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THE TURN TO LIFE, PART 2

Life, domesticated and undomesticated Ghosts, sacrifice, and the efficacy of ritual practice in early China

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This article explores classical Chinese conceptions of and practices surrounding life and vitality. Focus is given to the practice of sacrifice as well as the rejections of sacrifice among millenarian movements in Chinese late antiquity. My argument is that an engagement with this material challenges many of our understandings in the anthropology of religion concerning ritual, sacrifice, and interpretation.

Keywords: Chinese religions, sacrifice, ritual, millenarian movements, ghosts, sincerity

In the second century of the common era, a number of millenarian movements began emerging across the Han empire. In the *Taiping Jing*, a document associated with one of these movements, the era—self-proclaimed as “late antiquity”—was seen as one overrun with ghosts. Errors from the past had been accumulating to such a point that sacrifices were only empowering the ghosts and increasing their numbers. Death (*yin*) was overcoming life (*yang*), with the ghosts killing the living with all of their power:

Those in late antiquity have again inherited and carry on the small errors of middle antiquity, and they increasingly make them into ever greater errors . . . When it comes to summoning the dead, ghosts are not able to come and eat constantly, and yet the sacrificial offerings were nonetheless greatly increased, thereby exceeding the proper standards. Yin grows and overcomes yang. No one knows which ghostly and spiritual creatures repeatedly come to gather together and eat, indulging themselves and having their way, acting like dangerous thieves and killing people without end. When they kill a person, [the ghosts] see an increase in the service [i.e., an increase in the sacrificial offerings] and see no punishments. Why should they not continue [killing

the living] with all their strength? As a result, pernicious energies grow daily. It all turns back and attacks the giver of the sacrifices. (Wang 1992: 46.53)

Sacrifices intended to control the ghosts were in fact only increasing their dominance. The ghosts not only flocked to consume the ever-increasing number of sacrifices but also killed the living in ever-greater numbers—thus resulting in yet more ghosts and yet more sacrificial offerings. The imbalance between the dead and the living was becoming ever more dangerous:

Living humans are yang, ghosts and spirits are yin . . . Therefore, when yin triumphs, the ghostly creatures join together to create horrors so profound that no words can describe it. This is called the arising of the yin, and the decline of the yang. It causes rule and order to be lost and endangers the living. (Wang 1992: 46.50–51)

These cautionary words were purportedly spoken by a “Celestial Master,” sent down by a moral deity, Heaven, to save humanity. Similar claims were made by the Celestial Masters, a millenarian movement that began



when the high god Laozi, himself a hypostatization of the cosmos as a whole, gave revelations to warn of a coming apocalypse caused in part by the empowerment of ghosts through human sacrifice.

In both of these cases, a moral deity provides revelations to save the living from the growing power of ghosts. And among these revelations were calls on humans to reduce the power of ghosts by either reforming sacrifices or ceasing them altogether.

The emergence of millenarian movements seeking to reject sacrificial practices and instead focus on sincere belief in a higher, moral deity is hardly an uncommon phenomenon in our historical and ethnographic record. But in the case of early China we have a wealth of material on both these sacrificial practices and the millenarian movements that rejected them, material that should be brought into our larger discussions. In particular, as we will see, the debates surrounding ghosts and sacrifice were intimately involved with the work of controlling, enlarging, or enhancing life—a form of work that opens up interesting possibilities in our anthropological framing of issues of ritual, sacrifice, ancestor worship, cosmology, and belief.

Ghosts, interpretation, and anthropology

Late antiquity was not the only haunted world.

Perhaps few contemporary disciplines are as haunted as the field of anthropology. A haunting that has taken the form of—among other things—treating our comparative categories with deep suspicion. As our genealogies have successfully demonstrated, many of our categories—including most of the ones mentioned above—emerged out of a colonial past, and many are based implicitly on Christian, and more specifically, Protestant, understandings (Asad 1993).

I certainly agree with these critiques, and will turn to them below. But the question is where to turn from here. Like many anthropologists, I would argue that we need to take indigenous categories seriously in re-thinking our theories. But taking indigenous categories seriously in this sense does not simply mean that we must use indigenous understandings to explore practices within that particular culture. To begin with, as we will quickly see, it is not entirely clear what the “Chinese” understandings of any of these issues would be. We will, on the contrary, see an intense debate over all of these practices. Moreover, the competing understandings of these

practices are extremely productive: no one set of indigenous concepts will explain them fully. But, perhaps most importantly, we should still be committed to a comparative project that would bring these understandings into our larger anthropological discussions. The goal should be to work toward a more cosmopolitan body of theory, in which indigenous theories are brought into conversation with other indigenous theories, allowing us to develop more robust anthropological understandings. Our genealogies may have unleashed ghosts, but the goal should be to continue working with these ghosts, not abandon the project. This is exactly the approach advocated by da Col and Graeber (2011) in building what they call “ethnographic theory.”

In turning to China, such a project may seem deceptively easy. The Protestant underpinnings of our categories could not be clearer than when dealing with China. Nor, for the same reason, would the possible alternatives. During the development of social science theories in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China became the Other for many of these categories. China was repeatedly presented as a culture that emphasized ritual over belief, harmony with the world rather than tension with it, a worship of ancestors rather than a following of one’s individual calling, a *do ut des* form of sacrifice with the gods rather than a sincere communion with them. For generations of social scientists, from Hegel to Weber, China became the embodiment of a traditional society. The original anti-Protestant culture.

Such an Other was relatively easy to construct when working with Chinese materials. Statements that the world is harmonious and that we should learn to accord with it, that we should follow the wishes of the ancestors, and that the divine world is structured like a bureaucracy, are extremely easy to find in Chinese texts. And then asking what sets of assumptions would have made such statements possible would seem like a plausible mode of interpretation. Hence an entire anthropological literature devoted to reading so-called traditional China in exactly these ways.

But discovering the assumptions behind such statements may be missing the point. To begin with, whether statements such as these should be understood as ritual statements or statements of belief was a topic of intense debate in China. And, in either case, the work required to make the claims is itself one of the most telling aspects of the practices in question.

The work of anthropology is, in this sense, much like the work of everyday life. To which we now turn.



My goal in this paper will be to explore the indigenous understandings in the classical Chinese tradition concerning sacrifice, ritual, and belief. In the first part of the paper, I will explore the indigenous theories of ritual and sacrifice that developed in the classical Chinese tradition—the understandings and practices of sacrifice and ritual that were under attack in the second century of the common era. As Veena Das has argued, many of our anthropological theories of sacrifice are based upon a restricted set of understandings. Das (1983) expanded our anthropological understandings by exploring classical Sanskrit theories of sacrifice, and I hope to do the same here by exploring classical Chinese theories of ritual and sacrifice. I will focus on the theories and practices that developed in the Warring States and Han periods (ca. fourth to first centuries BCE), arguing that they have much to offer our current understandings. I will then turn to the anti-sacrifice movements that emerged in the first few centuries of the common era, movements that may in turn allow us to expand our anthropological understandings of belief and claims to coherence.

To begin with ritual and sacrifice.

Part I: Ritual and sacrifice in China

The body, energies, and death

A helpful way of analyzing ritual practices is in terms of why they are being undertaken. In other words, what are the perceived problems that need to be solved, and what would things be like if the ritual were not undertaken?

A fundamental problem in dealing with humans is that they are a mess of different energies (*qi*), souls (the *hun* and *po*), and faculties. What we would call emotions were in fact different energies that would be pulled out through interactions with other people—themselves other messes of energies. These responses tend to fall into certain patterns. What might elsewhere be called a “personality” would in early China be seen more as the sets of patterned responses that these messes of energies have fallen into.

Humans also have highly refined energies within them: *shen*. We can provisionally translate this as “divinity” or as “spirit.” These are the energies that give one consciousness, as well as the power to affect things—to move things, to transform things. If ghostly energies are associated with the earth, divine energies are associated with the heavens. The divinities above are pure *shen*—they

move freely, can see clearly, and can transform things flawlessly. They are not dominated by patterns of emotions—those seem to be associated more with the earthly energies.

Living humans have a little *shen*. Not as much and not as purely as the *shen* above, but enough to have some degree of consciousness and some ability to transform things around them.

This brief mapping of humans will give a sense of the problems that humans confront. Minus any of the ritual work humans can undertake, there is always a danger that humans will fall into dangerous patterns of jealousies, angers, and resentments, at both a mundane, everyday level and a larger communal level. But the most dangerous moment occurs at death. Released from the confines of the human body, the demonic energies would look back on the living and witness them continuing with their lives; their worst angers, jealousies, and resentments would be drawn out.

This is what would be called a *gui*—the term I have been translating as “ghost,” although another equally plausible translation would be “demon.” These demonic presences pervade the earthly realm. When they are not domesticated within something—a domesticated human body, a (as we will see) domesticated sacrificial space—they are extraordinarily dangerous.

Over time after death, the most powerful element—the *shen*—would tend to float up to the heavens. If the danger of the demonic energies of the recently deceased is that they become enmeshed in anger, jealousies, and resentment against the living, the concern over time is that the *shen* of those deceased long ago would float into the heavens and become indifferent to human concerns—every bit as indifferent as the other spirits above.

