Christianity and the Celestial Masters, it is being done for theistic reasons—following the guidelines of a divine power who sees through human rituals. But the former is simply a secularized version of the latter. In both cases, the transcendental unmasking involves rejecting the world of ritual as a human construction.

Indeed, as Strathern has argued, transcendental traditions have an inherent tendency toward disenchantment.³¹ There is nothing uniquely modern about such disenchantment. And one of the reasons for such disenchantment is precisely that a recurrent move in these transcendental traditions lies in unmasking earlier ritual orders. The modern social scientist unmasking traditional ritual orders is simply a variation of earlier transcendental movements doing the same.

Here again we see an interesting variant from China. The same transcendental unmaskings can certainly be seen among the Mohists and Celestial Masters. But the nature of the sacrificial rituals, and the fact that these traditions were picked up in the Axial Age by the followers of Confucius, had a dramatic effect on what



would become one of the most important branches of Chinese social and political theory. One finds in China more specifically an entire body of critical theory developing out of concerns with ritual. The goal was not to unmask ritual but rather to emphasize the social constructionism of ritual—to make it as overt and thus as hopefully efficacious as possible.

As we have seen, much of this ritual theory in China emerges out of a problematic of discontinuity, of a concern with discrete things that interact poorly and thus need to be domesticated to construct better forms of interaction. Ritual then becomes an inherent part of achieving a moral world. In the sacrifices in question, that work of ritual construction and domestication is made as overt as possible. Here is an obvious example: at various times in Japanese history, the imperial line was claimed to be genealogically descended from Amaterasu. An unmasking would seek to show that this was simply a claim being made to legitimate a given power structure. But, in the case of imperial China, there was never a claim that the Son of Heaven was actually descended from Heaven. This was presented as simply a ritual title, which the ruler could hold only as long as he lived up to the moral qualities required of the title. One does not need to unmask the fact that the Son of Heaven was not really the descendant of Heaven or that he was not really the father and mother of the people: these were explicitly presented as ritual constructions. They do not operate by trying to socialize practitioners into believing in a certain type of order; on the contrary, the efficacy assumes that ritual is creating a domesticated order that will, if it is successful, lead to a greater flourishing of humanity.

The critiques that emerge out of this tradition thus take the form of questioning particular social constructions and advocating others instead rather than unmasking ritual itself. Indeed, the closest moments toward an unmasking that one finds in Confucian texts are when an author criticized practitioners for thinking that ritual is about affecting the spirits rather than about affecting humanity. For example, Xunzi, a third-century BCE thinker, criticized practitioners of sacrifices and divinations who thought that the rituals were about affecting divine powers. But his point is not that sacrifice and divination should be unmasked and therefore no longer performed; his concern was to ensure that the rituals were being undertaken for the right reasons—to train properly the dispositions of the practitioners.³² The second-order claim concerning ritual, in other words, was not to see through it and reject it but rather to reinterpret it as being about social construction.

Much of Chinese political theory focuses much less on the questions of when and how the state should be allowed to intervene in society and instead revolves much more around the types of worlds the state should construct—how the state

should guide humans into certain patterns of behavior rather than others. In short, alongside the transcendental unmaskings, critical theory can also emerge out of these ethicized rereadings of ritual traditions.



So let us now recast our larger models, but this time informed by the Chinese material. In the world of sacrificial practice—the world Strathern has termed immanentist—phenomena were seen as governed by a series of ghosts, spirits, and demons who operated out of their own interests, sometimes with concern for humans but often mixed with combinations of anger, jealousy, and hostility. The world was thus, from the humans' point of view, fundamentally capricious. The goal was to use practices like sacrifice to coerce these divine powers into supportive relationships with humans. To the degree to which these sacrifices were efficacious, and because, if they were, the resulting order would be relatively temporary and based on a (limited) human attempt to construct the world in a certain way, the sacrifices had to be undertaken endlessly.

Much of the focus of this ritual work came down to questions such as: why were the relationships between humans and divine powers so potentially fraught? What type of divine-human relationship should be called for in the rituals? Answers to these questions could involve a seemingly endless series of possibilities. Here, we summarize just the two approaches mentioned in this essay.

