

Of Tripod and Palate
Food, Politics, and Religion in
Traditional China

Edited by
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CHAPTER FOUR

The Offering of Food and the Creation of Order: The Practice of Sacrifice in Early China

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Anthropologists of contemporary Chinese religion have often pointed out that the lines between spirits, ghosts, and ancestors are highly permeable. Indeed, the primary difference between them is to be found in food—both in the types of food offered and the ways in which it is given. Ghosts are dead humans who are not fed by living descendants (and thus become hungry and highly dangerous, but also objects of offerings by individuals outside of more established avenues of worship); ancestors are fed by their living descendants (and thus are not dangerous and may even be helpful to the descendants); and spirits are fed by larger numbers of people than just simply their descendants (and thus become far more powerful than ghosts or ancestors). Moreover, each of these can become any of the others if the food offerings are changed: a ghost can become an ancestor, an ancestor can become a ghost, a ghost can become a spirit. In other words, it is living humans, through the act of feeding, who define the differences between spirits, ghosts, and ancestors.¹

This particular view, in fact, is traceable back to the *Liji* (Book of Rites), one of the Five Classics, and the only one devoted explicitly to ritual practice. This historical continuity should not surprise: the sacrificial practices observed by anthropologists were the result of a self-conscious attempt by the state in late imperial China to transform ritual practice at the local level to that prescribed by the earlier ritual texts.

The goal of this paper will be to analyze the visions of food offerings and sacrifice found in the *Liji*. This was once a topic of great scholarly concern, but it is one that has fallen into neglect recently. The reason for this neglect is very simple: with the explosion of archaeological finds over the past few decades, scholars have wisely turned to a study of these paleographic materials to analyze early ritual practice.² But we are now in a position to pull

back and analyze these paleographic sources with our received texts, and I argue that in this particular case there is much to be learned by doing so: it is now possible to see how the logic of sacrifice outlined in the *Liji* relates to the practices we are seeing in the paleographic materials, and thus to gain a glimpse of how to link indigenous theories of sacrifice with actual practice. My full argument is that the latter is indeed illuminated by looking at the former, and that, by bringing these sources together, we can begin developing a full history of approaches to sacrifice in early China.³

Spirits, Ghosts, and Ancestors in the *Liji*

I turn first to the narrative of the origins of sacrifice in the “*Ji fa*” 祭法 chapter of the *Liji*. In setting up their claims, the authors distinguish between two different types of sacrifice: sacrifices to the nature spirits and sacrifices to the ancestors. The authors turn first to the former.

According to the authors, the ancient sages recognized that are powers in the cosmos that humans either revered or needed to utilize as resources for their livelihood. As the authors summarize at the end of the chapter:

When it came to the sun, moon, stars, and constellations, they were what the people looked up to; as for the mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills, these were the places from which the people took their resources to use. If they were not of this type, they were not entered into the sacrificial canon.⁴

The crucial point that the authors make is that these objects were not “spirits” until the sages named them as such:

The mountains, forests, rivers, valleys, and hills that could send out clouds, make wind and rain, and cause to appear strange phenomena—all were named “spirits” (*shen* 神). (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.3)

“Spirits,” then, are a name given by humans to those elements of the natural world that had powers important to humanity. There were no spirits until the sages designated particular phenomena as such.

The sages then set up a proper hierarchy for those who could offer sacrifice to these spirits. For example, a ruler was granted the power to offer sacrifice to all hundred of the designated spirits, while the lords were allowed to offer sacrifice only to those designated spirits on their own land:

He who possessed all under heaven sacrificed to the hundred spirits. As for the lords of the states: if they [the spirits] were on his land, he sacrificed to them; if they were not on his land, he did not sacrifice to them. (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.3)

Both the hierarchy of the sacrificial system as well as the very object of the sacrifices themselves—namely, the spirits—were defined by human sages simply based upon what those sages deemed significant in the natural world for humans.

The authors turn next to the issue of the ancestral cult. Here again, the sages recognized a set of basic facts in the natural world relevant to humanity. First of all, they recognized that everything on the earth that lives will ultimately die. And, for almost all creatures, this death is the end. But there is one exception: unlike all other creatures, humans remember their dead.

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” (*gui* 鬼). (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.4)

In what would at first appear to be a non sequitur (but is in fact nothing of the sort), the authors then turn immediately to a description of how the sages set up the basic hierarchical divisions of society. Based upon these divisions, land was apportioned—with higher aristocrats receiving more land, lower aristocrats receiving less land, and so on. Ancestral sacrifices, according to the authors, were also set up according to this social hierarchy:

The kings of all under Heaven divided the land, instituted states, founded cities, and set up towns. They established ancestral temples, ancestral halls, altars, and sacrificial areas, and they offered sacrifices. They thereupon made the divisions for closeness and distance of kinship and for greater and smaller [amounts of land]. (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.5)