The divinities above, including Heaven and the various spirits, are autonomous, self-productive, and self-dependent. They do not need humans and are often indifferent to human concerns. They can therefore also, from the point of view of humans, appear highly capricious: since humans seem often not to be a part of their concerns, the divinities will often—and perhaps unintentionally—undertake activities that are harmful for humans. In short, if the danger of ghosts is that their anger is often directed explicitly at the living, the danger of spirits is that they can be indifferent and thus, from the point of view of humans, capricious.

Given these sets of problems, the ritual work of dealing with the dead—and hence enhancing life—entailed a process of both separating the various components of



what was once in a living human and transforming them.

The body would be placed into a tomb, along with the earthly energies and souls associated with the person when alive. Various texts would call these souls the *po*, or the *hun* and the *po* (Brashier 1996). The hope was that these energies would remain with the body in the tomb. Objects associated with the person in life—furniture, food, clothing, texts—would be placed in the tomb. And requests from the living would be placed at the tomb calling for the dead souls to remain there, removed from the living (Seidel 1987).

What would ultimately befall these energies was hotly debated. Perhaps they simply dissipated in the tomb. Or perhaps they went on to different spaces—western paradises, or subterranean hells. But, from the point of the view of the living, one of the most important issues was simply that they be kept away. Their presence among the living would tend to bring out the most dangerous tendencies from both.

If the goal was to remove the earthly energies and souls of the deceased from the living, the goal with the *shen* was to transform it into an ancestor—into a supportive entity that would act toward the living as if they were descendants.

After the corpse was buried, a tablet would be set up to be the new form for the spirit on earth. The spirit would thus hopefully be removed from the corpse, as well as from the sets of patterned responses that had defined the person while alive. The spirit would be given an ancestral title based upon the generation from the living head of the family, and the tablet would be placed in the ancestral hall based upon that rank. Now the ancestral sacrifices would begin.

This shift from the burial of the person to the rituals involving the spirit as an ancestor would be called a shift from “mourning” to “sacrifice.” As the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), one of the major compendia of ritual theory from early China, puts it:

In sacrificing, one is called “filial son” and “filial grandson.” In mourning, one is called “grieving son” and “grieving grandson.” (*Liji*, “Za ji,” 107/20.12/6)

This is the practice that has come to be known as “ancestor worship” in the anthropological literature. These sacrifices to the ancestral spirits were also directly related to the sacrifices that would be given to the other spirits as well. The hope was to bring these energies of the *shen*

into networks of support that would enhance the life of humanity.

Sacrifice and the world of forms: Corpses, names, and tablets

The “Jifa” chapter of the *Liji* puts it succinctly:

Generally speaking, as for everything that is born between Heaven and Earth, all of these can be said to have allotments. When the myriad things die, all are said to be cut off; when humans die, they are named “ghosts.” The kings of all under Heaven . . . established ancestral temples, ancestral halls, altars, and sacrificial areas, and they offered sacrifices . . . Therefore the king erected seven ancestral temples, with an altar and level area for each. They were called: the temple for the father, the temple for the grandfather, the temple for the great-grandfather, the temple for the great-great grandfather, and the temple for the highest ancestor . . . When they removed each tablet, they placed it at the altar; when they removed it from the altar, they placed it at the level area . . . When the tablet was removed from the level area, they were called “ghosts.” (*Liji*, “Ji fa,” 122/24.4–5)

The designation “ghost” would be used before the creature became an object of sacrifice—an ancestor—and then again after the sacrifices came to an end. During the period when it was an object of sacrifice, it would be given a temple name and a tablet, and also, as we will see, a corpse impersonator to receive the offerings. The name and body were used to give form to the spirit, so that it could be domesticated and controlled, thus transforming the ghost into an entity supportive of humans. Even writing was one of the inventions that allowed humans to begin domesticating and gaining control over the ghosts and Heaven. As the *Huainanzi* put it: “In ancient times, when Cang Jie created writing, Heaven rained grain and the ghosts cried all night” (*Huainanzi*, “Benjing,” ICS, 8/62/27–28).

But let us start with the impersonator.

After the corpse was placed in the tomb, it would be given another ritual body. The ancestor would be called down to inhabit what is often translated as “impersonator” (*shi*). But the term literally means “corpse.” (The same word was used to describe the corpse now in the tomb.) The ancestor was being given a new ritual body to receive offerings. With its ritual body, the deceased becomes (hopefully) dependent upon the living. The living feed the dead just as, in reverse, the older fed the younger while alive.



A similar logic is used in sacrifices to other spirits as well. The goal is to make the ghosts and spirits dependent on humans by involving them in webs of exchange—webs of dependent relationships.

And what is the nature of these relationships?

In one of these impersonation rituals, the grandson of the deceased would be called upon to serve as the corpse of his deceased grandfather. The *Liji* theorizes this impersonation as follows (Puett 2014):

Now, according to the way of sacrificing, the grandson acted as the impersonator of the king's father. He who was made to act as the impersonator was the son of he who made the sacrifice. The father faced north and served him. By means of this, he made clear the way of a son serving his father. This is the relation of father and son. (*Liji*, "Ji tong," ICS, 131/26/14)

In this example, the father is the ruler, and his father is the deceased. The grandson plays the corpse of his grandfather, and the father plays the role of son to his own son. Through this role reversal, a normative father-son relationship is built up across the three generations. Within the ritual space, the ghost becomes a supportive ancestor and the living become filial descendants, with perfect father-son dyads extended across the three generations.

The father, therefore, is the sacrificer. It is he who offers sacrifices to his father, via his son as corpse. And it is thus also he who becomes the center of the web of relationships created by the sacrifice. The deceased (ideally) becomes dependent on the father, just as the son serving as the corpse of the grandfather is dependent on the father outside the ritual.

At the royal level, the dyad is extended. The sacrifices are also given to Heaven, and the leftovers are spread to the various families of the realm. The ruler thus becomes, ritually speaking, a Son of Heaven, and also, going in the other direction, the father and mother of the myriad people. In the world created within the ritual, the disparate lineages are connected by their ritual kinship relations with the ruler, who in turn is connected in ritual kin relations with Heaven (Puett 2005).

The goal, in short, is to create an ordered pantheon of spirits and ancestors that would operate as much as possible on behalf of humanity. These relations, moreover, ideally place the ghosts and even higher spirits into ritual kinship relations with humans. Within the

sacrificial space, the cosmos would become, ritually speaking, a single lineage. And the ruler would be at the center of this web of relationships, making, to quote again from the *Liji*, "all under Heaven as one family" (*Liji*, "Li yun," 9.22/62/5).

So how are we to understand this?

Ritualization and domestication

The "Li yun," one of the chapters of the *Liji*, compares the constructions of reality created by ritual to the domestication of the landscape through agriculture (Puett 2010a). The world that would have pre-existed agriculture was one in which a basic level of harmony existed. But it was also a world that was inherently dangerous for humans. It would at seemingly random times be too cold or too hot, and humans would die from exposure; rains and dry spells would occur, leaving floods or droughts; animals would eat humans, and humans would unwittingly kill themselves by eating poisonous plants. The development of agriculture involved finding general patterns to the cold and heat (which would then be termed "seasons"), clearing forests, domesticating crops and animals, and killing those animals that could not be domesticated. The entire world was thus organized into a new type of ordered harmony—but one now organized by and for humans. As a result, what had before been a series of forces, powers, and elements that—from the point of view of humans—interacted in dangerous ways were domesticated and transformed into a new web of relationships in which humans, now at the center, would flourish. The abundant fertility of life, although never completely controlled, was organized into forms beneficial to humanity.

Ritual, according to the chapter, works the same way. Just as agriculture involved domesticating discrete and dangerous entities and organizing them into new relationships with humanity at the center, so does ritual involve the same. If we think of life as flows of *qi*, including the highly refined *qi* of *shen* (spirits), then the problem in dealing with humans is much the same as the problem in dealing with plants and animals: the issue is one of organizing the *qi* into workable patterns (Farquhar and Zhang 2012). By so domesticating the world, what was before a dangerous (for humans) world of highly capricious spirits and potentially malevolent ghosts is transformed into a world of benevolent spirits and ancestors acting in support of humanity (Puett 2013a). The more removed from the center one is, the less domesticated one is. At the furthest remove, one is simply a ghost.



Ritual theory

It is precisely this endless work of domesticating ghosts into ancestors and spirits that becomes the focus of classical Chinese ritual theory. Unlike a theorization that proceeds from a view of ritual as a single transformative moment—a Christian baptism, for example, or an initiation, or a wedding ceremony—the theorization in this case is of a ritual based upon the ongoing work of domestication, a domestication that is never complete.

For all of these participants—the living, the remains of dead humans, powers in the larger cosmos—the normative dispositions being hopefully inculcated through the sacrifices are an ideal world which only in part alters the actual behavior of the participants after they leave the ritual: sons will often not be filial, the populace will usually not view the ruler as a father, the ghosts will often continue to curse the living, Heaven will continue to be capricious. The transformations, in other words, are temporary and inadequate. Ghosts and spirits are always more powerful than the ritual attempts to domesticate them. They always exceed the rituals. And when the rituals fail, the ghosts return. Underlying the ritual world of supportive gods and benevolent ancestors are ghosts, just as a capricious world of disasters underlies and frequently breaks through the domesticated world of agriculture. Despite human attempts at domestication, the world continues to be disparate and dominated by capricious and highly dangerous powers.