One possibility is to see the existing world of capricious spirits as the result of a human transgression that broke an earlier harmony—the transgressions of Prometheus, the introduction of a stranger-king, in other words, an earlier continuity broken by the introduction of discontinuity. The result was that humans gained their autonomy from the gods but at the cost of being in a constant agon with them. Sacrifice was thus seen as endlessly recapitulating this movement of both appeasing the divine powers while still maintaining the autonomy of humanity, both expiating the transgression against the gods while reasserting it at the same time. Sovereignty would then be portrayed as creating a higher continuity, incorporating the transgressions while relinking humanity with the divine world. Sovereign power would thus play on both of these modes—a heroic (transgressive) mode and a cosmic (sacerdotal) mode.

Another possibility is to see the existing world of capricious spirits as simply a given—the natural state of the world. Human activity is then aimed at domesticating the world so that humans could flourish. In this view, humans were constructing a world in which everything would be domesticated and reorganized around humanity. An earlier discontinuity is broken by the ritual creation of

continuity. Sovereign power building on such rituals would emphasize the rise and fall of successful attempts to build such ritual orders of harmony—a rise and fall, with active and heroic and cosmic modes built into a dynastic cycle.

Although these ritual claims have been laid out with Indo-European and Polynesian materials, on the one hand, and Chinese materials, on the other, this is largely the result of the theoretical models that have developed in Europe and China, with each picking up on particular rituals in these immanentist traditions. As we have noted, expiation rituals became the paradigmatic form of sacrifice for theoretical models based on the continuity approach, and hosting rituals became the paradigmatic sacrifice for theoretical models based on the discontinuity approach.

And where did these theoretical models come from? The Axial Age movements that started in the mid-first millennium BCE, and the salvationist religions in the first few centuries of the common era involved reactions to these sacrificial traditions. They also involved second-order claims, with attempts to unmask or explicate the earlier sacrificial traditions. These second-order claims involved the-
orizations of various sorts of the immanentist sacrifices.

By far, the most common move among the Axial Age movements and the salvationist religions in the first few centuries was an outright rejection of sacrifice based on transcendental claims. Such a move involved assertions that the cosmos was—prior to the involvement of humans—coherent, structured, and organized according to moral principles. As such, humans needed to align their behavior with this coherent world. This often entailed positing the existence of a benevolent creator deity (God in Christianity, Allah in Islam, Heaven for the Mohists, Laozi for the Celestial Masters) or a divine power more primordial than the usual spirits of sacrifice (Brahma, Taiyi). These creator deities and primordial figures did not accept sacrifices and usually opposed sacrifices to the lesser spirits. They instead required faith on the part of the practitioners that they represented a higher truth of an inherent unity and coherence of the cosmos.

Because this coherence preceded human activity, the highest goal of humanity was to accord with it. This also entailed a rejection of earlier systems of ritual—particularly sacrifice. Thus, the movements tended to call for a rejection of sacrifice altogether as well as a radical rethinking of earlier systems of ritual. Proper behavior, on the contrary, meant following the moral imperatives of the creator deity.

Another move involved self-divinization claims that would allow the practitioner to reject sacrifice and ultimately gain the powers of the spirits directly. This too would often involve the claim that there were higher patterns in the cosmos with which the divinized humans would be able to accord. But yet another move was to place self-cultivation within the rituals themselves. Here,

sacrificial rituals were supported, but they were reinterpreted into a moral framework.

Many of the theoretical bodies of literature that we possess on sacrifice and ritual were developed in these Axial Age movements and salvationist religions. In one genealogy we have been tracing, the unmasking seen in transcendentalist movements has resulted, in secularized forms, in much of the theory that has become dominant in the Euro-American tradition. In another genealogy, we have traced the emergence of a body of ritual and political theory in China not based on these same unmasking moves. This latter body of theory, I would argue, has much to inform our larger generalized understandings.



This chapter has involved unpacking a number of layers in the deep history of humanity, with openings toward a wide-ranging series of comparative implications for our understandings of sovereignty and critiques of sovereignty. Building on the work of Dumézil, Sahlins, and Strathern, we have seen paradigmatic forms of sovereignty that emerged out of a set of sacrificial rituals and myths on the origin of human society and the state, and we have noted the particular permutations of these rituals that became dominant in China. We also noted the permutations that developed as well during the emergence of transcendentalist movements midway through the first millennium BCE and again in the second century CE.

In this chapter, I have focused in particular on the ritual practices, the body of theory arising out of these ritual practices, and the rejections of these ritual practices in early China. I have noted how the ritual theories seen as developing from Confucius became one of the most powerful Axial Age positions in China and later became one of the dominant political frameworks in China as well. As a result, transcendentalist movements in China became important, but often in the form of critiques of the dominant political order. This has had major ramifications for the types of sovereignty that have played out in China as well as for the forms that political theory has taken.