And, to a large extent, the failure of these rituals is why in a larger sense they work (Seligman et al. 2008: 30; Puett 2010b, 2013b). As Seligman, Weller, Simon, and I have argued, building upon Chinese ritual theory:

These arguments imply that ritual always operates in a world that is fragmented and fractured. Moreover, the subjunctive world created by ritual is always doomed ultimately to fail—the ordered world of flawless repetition can never fully replace the broken world of experience. This is why the tension between the two is inherent and, ultimately, unbridgeable. Indeed, this tension is the driving force behind the performance of ritual: the endless work of ritual is necessary precisely because the ordered world of ritual is inevitably only temporary. . . . If the world is always fractured, and if ritual always operates in tension with such a world, then we need to think of ritual in terms of such an endlessly doomed dynamic. Ritual should be seen as operating in, to again quote Robert Orsi, “the register of the tragic.” Although the claims of ritual may be of an ordered, flawless system, the workings of ritual are always in the realm of the limited and the ultimately doomed. (Seligman et al. 2008: 30)

The vitality here, the energies of *qi*, is not something that is produced by or within these domesticated ritual spaces. The domesticated spaces serve rather to shift this energy into workable—but ultimately doomed—worlds. The world that exists within the ritual space is one of pure patriarchal hierarchy. A domesticated space, but one lacking in women, fertility, life. Ritual creates an ordered world, but it is also a world in which life—or at least the processes that would allow for a continuation of life—is erased. One is reminded of the opening lines of Sylvia Plath’s “Munich Mannequins”: “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children./ Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb” (Plath 1981). Ritual domestication temporarily orders a capricious world, but such a world of ritual perfection is a world without life.

The world outside the ritual space has abundant fertility, but also death; a world of reproduction, but a world as well of ghosts. In contrast, the ritual world has neither life nor death. A flourishing life, then, actually resides in between the two—in between the ritual and non-ritual worlds, in the disjunction between the two.

Part II: Toward a more global anthropology*Multiple worlds, multiple selves*

Within the ritual space, we find a world that perfectly matches the list of characteristics commonly attributed to China—reverence for ancestors, a harmonious cosmos, a *do ut des* form of sacrifice. But all of these are ritual statements, not statements of belief. Far from being assumptions, these notions are on the contrary highly counter-intuitive, made in explicit disjunction with what exists outside the ritual space. They refer to ritual attempts to create such a world—with, again, the full (and necessary) understanding that such attempts will ultimately fail. And that is also why they can be so effective.

Disjunctions have certainly been encountered before in anthropological theory. Take, for example, Maurice Bloch’s famous critique of Geertz’s (1973) interpretation of Balinese conceptions of time as cyclical (1977). As Bloch argued, Geertz’s method consisted of taking ritual statements concerning time cycles and then reading these as indicative of a larger worldview. But isn’t it possible that these were indeed just ritual statements, and not at all indicative of what conceptions existed outside the ritual space?

But Bloch’s further argument (1989) is that ritual—and the world of religion in general—should be understood as naturalizing a set of hierarchies that are in fact, outside the ritual space, potentially contingent. Such a



reading is based in part upon Bloch's understanding (1989) of Malagasy ancestor worship, a ritual that grants authority to the elders of society by conferring sacred legitimacy to them. In other words, the problem that ritual is trying to solve is that the world of everyday life is contingent, based on linear time and thus ever-changing. The world of ritual, on the contrary, is based on the timeless authority of the ancestors.

This framework also informs Bloch's argument concerning rebounding violence, which Bloch defines as a set of rituals directed at solving the problem of "how human beings can be the constituent elements of permanent institutional structures" (1992: 19). As Bloch argues:

To achieve this they must appear, in a certain light at least, to be immortal and unchanging, and therefore other than human; at the same time, they must also be truly alive, in a human body which cannot but be perceived as transformative and mortal. The construction of the ritual drama of rebounding violence is an attempt to avoid the force of this contradiction. (p. 19)

To resolve this contradiction, the world of ritual posits a division between a transcendental order of the divine that is eternal and unchanging, and a vitality associated with the world of plants and animals. Rebounding violence in ritual then consists of a two-step process. In the first stage of a ritual (be that initiation, possession, or sacrifice), one is taken over by the transcendental order. In initiation, for example, one is taken from a child-like state, in which one is closer to animals, and then symbolically killed and brought closer to the divine powers (be they ancestors or gods). In sacrifice, the vitality of the sacrificer is identified with the animal that is then killed and taken over by the transcendent powers. In the second stage of the ritual process, there occurs a reversal, in which the participant, now associated with the transcendent powers, returns and attacks the vital, animal world. In an initiation, this is when the initiated children (now adults) return to attack and appropriate sources of fertility—i.e., they are now warriors and hunters. In sacrifice, this is when the sacrificed animal is consumed. At this point, after the victim has been killed, it no longer represents the sacrificer in his vital aspect; it is simply meat that is then consumed by the participants. This restores vitality to those who had just lost it symbolically because of the killing of their vital aspects during the sacrifice.

Such an argument comes out of a very long tradition in anthropology, in which religion is read as a reified

version of social hierarchies: society creates gods in its image, but then forgets that society is in fact the creator. It takes a modern social scientist to unmask the sacred and show that it is really a reified form of what are in fact contingent social practices.

The dispute between Geertz, arguing that culture is first, and Bloch, arguing that ritual, and religion in general, are a projection of otherwise contingent hierarchies in society, has played out in analyses of China as well. Is Chinese ancestor worship, as well as its bureaucratic pantheon of gods, a simple projection of a patriarchal family structure and bureaucratic government respectively (Wolf 1974), or were these religious assumptions first, and the respective social structures emerged from them (Keightley 1978)?

But the arguments in the *Liji* give another possibility, and it is one that opens up some interesting issues for anthropological theory. The ritual theory in the sacrifice chapters of the *Liji* is quite clear that what appears in the ritual is not based upon an assumption of a harmonious world, benevolent ancestors, and supportive gods. But the rituals are equally not trying to instill such a belief either. On the contrary, rituals are presented as constructs, radically disjunct from the world outside the ritual. And the nature of the substitutions and role reversals works to emphasize these disjunctions. There is nothing to unmask here. No one is being asked to believe that the ancestors are really benevolent, or that the ruler is really the Son of Heaven, or that he is the people's father and mother. The supportive gods and benevolent ancestors are clearly a product of ritual action. And such relations are not even being presented as an ideal that we could or even should try to live within. The interest in the theory is rather in the disjunctions themselves, in the constant work of going back and forth between the spaces.

This is a very different model than one that emphasizes coherence—whether that coherence is to be located in the coherence of a belief system or in the (partial) coherence provided by a structured, enduring, transcendental religious sphere.

To return to Bloch's theory of rebounding violence. The problem underlying these rituals in China is not one of reconciling the needs of permanent social and political institutions with the fact of the mortality of individual humans (a tension represented symbolically as a contrast between a transcendental world above and a vital world on earth). The problem is one of working with a fundamentally discontinuous world of potentially dangerous interactions, and the work of ritual



involves attempts to domesticate both the natural and divine worlds—with, again, the constant realization that such a domestication will never (and ultimately, for life to continue, should never) be complete.

The implications of this can be rather far-reaching. But let's begin with some of the most immediate consequences. Think of the entire body of scholarship devoted to proclaiming that in so-called traditional China, people thought themselves to be, to quote one of the most famous studies, “under the ancestors’ shadow” (Hsu 1967). According to such a view, the living would normatively follow the paths laid out by their ancestors, and ancestor worship was the ritual means of instantiating such values. Otherwise brilliant ethnographies of the self in contemporary China will occasionally fall into this paradigm as well when they contrast a modern self with a traditional vision of the self, in which humans saw themselves as residing under the ancestors’ shadow (Liu 2000, 2002). But, as we have seen, the rituals were not aimed at instilling a belief that one should follow the ancestors; the rituals were on the contrary seen as (endlessly failing) attempts to domesticate ghosts into ancestors—an ancestral world actively being constructed by and for the living.

A similar point can be made in terms of cosmology. In opposition to the tendency to read cosmology in China as based on an assumption of a harmonious cosmos, Philippe Descola (2013) has argued that cosmology in China should be thought of as an endless attempt to connect disparate things—what Descola terms “analogism.” Analogism in this sense operates at a cosmological level as sacrifice operates at a ritual level. In both cases, the goal is to work with a fragmented, discontinuous world and to construct from this a world of continuity—a world of relationships in which humans can flourish. From the point of view of discontinuity, sacrifice and cosmology are both acts of domestication. To read statements concerning the harmony of the cosmos as statements of belief is to miss the extraordinary ritual work underlying the utterance.

None of this is unique to China. Let's return to ancestral rituals in Madagascar. David Graeber (1995) has challenged Bloch's understanding, arguing that Malagasy ancestral rituals do not involve socializing the participants to submit themselves to the will of the ancestors. On the contrary, the rituals involve acts of violence against the deceased, and result in an empowerment of the living vis-à-vis the dead. Putting it in terms of Chinese ritual theory: the rituals work because they play on the (ultimately unresolvable) disjunctions between the power

that the deceased once had while alive and the hopes for the living vis-à-vis the dead.

And one wonders too about Bali. It is possible that there was an overall assumption of time as cyclical. It is also possible that there was a split between such a notion within ritual space and a more universal experience of time as linear outside of it. But one wonders if it might not also be possible that the really interesting questions would come in with the constant interplay and disjunctions between several different worlds. What was happening when people moved back and forth across these different worlds? This is, of course, precisely the re-reading of the Balinese material that Howe (2000) provides. Labeling any of these worlds as universal, or as based on the need for a permanent set of institutional structures (represented as a transcendental order), is to domesticate this complexity every bit as much as one does by denying the complexity and reading the ritual statements as indicative of a coherent worldview.

Thought of in this way, sociality consists of these endless orderings and re-orderings of the world, from mundane daily life to the larger cosmos. Multiple selves, multiple worlds. If we take ritual theory from China seriously, we have to give up our models based upon assumptions of coherence (however defined). To refer back to Orsi: the work of ritual always operates in the register of the tragic.

Continuity, discontinuity, and the play of substitutions and transformations in sacrifice

What would this mean for our theories of sacrifice? As we have seen, sacrifices in China do not, contrary to the way they have so often been portrayed, involve a *do ut des* logic—such a logic that would only be operative within the ritual space, whereas the real work of the ritual involves the disjunction between the ritual space and what is outside it. And they are equally not based upon the interplay of a transcendental order and a vital order as theorized by Bloch. So how then should we understand sacrifice?

Sacrifice is one of the many comparative terms in anthropology that is being treated with suspicion—a concept overly dependent on Christian understandings (see, for example, Detienne 1989: 20). And the classic work on the subject by Hubert and Mauss (1981) is often taken as an example of this. The theory in Hubert and Mauss does indeed consist of several different and potentially contradictory strands organized together under a vaguely evolutionary framework culminating in the Christian eucharist.



But I would argue that sacrifice is still an extremely helpful comparative concept. And, if our goal should be not to reject our comparative terms but rather to rethink them through indigenous understandings, then we should also recognize that Hubert and Mauss were attempting to do precisely this. One of the key reasons the work has proven to be so productive is that it was developed primarily not from Christian understandings but rather from Sanskrit theories, applied to Catholic evidence as well as a smattering of ethnographic material from around the world. Even if the result was at times confused, it has nonetheless succeeded in opening up a huge number of provocative questions. The goal in its aftermath should be to continue the work of bringing in more indigenous understandings to enrich our understanding of the phenomena.

One very successful example of this approach has been the work that figures like Lévi-Strauss, Sahlins, Valeri, and Bloch have done in developing Hubert and Mauss's arguments. Hubert and Mauss discuss the sacralization of the sacrificer, and elsewhere discuss the victim as a substitute for a god. Taken out of the general evolutionary theory Hubert and Mauss employ, one finds a fascinating insight into the interplay of sacralization and desacralization in sacrifice.

We have already seen the importance for such an idea for Bloch: in his theory of rebounding violence, the notion of the victim as a substitute for the sacrificer allowed Bloch to argue that this represented the first stage in the ritual complex of rebounding violence, with the transcendental overcoming the vital aspects of the sacrificer. But let us expand our comparative focus to look at other ways this substitution plays out. If we take ritual theory from early China seriously, we should be looking at the way that sacrifice creates disjunctions that operate in productive tension with the world outside the ritual space. Exploring the different ways that this occurs will help to place the Chinese material into a larger comparative perspective, while also allowing the Chinese material to frame some of the terms of the comparison.

For both Sahlins and Valeri, working with Polynesian materials, the focus has been on the notion of the victim as a substitute for the sacrificer, representing the sacrificer in his disordered state. As Sahlins has argued, "It could even be argued that cannibalism exists in nuce in most sacrifice, inasmuch as the victim must be identified with the sacrificer and is often consumed: either by the congregation as communion or by the sacrificer (priest) as representative of the god" (Sahlins 1983: 82). The result of these substitution processes would be, rit-

ually speaking, the sacralization of the sacrificer. As Valeri has put it:

In a sacrifice, the offering—which is a substitute of the sacrificer—is eaten by the god and thus feeds him. But it also becomes part of him and thus participates in his powers. Insofar as part of the offering so transformed returns to the sacrificer to feed him, he acquires part of the divine powers. The sacrificer may be viewed as undergoing, through his substitute, symbolic cannibalization and resuscitation: he is transformed by being eaten, incorporated by the god. (Valeri 1989: 224)

The human sacrificer is ostensibly submitting himself to the divine, but in fact the ritual act involves the sacrificer acquiring—one could say stealing—divine powers.

The substitution processes of sacralization and desacralization can operate in other ways as well. As Valeri argues with hunting rituals of the Huaulu:

All wild animals, and particularly pig, deer, and cassowary, are imbued with sacredness for the Huaulu. What this means is that they are intangible, forbidden, and that there are nonhuman, occult forces that represent that intangibility and actively enforce it. To appropriate the animals, then, human must desacralize them, which means persuading these occult forces to let them go. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that every time a Huaulu kills an animal, he commits a sacrilegious act and thus becomes vulnerable to retaliation from the occult forces that protect his victim. These forces must therefore be neutralized and propitiated through a variety of ritual means, some of which are sacrificial by any definition of the term "sacrifice." The main one is a metonymic preservation of the sacredness (i.e., intangibility) of the animal through the "offering" of its prime part—the head—to the occult powers. (Valeri 1994: 116–17)

The goal is to remove material from the world controlled by divine powers in order to allow human appropriation. The overt act of the sacrifice thus involves an offering to the divine powers, but the result is that humans are able to appropriate the resources they want.

Despite the many differences, the practice of sacrifice in all of these Austronesian examples operates in terms of introducing discontinuity. A world without sacrifice is a world of continuity, in which all beings are connected in a single order controlled by and often descended from the divine. Human appropriation is thus an act of introducing discontinuity either by appropriating animals from this divine world or by appropriating divine power.



The Vedic material from which Hubert and Mauss were working operated in very similar ways.

As Veena Das (1983) has argued, however, an entire body of Sanskrit theory concerning sacrifice does not focus on the act of killing, or on the notion that the victim represents the sacrificer in his disordered state. And much the same holds true for the classical Chinese theories as well. There is little concern with the act of killing in classical Chinese theories of sacrifice, and the play of substitutions is far more generalized than simply a focus on the victim and the sacrificer. So how might we understand this from a larger theoretical perspective?

Building upon Lévi-Strauss (1966: 224–5) and Marshall Sahlins (1985), Michael Scott (2007) has argued that a key question for any practice is whether the problem underlying and motivating the practice is seen as being one of too much continuity (in which case the goal is to create discontinuity) or too much discontinuity (in which case the goal is to create continuity).

What is intriguing about Chinese sacrificial practice from this perspective is that, as we have seen, it is on the contrary based on a concern with discontinuity. The point of the sacrifice was to create continuity. To move from a world of disparate things, dangerous ghosts, and capricious spirits—a world of discontinuity—to one of hierarchical continuity, in which the sacrificer connects these entities into a continuous hierarchy with himself at the center of the web of relationships. The goal was not to make (ostensibly, anyway) amends for removing elements from a divine world but rather to domesticate the divine world by building sets of relationships with humans at the center.

Similarly, the play of substitutions in sacrifice involves more than simply the identification of the offering with the sacrificer. The play also occurs among the participants (with the grandson, for example, acting as the corpse of the deceased grandfather, but doing so in the ritual role of the deceased as an ancestor), and the role of the offerings is to define these relationships. The result is an endless interplay of substitutions and transformations: the son becomes the grandfather, Heaven becomes the father, the ruler becomes the son, the ruler becomes the father and mother, etc. The concern is thus less to sacralize the human than to humanize the divine, domesticating the divine into a web of human relationships.

To return to Bloch. In early China, the divine is not a transcendental realm in Bloch's sense of the term. The goal in sacrifice is to domesticate the world—most cer-

tainly including the divine. And the play of substitutions involves a series of substitutions in the various subject positions of the (human and divine) participants, rather than identifications with the victim. Fitting this into Bloch's model risks losing what seems to be the real concern of the ritual: the focus is not the endless interplay of vitality and transcendence but rather to empower the sacrificer by domesticating both the natural and divine worlds—with, again, the constant realization that such a domestication will never (and ultimately, for life to continue, should never) be complete.

Read this way, Bloch has powerfully articulated the workings of a ritual complex based upon a concern with an essentially dualistic cosmology. There may well be many societies that fit this model well (although Graeber has raised questions about the degree to which the Malagasy material fully fits). But I would prefer to see this as one permutation of a much larger set of possible concerns. What if the problem is not seen to be one of reconciling the needs of permanent social and political institutions with the fact of the mortality of individual humans (a tension represented symbolically as a contrast between a transcendental world above and a vital world on earth)? What if the problem, as is the case here, is one of working with a fundamentally discontinuous world of potentially dangerous interactions? The work of ritual thus involves a different set of endless acts of domestication and substitutions.

So, if sacrifice can work in terms of either the (limited) establishment of either continuity or discontinuity, and in terms of either the sacralization of the human or the domestication of the divine, then what is the larger problematic that leads to these permutations? If we again take ritual theory from China seriously, one possibility might be that sacrifice serves to establish a limited empowerment of life for humanity against a larger order—an empowerment that is limited because that larger order is inevitably more powerful than human attempts to work with it. This can work from the point of view of either continuity or discontinuity—either trying to break from a continuous divine order or, as in China, trying to build continuity out of a discontinuous order. Either way, the work of sacrifice involves the productive disjunction between the created ritual order and the world outside.