One of the interesting aspects of comparative studies is to find societies facing comparable problems and tensions, to trace the debates and struggles that emerged out of these tensions, and to explore the historical implications of the different ways these struggles played out. In the case at hand, we have explored the tensions between sacrifice and transcendental rejections or rethinkings of sacrifice in key moments of Eurasian history. The ways these tensions played out in different parts of Eurasia has had profound implications for the historical dynamics of sovereignty.



NOTES

1. The term *Axial Age* was coined by Karl Jaspers in his *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953). The most powerful discussions of these issues from even larger comparative points of view are those of David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), and Alan Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
2. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*.
3. Georges Dumézil, *L'héritage indo-européen à Rome* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 41–42.
4. Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 73–103.
5. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 92n12.
6. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 73–103.
7. For an example of the former, see Alan Strathern, “The Vijaya Origin Myth of Sri Lanka and the Strangeness of Kingship,” *Past & Present* 203 (2009): 3–28.
8. Georges Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty* (New York: Zone, 1988), 47–55.
9. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 84–91.
10. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 164–95.
11. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 233; Michael W. Scott, *Severed Snake: Matrilineages, Making Place, and a Melanesian Christianity in the Southeast Solomons* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic, 2007).
12. On Hawaii, for example, see Valerio Valeri, *Kingship and Sacrifice: Ritual and Society in Ancient Hawaii* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
13. Jean-Pierre Vernant, “At Man’s Table: Hesiod’s Foundation Myth of Sacrifice,” in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Greeks*, ed. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, tran. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 21–86.
14. Maurice Bloch, *Prey Into Hunter: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1992).
15. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 73–103; Valerio Valeri, “Diarchy and History in Hawaii and Tonga,” in *Culture and History in the Pacific*, ed. Jukka Siikala (Helsinki: Finnish Anthropological Society, 1990), 45–79.
16. Guy Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Guy Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
17. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 204–218.
18. See chapter 1. See also Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 195–204.
19. Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 31–79. For an excellent comparative discussion of these issues, see David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins, *On Kings* (Chicago: HAU, 2017), 428–433.
20. Puett, *To Become a God*, 101–103.
21. Puett, *To Become a God*, 145–200.

22. Michael Puett, "Ritualization as Domestication: Ritual Theory from Classical China," *Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual, Volume I: Grammars and Morphologies of Ritual Practices in Asia*, ed. Axel Michaels, Anand Mishra, Lucia Dolce, Gil Raz, and Katja Triplett (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010), 365–376.
23. Michael Puett, "The Offering of Food and the Creation of Order: The Practice of Sacrifice in Early China," in *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, ed. Roel Sterckx (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 75–95.
24. As Michael Scott has argued, ritual practices based on discontinuity are under-discussed and undertheorized in the anthropological literature. See Scott, *Severed Snake*. Stanley Tambiah has made a similar point in his discussion of the Trobriands in "On Flying Witches and Flying Canoes: The Coding of Male and Female Values," in *Culture, Thought, and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 287–315.
25. The prominence that Hesiod's account has been given in explications of ancient Greek sacrifice has been criticized by several recent scholars. See in particular F. S. Naiden, *Smoke Signals for the Gods: Ancient Greek Sacrifice from the Archaic Through Roman Periods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); C. A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden (eds.), *Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); and S. Hitch and I. Rutherford (eds.), *Animal Sacrifice in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
26. Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016); Michael Puett, "Forming Spirits for the Way: The Cosmology of the *Xiang'er* Commentary to the *Laozi*," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 32 (2004): 1–27.
27. Michael Puett, "Ghosts, Gods, and the Coming Apocalypse: Empire and Religion in Early China and Ancient Rome," in *State Power in Ancient China and Rome*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 230–259.
28. Peter K. Bol, "Emperors Can Claim Antiquity Too: Emperorship and Autocracy Under the New Policies" in *Emperor Huizong and Late Northern Song China: The Politics of Culture and the Culture of Politics*, ed. Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Maggie Bickford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 171–205.
29. David Ownby, "Chinese Millenarian Traditions: The Formative Age," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1513–30.
30. Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 169.
31. Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*, 199–204.
32. *Xunzi*, "Tianlun," *Sibu beiyao* edition (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936).