The sacrificial ruse

As Valeri has argued, there is a bit of a ruse in any sacrifice (1994: 104). And, as is now clear with the inclusion



of the material from China, this ruse can operate either way—in terms of either continuity or discontinuity.

In terms of the failed construction of discontinuity, one of the most famous examples is Hesiod's myth of Prometheus (Vernant 1989). Prometheus's sacrifice to Zeus is ostensibly a submission to the divine, but in fact Prometheus gives Zeus the inedible bones, wrapped enticingly in fat, while Prometheus himself gets to eat the meat. This is, of course, the same division that was made in most sacrifices in ancient Greece: the goal of the sacrifice was to create discontinuity, to gain the support of the gods while winning autonomy for humanity. Ostensibly a submission, but in fact a ruse.

And that is most certainly the case with China as well. But the concern was not to create discontinuity but rather to create continuity. Yes, humanity gives food from itself (domesticated by human labor) to the divine, but it does so with the goal of—to whatever extent possible—domesticating the divine. The sacrifice does not in any way involve a submission of the living to the ancestors. On the contrary. It is the sacrificer, not the ancestor, who is empowered by the sacrifice. Indeed, one of the results of the sacrifice is that everything, including the ancestor, becomes dependent on the chief sacrificer.

But not fully. The key with sacrifice is that the ruse is never complete. Going back to Greek sacrificial practice. The sacrifice was a ruse to gain autonomy from the gods, but such autonomy was short-lived: humans were dependent on the gods for their livelihood. And the ruse in part only underlined that dependence. Yes, humans get to eat the meat in the sacrifice, while the gods get only the inedible bones. But humans need to eat the meat to survive, while gods, being immortal do not. The gods have life; humans do only briefly. The ruse only underscores the dependence that humans have on the gods.

If Greek sacrificial ritual involved an ultimately doomed attempt to gain autonomy from the divine, Chinese sacrificial ritual involved an ultimately doomed attempt to domesticate the divine. In both cases, the sacrificial ruse was based upon an ultimately failing creation of a disjunctive ritual world.

Perhaps this explains part of the motivation for sacrifice in general. There have been attempts to link the practice of sacrifice to the emergence of domestication (Smith 1987; Descola 2013: 228). But, as Valeri (1994) has pointed out with the Huaulu, sacrifice can also occur with hunting rituals, using non-domestic animals.

But if sacrifice is thought of, as hypothesized above, as a limited empowerment of life for humanity, then

it becomes clear that domestication is only one of the many modes in which sacrifice can operate. In the form we see in China, this empowerment of life for humanity certainly does take the form of domestication, and very much operates, as Descola (2013) has correctly argued, in terms of attempts to build a continuous world out of what is perceived to be radically discontinuous. When the empowerment takes the form of appropriating animals and materials from what is seen as a continuous order—an order in which everything is inherently related—it involves an introduction of discontinuity. In this sense, Huaulu and ancient Greek sacrifice, for all of their many differences, share a similar concern. Even though Huaulu sacrifice is focused on non-domestic animals, and Greek sacrifice is focused on domesticated ones, the problematic is similar: appropriation in both cases involves creating a rupture from a divine, continuous order, and the sacrificial ruse, so to speak, involves stealing some aspect of this divinity for the sake of human flourishing.

In both cases, too, it is important to note not only that the ritual is less powerful than the divine figures and will thus gain only a momentary support for humanity, but the ritual practice assumes this to be the case. The source of life is beyond the rituals, and that source would be destroyed if the rituals were to ever be successful in colonizing the world outside it.

Sacrifice, then, plays on the tensions produced through the inevitably doomed human attempts to control, appropriate, and domesticate life. The precise permutations of sacrificial practice depend on the ways in which these tensions are articulated. But the exploration of these permutations should focus on the disjunctions, the plays of multiple worlds, and the nature of the ruses required to create doomed ritual worlds in which humanity can, briefly, capture life. Pre-defining any of these worlds as a coherent worldview, or pre-defining the tension as being one of a transcendental order defined by the need for permanent structures and the vitality of life, limits our ability to see the complexity of these disjunctions.

Sacrifice and rejections of sacrifice

The texts I have been working from here—the sacrifice chapters of the *Liji*—are attempts to theorize sacrificial practice. The chapters were written between the fourth to second centuries BCE, but the particular focus was to theorize sacrificial practice from the Bronze Age—practices that the authors felt were being increasingly rejected. To explicate this further, a brief history of



these sacrificial practices will be helpful. This will allow us to see the agon of these practices, the conflicting attempts at encompassment, as competing figures tried to order different worlds.

Through paleographic evidence, scholars have been able to reconstruct a fair amount of sacrificial practice from the Bronze Age. Our first written evidence from China is from the late Shang period (*ca.* 1200–1050 BCE). The writings are divination records made to the ancestors of the Shang kings. Many scholars have tried to read the inscriptions as evidence of a *do ut des* vision of sacrifice in which the kings would give offerings to their ancestors and in return would receive blessings from above, and many have further argued that such sacrificial practices reveal an early emphasis on a belief in an ordered, bureaucratic pantheon (Keightley 1978).

But the indigenous theories we have been exploring may fit the evidence much better. Putting it in that terminology, the rituals are attempts to deal with a highly dangerous set of recently deceased figures as well as highly capricious deities—most importantly the high god Di. The recently deceased are constantly cursing the living. Thus, when the living get sick, the divinations seek to determine if the sickness is a result of a curse by one of the recently deceased figures, and, if so, what sacrifices might be used to alter the situation. If the sacrifices succeed, the result would be that, using the later terminology, the ghost would be transformed into a supportive ancestor, acting on behalf of the living. And, of course, often this would not occur. Even after the sacrifices, we are often told in the divination records that the sickness—the curse from the recently deceased—continued. The deceased are more powerful than the rituals. In the later terminology, the ancestors often revert to being ghosts. As I have argued elsewhere:

There is, thus, in the late Shang, a constant agon between humans and spirits, with spirits controlling natural phenomena and humans attempting to appropriate aspects of the natural world for their own benefit. This results in seemingly endless attempts by humans to placate, coax, and influence the spirits through sacrifice and divination. And the attempt seems often to fail: the spirits are capricious and far more powerful than the rituals humans use to control them. (2002: 44)

Tellingly, such divinations focused on ending the sicknesses of the living would only be aimed at the re-

cently deceased, as they were the ones who would curse the living. Those who had been dead longer seemed to be more powerful, but also less directly focused on the living. The most powerful—and most distant—entity was Di, the high god. Di controlled the winds and rains, but was relatively unresponsive to human manipulation. Thus, human attempts to affect more powerful entities would begin with the recently deceased, who were at least potentially more pliable by human activity. The recently deceased would be sacrificed to, and they in turn would be called upon to “host” (*bin*) the ancestors in the next generation. This would continue up the entire pantheon, ultimately to the point where the highest ancestor would be called upon to host Di (Puett 2002: 47–50). Returning to later ritual theory: the goal of the sacrifices was to domesticate a series of highly dangerous ghosts and capricious spirits and to form them into a coherent, hierarchical pantheon of ancestors and spirits operating on behalf of the living.

Well, on behalf of a certain group of the living. We also have divination records from the Zhou, a group to the west who were also making sacrifices to the Shang ancestors (Shaughnessy 1985–87). The Zhou later defeated the Shang, and instituted a system of sacrifices linking its own ancestors to the high god, now called Heaven.

Far more records survive from the ensuing Western Zhou dynasty (*ca.* 1050–771 BCE). Perhaps most importantly, we have in the bronze sacrificial vessels used to make offerings inscriptions addressed at least in part to the ancestors. Here we find many of the ritual statements that would become so important for the *Liji* theories: within the ritual space, Heaven is a benevolent deity, the ruler is a Son of Heaven, the ancestors of the royal family are arrayed in ascending generational order between the living and Heaven, with the dynastic founders, Wen and Wu, serving Heaven (Puett 2002: 54–68). These are, of course, ritual statements, aimed at constructing such a world.

It was this Western Zhou version of these rituals that the *Liji* was most concerned with reviving. And what were they being revived against?

By the fourth through second centuries BCE, these rituals, and the social worlds being created and worked against through these rituals, were being destroyed. The centralized forms of statecraft that emerged during this period were designed to gain as much direct control over territory as possible. With such a goal, at least the highest level of state rituals shifted dramatically as well. Although ancestral rituals continued, the ritual title of “Son of



Heaven” came to be rejected, as did state rituals aimed at bringing a capricious Heaven into a relationship with the ruler. The imperial rituals, developed by the First Emperor during the Qin empire (221–206 BCE) and consolidated by Emperor Wu (153–89 BCE) during the subsequent Han dynasty, instead involved the sacralization of the ruler. The ruler would engage in sacrifices, but the goal was not to become a Son of Heaven, centering the cosmos as if it were a lineage. The goal, on the contrary, was for the ruler to become divinized and ultimately connected to the Great One—a high god more primordial and more powerful than Heaven (Puett 2008).

Along with these changes at the state level, attempts began developing at the non-state level as well to transcend the entire process of sacrifice and the inevitable result of becoming a (partially) dependent ancestor. Sets of techniques that I have termed “self-divinization” movements began arising in the fourth through second centuries BCE (Puett 2002). These tended to be anti-sacrificial movements, oriented toward cultivating the energies and spirits within the body. The ultimate goal was to directly become a spirit and ascend into the heavens without dying. The result would be life as a spirit—autonomous, living as long as Heaven and Earth, and completely removed from the webs of dependent relationships that sacrifice would have wrapped them within. Tellingly, part of the regimen for such practitioners involved not eating grains—grains being the perfect embodiment of human domestication (Campany 2009: 62–87). The goal of the practices was to transcend the world of human domestication—including both agriculture and sacrifice—altogether.

Self-divinization is, in a sense, the under-current of sacrificial practice. The goal here is not to domesticate the divine but rather to divinize the human. One of the key aspects of this is to reject or transcend the domesticated world of humanity. And the goal is also to transcend the capricious spirits above and move as close as possible to the Great One, a divine power more primordial even than Heaven and one that could not be domesticated to even the limited degrees that Heaven might hopefully be domesticated.

Part III: Sincerity movements

Moral ghosts

This brings us back to the world of ghosts. Exploring indigenous understandings of sacrificial practice can be

very revealing. Equally revealing are the attempts to transcend or avoid such rituals, as in the self-divinization practices. And revealing as well are the critiques that were made of the practices, and the attempts to create alternate communities altogether.

In the fifth century BCE, a figure named Mozi founded a new community based upon the claims that Heaven was not capricious at all but rather a perfectly moral deity who had created the cosmos precisely so that humans could thrive. The emphasis was not on the human domestication of an otherwise capricious and dangerous world but rather on the harmonious cosmos created by a benevolent deity:

Moreover, there are ways that I (Mozi) know Heaven loves the people deeply. It shaped and made the sun, moon, stars, and constellations so as to illuminate and guide them (i.e., the people). It formed and made the four seasons, spring, autumn, winter, and summer, so as to weave them into order. It sent down thunder, snow, frost, rain, and dew so as to make the five grains, hemp, and silk grow and prosper, and sent the people to obtain materials and benefit from them. It arranged and made mountains, streams, gorges, and valleys, and distributed and bestowed the hundred affairs so as to oversee and supervise the goodness and badness of the people. It made kings, dukes, and lords and charged them with, first, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked, and, second, plundering the metals, wood, birds, and beasts and working the five grains, hemp, and silk so as to make the materials for people’s clothing and food. (*Mozi*, “Tianzhi, zhong,” 7.6b–7a)

This same emphasis on a properly ordered cosmos can be seen in the divine sphere in general. The ghosts were not highly dangerous entities but rather figures in a perfectly ordered pantheon, ruled by the benevolent deity Heaven, who rewarded the good and punished the bad so as to give proper guidance to humanity:

Therefore, in ancient times the sage kings made manifest and understood what Heaven and the ghosts bless and avoided what Heaven and the ghosts detest so as to increase the benefits of all under Heaven and eradicate the harms of all under Heaven. This is why Heaven made coldness and heat, placed the four seasons in rhythm, and modulated the yin and yang, the rain and dew. At the proper time the five grains ripened and the six animals prospered. Diseases, disasters, sorrows, plagues, inauspiciousness, and hunger did not arrive. (*Mozi*, “Tianzhi, zhong,” 7.6a–6b)



The harmonious world posited in the *Liji* as a product of human domestication is here seen as a creation of a moral high god. The entire cosmos is already ordered and perfectly moral.

And what about sacrifices? They were to be continued, but, since the ghosts were already benevolent and already acting on behalf of humans—indeed, providing guidance to humans—the entire emphasis on transforming ghosts into gods, goddesses, and ancestors was rejected altogether. The work of domestication and the play of substitutions have no role. Sacrifices were simply instituted by the sage kings to inculcate within the practitioner a proper reverence for the ghosts:

Therefore, if it were like this, then Heaven would send down cold and heat without moderation, snow, frost, rain, and dew at the improper time, the five grains would not grow, and the six animals would not prosper . . . Therefore, in ancient times, the sage kings clarified what Heaven and the ghosts desire and avoided what Heaven and the ghosts detest. They thereby sought to increase the benefits of all of Heaven and push away the problems of all under Heaven. They thereby led the myriad peoples under Heaven to purify themselves, bathe, and make libations and offerings to sacrifice to Heaven and the ghosts. (*Mozi*, “Shangtong, zhong,” 3.5a–5b)

The key, as several chapters of the *Mozi* argue, is that one must simply have faith in the ghosts.

In short, human behavior was not aimed at domesticating a capricious world so that human life could flourish. The concern was rather to live properly within the world created by Heaven and ruled over by Heaven and the ghosts. Sacrifices were to continue, but only to inculcate within humans a proper reverence for the moral ghosts. Other rituals that did not serve a comparable purpose were to be rejected.

This emphasis on belief in a benevolent creator-deity, on a coherent, harmonious world that we must learn to live within properly, and on a suspicion of rituals, is, of course, quite comparable to generally Protestant practices. Those anthropological approaches devoted to reconstructing a coherent worldview that is purportedly believed in by the figures involved, with rituals serving essentially to inculcate those beliefs within the practitioners, would fit the Mohist community very well. Here, one could indeed take a ritual statement as (ideally) a statement of belief. But, it is important to note, this is an oppositional movement, explicitly devoted to denying the disjunctions and transformations that underlay

the ritual practices of the day and instead calling for a belief in coherence. As Luhrmann (2012) has argued, belief in a counter-intuitive way of thinking requires incredibly difficult work.

The Mohist communities were relatively small, and they seemed to have died out not long after the consolidation of the empire. But later communities with a comparable focus on moral gods and ghosts were to emerge.

Millenarian movements

In 142, Laozi appeared to give revelations to a certain Zhang Daoling. Although Laozi had earlier been understood to be a human sage who had written the *Laozi*, Laozi was in these revelations the cosmos itself, now taking human form in order to offer revelations to humanity. The *Laozi* text was an earlier revelation from the same god. But that earlier revelation had been so misinterpreted that a further revelation was necessary. Indeed, the misinterpretations were so severe that human activity had been progressively destroying the cosmos. Laozi was thus returning to offer further revelations to a community of followers who would hopefully survive the coming apocalypse and seed a new group of humans for the cosmos to come. The resulting community of followers, called the Celestial Masters, created a separate state in southwestern China, preparing for what was to come.

At roughly the same time, another salvationist movement, called the Taiping (Great Peace), emerged in the eastern portion of the north China plain. Similarly apocalyptic, the Taiping movement held that the cosmos had become overridden by ghosts—a problem created directly by human sacrifice. The cosmos was in danger of coming to an end, and a higher—and purely good—deity was offering revelations to save humanity (Puett 2015).

The Taiping Jing

The early portions of the *Taiping Jing*, mentioned at the start of this paper, are part of this context (Hendrischke 2007). The concern is that the world has been overrun with ghosts. And this is entirely a consequence of how humans lived while alive:

Those who exhaust themselves by bringing distress and bitterness to themselves become distressed and embittered ghosts. Those who exhaust themselves in vileness become vile ghosts. This is something that can clearly



be seen. All humans are able to understand this, and yet none are willing to become good and make their *hun*-soul and spirit joyous. This is a truly severe transgression. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 52.73)

The reason that ghosts should not be a problem is that humans in fact are perfectly ordered in relationship to the cosmos.

When humans are born, they receive correct *qi* from Heaven and Earth, and the four seasons and five phases come to join as [the *qi*] becomes human beings. This was the ordered form of the former humans. Their bodily forms resided [properly] within Heaven and Earth, the four seasons, and the five phases. The bodies of the former humans were always joyous, good, and without anxieties, turning back to transmit more life. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 52.73)

Humans in antiquity lived properly. They were thus joyous at death, just as they had been joyous in life:

As such, hold fast to the good and study. Those who roam joyously to the utmost become ghosts who roam joyously. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 52.73)

As such, humans—both during life and afterward—were able to undertake their cosmic duty of helping Heaven to generate and nourish the myriad things:

In between Heaven and Earth, all of the spirits and essences must together help Heaven generate, nourish, and grow the twelve thousand things. Thus all of the spirits and essences fully obtain ranks and sustenance. This is like the myriad ministers and worthies who all help the emperor and kings nourish the people and myriad things; they all receive ranks and sustenance. Thus they follow Heaven as their model, always with the fifteenth day of the month a small report is sent up; at the beginning of the next month a medium report is sent up; and each year a large report. Therefore those with great merit will receive promotion and those without merit will be sent away or punished. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 151.407–408)

The wording here is particularly telling. The way that the spirits and essence can become helpful for the nurturance of life is that Heaven itself functions as a perfect bureaucracy, rewarding those who act properly and punishing those who do not. Far from being a cosmos filled with dangerous ghosts, the cosmos on the contrary looks

very much like the one described by the Mohists: it is a cosmos governed by a benevolent Heaven, and overseen by a proper bureaucracy (Puett 2009).

So why have things fallen apart? It is entirely the fault of humans. Heaven has been sending down sages to provide proper guidance to humanity. But despite the clear teachings, humans have misunderstood them. These misunderstandings have accumulated, and as a result later generations have increasingly failed to live properly within the cosmos and failed to undertake their proper cosmic duties. This has led to an increasing level of resentment on the part of humans, and this in turn has resulted in an increasing number of dangerous ghosts:

Later generations were unworthy. They have on the contrary long embittered the bodies of Heaven and Earth, the four seasons, and the five phases. This has caused them to be all the more resentful when they die, distressing their *hun* and *po* souls. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 52.73)

The result is the situation mentioned at the beginning of the essay: the ghosts have become dangerous and all-pervasive, feeding off the living and thus throwing off the balance between Heaven and Earth.

The world of dangerous ghosts, in other words, is not an inherent part of the cosmos that humans are trying to alter through their work of domestication. The cosmos on the contrary is inherently harmonious, and proper human behavior plays a crucial role in maintaining that harmony. The dominance of a world of dangerous ghosts is purely a result of improper human activity. And among the most important of these improprieties is sacrifice.

Done properly, sacrifice for the *Taiping Jing* is simply a way of paying proper obeisance to higher powers and of therefore inculcating within the living a proper sense of reverence for the ghosts and Heaven. What the *Taiping Jing* is rejecting is precisely the play of substitutions in the sacrificial ritual. There is no transformational play at all: sacrifice is simply an act of obeisance to the ghosts. A view of sacrifice, in other words, directly reminiscent of the Mohists.

But in later generations—what the text calls “late antiquity”—sacrifice on the contrary started being used incorrectly. As the ghosts became progressively more dangerous and progressively more numerous, humans have responded by increasing the sacrifices. And, by foolishly over-indulging in sacrifice, humans have only



made the problem worse. The result is a cosmos overrun by ghosts.

How do we solve the problem? If Heaven sends down yet more sages, they will simply give words that will yet again be interpreted incorrectly and misunderstood:

If they [Heaven and Earth] were to wish again to give birth to a sage, it would just be the same yet again. Heaven has been troubled for a long time. For this reason it sent me down to give its words as announcements to you, the Perfected. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.350)

Accordingly, there can be no more human sages: “Therefore, Heaven does not again make a sage speak, as he would be unable to fully eradicate all of the problems” (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 91.356). And there can be no more interpretation of any kind.

So what will the Celestial Master ask the Perfected to do? The Perfected will instruct humans to take all of the earlier writings and, without any interpretation, simply put them together. Since the teachings of Heaven are one, simply organizing by topic everything that remains from different sages of the past together will result in a single, clear sagely statement:

If one has these follow one other by category and thereby supplement each other, then together they will form one good sagely statement. (*Taiping jing hejiao*, 132.352)

The words should be taken literally, with no interpretation.

No interpretation, no sacrificial substitutions, no transformations. The world is coherent and harmonious, and guided by a moral deity. The key is simply to have faith in that coherence and in the precepts offered from above, and to accept the precepts literally.

The Celestial Masters

At roughly the same time, another group, the Celestial Masters, formed in the southwest (Kleeman 2016). The Celestial Masters were followers of the revelations that the high god Laozi made to Zhang Daoling in 142. The leader was Zhang Daoling’s grandson, Zhang Lu, who also purportedly authored the *Xiang’er* commentary to the *Laozi*.

The *Xiang’er* commentary reads the *Laozi* not as a text written by a human but rather as a revelation of the high god Laozi (Bokenkamp 1997). According to

the *Xiang’er*, Laozi is in fact the Way, and has taken human form in order to offer revelations to humanity. Even the cosmos itself is a form that the Way has, reluctantly, taken:

“I” refers to the Way. It desires to be without a body. It simply desires to nourish spirits; that is all. And it desires to compel humans to model themselves on this. (*Xiang’er*, 154–5)

The Way would prefer not to have a body. But it needs to nourish spirits, and it needs humans to use their bodies to do the same (Puett 2004).

Humans, therefore, must simply follow the admonitions of the Way to use their bodies to accumulate more essence and thus nourish spirits for the Way:

Humans should only preserve their bodies; they should not love their bodies. What does this mean? If you maintain the admonitions of the Way, you accumulate goodness and complete accomplishments; accumulate essences and complete spirits. (*Xiang’er*, 161–2)

If they do so, they can become transcendents and live long:

When spirits are completed, the transcendents live long. Consider them [the spirits] the treasures of the body. (*Xiang’er*, 163)

Life, then, consists of following the precepts of the Way and using one’s body to nourish spirits on behalf of the Way. Death means failing to follow these precepts:

The Way is life; aberrance is death. The dead belong to the earth; the living belong to Heaven. (*Xiang’er*, 295)

Life is of Heaven, while death is of the Earth.

Like the Mohists, the high god—in this case the Way—created the cosmos with a clear system of rewards and punishments to ensure proper human behavior. In this case, death itself was created as punishment. Life is the reward given to the good:

The Way established life in order to reward the good, and established death in order to punish the bad. As for death, this is what all men fear. The transcendent rulers and nobles, like the common people, know to fear death and enjoy life; it is what they practice that is different . . .



Although the common people fear death, they do not try to trust in the Way, and they enjoy committing bad acts. Is it surprising that they are not yet trying to escape from death? The transcendent nobles fear death, trust in the Way, and hold fast to the precepts. Therefore they join with life. (*Xiang'er*, 299–303)

Insofar as the transcendent nobles follow the precepts of the Way and have faith in the Way, they will live. They are freed from death. Those who do not are but corpses:

The bodies of those who do not understand the Way of long life are all just corpses that move. It is not the Way that moves them; theirs is entirely the motion of corpses. The reason that people of the Way are able to obtain the long life of transcendents is that theirs is not the movement of corpses. They are different from the vulgar. Thus, they are able to fulfill the potential of their corpse and command themselves to become transcendent nobles. (*Xiang'er*, 72–4)

The proper use of the body, therefore, is to focus simply on the cultivation of essences and spirits:

The body should constantly generate itself and take calming the essences and spirits as its basis. (*Xiang'er*, 456)

What about other uses of the essences and of the body—such as copulation for reproduction? The Way decrees that this should only be done to the minimum degree necessary to generate more bodies:

Now this [copulating to reproduce] produces great calamities. Why did the Way create (*zao*) it? The Way values ancestral sacrifices and values that the species does not end. It desires that humans join their essences and generate life; therefore [the Way] teaches it. (*Xiang'er*, 57–63)

The Way would prefer that there be no bodies, and it would also prefer that there be no waste of essence for the purposes of copulation. But it needs bodies to nourish spirits, and it therefore needs the human species to continue. Accordingly, it has created copulation. And, for those who do not go on to use their bodies properly, it has created death and sacrifice.

But those who do follow the precepts of the Way cease copulation at an early age and thereafter use their bod-

ies only to complete spirits. They become transcendents, and are freed from the world of sacrifice:

However, humans with utmost power . . . are able to not unite and produce life. From a young age they stop this [i.e., the losing of their essences through copulation] and they are able to complete good spirits earlier. These are called the essences of the Way. Thus, Heaven and Earth have no sacrifices, dragons no offspring, transcendents no wives, the Jade Maiden no husband. (*Xiang'er*, 57–63)

Sacrifice is associated with death, not life. Indeed, it is forbidden to those who follow the precepts of the Way:

Those who practice the Way live; those who lose the Way die. The correct method of Heaven does not reside in sacrificing, praying, and offering. The Way therefore forbade sacrifices, prayers, and offerings. (*Xiang'er*, 374–5)

Freed from the world of reproduction, death, and sacrifice, they become self-generating and achieve long life:

They are able to model themselves on the Way, and are therefore able to generate themselves and endure and live long. (*Xiang'er*, 65–6)

This results in a division of humanity. The transcendents are able to follow the Way, nourish spirits, and obtain long life. They do not copulate and do not engage in sacrifices. Those who do not follow the precepts, on the contrary, at least serve the minimal function of reproducing more bodies. But theirs is the way of death. They die, and they become ghosts to whom must be given sacrifices.

So why does the Way need human bodies to be used to nourish spirits?

The body is the vehicle of the essence. Since the essence can leave you, you should carry and orient it. When spirits are completed and the *qi* comes, they carry and orient the body. If you wish to bring this task to completion, do not depart from the One. The One is the Way. Where does it reside in a person's body? How does one hold fast to it? The One does not reside in the human body . . . It exists outside Heaven and Earth. When it enters between Heaven and Earth, it comes and goes in the human body. It moves everywhere within your skin; it does not rest in one place. The One disperses its form as *qi* and collects its form as the Taishang Laojun [i.e., Laozi],





who rules Kun Lun. It is sometimes called emptiness and nothingness; it is sometimes called spontaneity; it is sometimes called the nameless; all are the same. (*Xiang'er*, 103–10)

The Way created bodies in order to accumulate essence and complete spirits. The Way disperses *qi* throughout the cosmos, and humans are called upon to use their bodies in order to accumulate essence and complete spirits. Those who do so can become transcendents and live long. But those who do not follow these precepts will die and become ghosts, and sacrifices will have to be given to them.

The entire cosmos thus functions normatively like a giant factory to generate spirit. When humans fail to follow their proper role in doing so, the entire cosmos is thrown into danger.

The problem in what the *Taiping Jing* would call “late antiquity” is that fewer and fewer humans have been following the precepts. As a consequence, ghosts and sacrifices are becoming ever more prevalent, and the cosmos is not getting the support it needs for the cultivation of spirits. The result is that the cosmos is in danger. This is why Laozi took human form yet again to offer further revelations. Those who would follow the precepts will survive the coming cataclysm and become the seed people for the new cosmos to come. As the *Da Dao jia ling jie* puts it:

You will see Great Peace. You will pass through the catastrophes unscathed and become the seed people of the later age. Although there will be disasters of war, illness, and flood, you will confront them without injury. (Translation by Bokenkamp 1997: 173)

The result of these practices will be the creation of the “seed people,” who will help to generate humanity in the cosmos to come. Proper seeds come not from human domestication but from transcending such domestication and simply completing the spirits within the body.

The cosmology of the *Xiang'er* commentary operates as an inversion of that seen in sacrificial practice. If the goal of sacrificial practice was to use forms to domesticate the spirits, the *Laozi*, according to the *Xiang'er*, is written from the point of view of the spirits and, behind them, the Way. The world of forms is simply being used by the Way in order to generate more spirits. The body is being used not to domesticate and control spirits but simply to nourish and cultivate them (Puett 2010c).

And how does the commentary get such a reading from the *Laozi*? The commentary presents itself as simply a literal reading of the text (Puett 2016). The reason the *Laozi* has, from the point of view of the commentary, been misread as being a highly mysterious text filled with complex metaphors is because humans have failed to simply read the text as it is: a clear set of revelations that should be understood at face value. This, of course, is the same argument we saw in the *Taiping Jing*: the revelations are clear and offer the reader direct, unmediated access to the words of the purely good deity. Just as there are no substitutions in the sacrificial process, so are there no interpretations necessary for understanding. The world is as it is, and the precepts for understanding it and living properly within it are as well. All one needs is faith.

Coherence and disjunctions

We have seen an opposition. The dominant sacrificial practices were devoted to domesticating dangerous ghosts and capricious divinities. The world was discontinuous and fragmented, and life consisted of the endless attempts to order, encompass, and link these disparate things.

This was opposed by a series of movements—many of them millenarian movements—that put an emphasis on the importance of belief in a coherent and harmonious cosmos, created by a benevolent deity. In the form this takes in Chinese late antiquity, the cosmos was seen as being thrown into chaos by human interventions that had resulted in the ghosts becoming empowered and dangerous. Among these human interventions, indeed, were precisely the sacrificial practices devoted to domesticating the natural and divine worlds. For the *Taiping Jing*, the ghosts were inherently good, but human sacrifices had thrown the balance of life and death out of whack, thus leading to an endangerment of the cosmos. The Celestial Masters took this further and rejected sacrifice altogether for the transcendents. In both cases, humans were being called upon to cease sacrifices and undertake self-divinization techniques—only now in order to help the cosmos. These millenarian movements were accordingly building upon self-divinization techniques while holding a generally Mohist cosmology.

In short, if the goal of sacrificial action was to domesticate the dangerous ghosts and capricious divinities and transform them, to whatever extent possible, into a pantheon of supportive ancestors and deities, the





critique of such action was to argue that this domestication is on the contrary empowering the ghosts and throwing the cosmos out of balance. Within the world being created through sacrifice, the flourishing of human life is at least in part a product of the domestication of the world. For the millenarian movements, it is precisely the world created through sacrifice that is leading to an empowerment of the ghosts and an increasing push toward death—the death of humans, and ultimately the death of the entire cosmos. In opposition to the ritual and non-ritual interplay of the world of sacrifice, then, these millenarian movements called for a coherent world that we must have faith in, with revelations that must be read directly, without any mediation and without any human interpretation.

To explore the further implications of the point, it may be helpful to return to Bloch. For Bloch, millenarian movements can be characterized as an attempt to turn fully to the transcendental, with a rejection (or partial rejection, depending on the extremity of the movement) of the vital elements. In terms of the ritual complex of rebounding violence, millenarian movements undertake the first part of the ritual move, in which the vital elements are overtaken by the transcendental, but not the second, in which the vital elements are then reincorporated.

Bloch is certainly in part correct to say that the millenarian movements involve an attempt to create a transcendental order. But what such a framework misses is the distinction between the work of ritual and the work of belief. Millenarian movements are often what I would like to call “sincerity movements.” Sincerity movements are based upon calls for a *belief* in a counter-intuitive set of transcendental claims—claims that the world is coherent, created by a moral deity, and that such a belief requires a rejection of the sacrificial and ritual traditions that otherwise guide life. Indeed, in China, it is precisely in the sincerity movements that a transcendental order along the lines articulated by Bloch is posited as such. And the point can almost assuredly be generalized. Millenarian movements are not a rejection of vitality but a (deeply counter-intuitive) claim that the vital world is part of a larger coherent order created by a benevolent deity.

In terms of his overall model of rebounding violence, it is as if Bloch has taken the visions of transcendence more associated with sincerity movements and then read those into a ritual world. But it is precisely the interplay of ritual work and sincerity movements

that is of interest in exploring the dynamics of life in human communities. The former rely upon an endless play of disjunctions and substitutions in the (ultimately doomed) attempts to gain, appropriate, and control life. The latter are based upon a (highly counter-intuitive) faith in coherence and the literal in a call to see life as (a lesser) part of a larger comprehensive system.

Conclusion

A pervasive danger in anthropology is to take a statement, such as “the world is harmonious,” or “ancestral spirits are benevolent,” and ask what set of assumptions or worldview would make it possible for someone to believe such a statement. But that may be precisely the wrong question to ask. Whether such statements should be taken literally, and treated as beliefs, is a very complicated question. In many cases, such statements are ritual statements, clearly counter-intuitive to the world outside the ritual space. Or, when they are made as statements that are supposed to be believed, and believed quite literally, we must recognize again that such statements are highly counter-intuitive, and the work of believing them is every bit as fraught and difficult as the work of ritual world-making. This work, and the agony of this work, is a key issue that anthropology must address.

One of the goals of this paper has been to take seriously indigenous ritual theories from China as well as the theories from some of the movements that arose against the sacrificial practices in question. Doing so highlights that agony.

If we use these indigenous theories to think comparatively, we come up with some intriguing results. Let's begin with the disjunctions of ritual. The practices involved—here we have focused on sacrifices—in generating these disjunctions can be focused on building continuity or creating discontinuity. But in either case the sacrificial practices assume a disjunction between the ritual world being constructed and the world outside—a world larger than, and governed by powers stronger than, human sacrificial work. The practices can therefore only be understood not as an ideal world that would hopefully be created more generally but rather as a contingent attempt to empower humanity—whether that be through gaining some degree of autonomy from the divine (as, for example, in ancient Greek sacrificial practice) or through domesticating the divine (as in Chinese



sacrificial practice). The practices work through an endless play of substitutions and transformations, and they assume multiple worlds; reading them as a coherent worldview—taking ritual statements as indicative of a larger set of cultural assumptions—by definition misses the work of ritual. Again, the rituals only work because, ultimately, they fail. The sources of life lie beyond the rituals. A successful ritualization of the world would also mean a loss of life.

In contrast, sincerity movements, based upon a rejection of ritual more generally and sacrifice more particularly, call on practitioners to believe in a coherent world, usually created by and certainly governed by a benevolent deity. The structure of that world, and the precepts given by the deity governing that world, must be taken literally, directly, and without any mediation. Human acts of appropriation, of interpretation, destroy this coherence, and only sincere faith can bring redemption. Such claims of coherence are every bit as counter-intuitive as the ritual worlds created in sacrifice.

Taking these indigenous debates in China seriously certainly helps to underscore the degree to which many of our theoretical models may indeed be overly indebted to a generally Protestant vision. But we would therefore also have to expand the category of “Protestant” to say “sincerity” claims more generally (Seligman et al. 2008). Claims for the existence of a coherent world that one must believe sincerely, for the importance of following a truth (located in a transcendent god, within the practitioner, or both) that one must follow literally, for a degenerative/progressive vision of history culminating in a radical break—be that modernity or an apocalypse—are recurrent in world history. Protestantism is simply a recent instantiation of a recurrent way of acting in the world. But, ironically, the complexity of that acting is what has been lost when we read statements along these lines as simply being the result of a pre-given set of cultural assumptions or ontology. We are in essence applying a Mohist/*Taiping Jing/Xiang'er* hermeneutic of reading texts and the world literally, without the play of substitutions, and yet we have ignored the incredible difficulty that such a literal reading entails. These beliefs, in other words, operated much like rituals, and were just as counter-intuitive (Severi 2015). For all of our concern with questioning the Protestant assumptions underlying our theories, we may have missed some of the most important ones.

Putting the distinction between ritual and sincerity in terms of the agony of dealing with life, the questions

would be the following: Does life come from following the precepts of a divine order, or through the ultimately doomed ruses that appropriate that life for human growth? If the former, what is the work required to cohere with these precepts of life? And, if the latter, does that appropriation take the form of creating discontinuity from the continuous word of the divine, or does it take the form of creating continuity against a fundamentally discontinuous world?

The powers of life lie beyond humanity, and attempts to appropriate, domesticate, or accede to these powers are always limited and ultimately doomed. Whether one is undertaking analyses through a sincerity or ritual lens, these attempts—the work of culture—should become one of the concerns of our analysis. Ironically, our concepts have been so successful at domesticating this work that our analyses of Chinese practices often risk replicating the lifeless world of the ritual space. We analyze a domesticated space as if it were a coherent world, ignoring the ghosts underlying that space. Lost in such analyses is the work of rituals and the work of belief, the always doomed efforts to corral vitality, the wrestling with ghosts.

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