Just as land was divided according to hierarchical rank, so were ancestral sacrifices. As the text elaborates, the king was allowed to erect seven ancestral temples. Why would the number of ancestral temples matter? Because, according to the authors, those ghosts who received sacrifices were termed ancestors. With each passing generation, the final ancestor would be taken out of the sacrificial system—at which point the ancestor would revert to being a ghost:

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. At each he sacrificed monthly. The ancestral temples for the distant [ancestors] consisted of two tablets; sacrifices were offered seasonally, and then stopped. 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. For the altar and level area, when there was a prayer at them,

they made sacrifices. If there was no prayer, they stopped. When it was removed from the level area, they were named “ghosts.” (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.5)

In contrast to the king’s seven ancestral temples, the lords were allowed only five ancestral temples. As the text elaborates, the dead after the fifth generation were again termed “ghosts.” Continuing down the hierarchy, the nobles were allowed three, the officers two, and the petty officers one. The lowest strata of society were not allowed to sacrifice to the dead at all: “The lower offices and commoners got no ancestral temples; their dead were called ‘ghosts.’” (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.5).

The authors go on to elaborate the other dead humans who were to receive sacrifices as well, including figures who had done great services for humanity (and would therefore continue to receive sacrifices even after they were past the generational level at which such sacrifices would be maintained in the ancestral cult) and particular figures who died without descendants. Throughout, the concern of the authors is to emphasize the proper hierarchy set up by the sages for who should be allowed to perform which set of sacrifices.

The implication of the text is that these sacrifices were set up according to the dictates of a proper social hierarchy. Thus, if we simply return to following the sacrifices established by the ancient sages, we would also return to following a proper social hierarchy that should be underlying our state, economy, and family.

So what does the text argue? To begin with, the claim is clearly not that sacrifices were set up under divine guidelines. Indeed, they were not set up in response to the actions of divine powers (whether those be spirits or ancestors) at all. On the contrary, the argument is simply that there were certain elements in the cosmos (including everything from mountains to dead humans) that had features relevant to living humans. These elements themselves would appear to have been entirely indifferent to humans; their relevance was simply from the point of view of the living. It was the sages who decided to set up a sacrificial system in which certain powers in the natural world would be termed spirits and dead humans would be termed ancestors, and both would be sacrificed to accordingly. In other words, not only were sacrifices set up by humans for humans, but even the spirits and ancestors themselves were an *effect*, not a cause, of human ritual.

And the hierarchy of the sacrificial system was again a product of nothing other than what was deemed by human sages to be proper for humans. No argument is made, for example, that there is anything inherent in the powers of the cosmos that would determine whether a king or a lord would be the more appropriate sacrificer for a given spirit; the distinctions made between what spirits a ruler versus a lord should be allowed to sacrifice to were simply based upon the hierarchy deemed necessary for humans. Similarly, the text makes no claim that royal ancestors are inherently better than, or longer-lasting than those of lesser nobles; the argument of how

many ancestors a king as opposed to a lord or an officer should be allowed to sacrifice to was again simply made on the basis of the hierarchy deemed proper for humans.

The implication of this is that, if there were no humans defining natural powers as spirits and sacrificing to them, and if there were no humans defining particular dead humans as ancestors and sacrificing to them, then those spirits and ancestors, and the entire hierarchy that should exist amongst them, would not exist. There would simply be dead humans, mountains with resources, and the like. The text is thus explicitly arguing that the divine, at least in the ways it is defined (as spirits and ancestors) and in the hierarchy that we accept in our sacrifices, is a product of human ritual.

What are the implications of such a view? Radcliffe-Brown famously tried to read arguments like these as being precursors to functionalist analysis. Quoting from other chapters of the *Liji* as well as the *Xunzi* (which give arguments very similar to the ones we have been discussing), Radcliffe-Brown argues,

There is no doubt that in China, as elsewhere, it was thought that many or all of the religious rites were efficacious in the sense of averting evils and bringing blessings. It was believed that the seasons would not follow one another in due order unless the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, performed the established rites at the appropriate times. Even under the Republic a reluctant magistrate of a *hsien* may be compelled by public opinion to take the leading part in a ceremony to bring rain. But there developed among the scholars an attitude which might perhaps be called rationalistic or agnostic. For the most part the question of the efficacy of rites was not considered. What was thought important was the social function of the rites, i.e. their effects in producing and maintaining an orderly human society. (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, 158)

Radcliffe-Brown continues:

The view taken by this school of ancient philosophers was that religious rites have important social functions which are independent of any beliefs that may be held as to the efficacy of the rites. The rites give regulated expression to certain human feelings and sentiments and so kept these sentiments alive and active. In turn it was these sentiments which, by their control of or influence on the conduct of individuals, made possible the existence and continuance of an orderly social life. (Radcliffe-Brown 1965, 160)

Radcliffe-Brown thus wants to argue that the views under discussion oppose any belief in the efficacy of the rites and instead emphasize a rational, agnostic, and functional understanding of ritual—precisely like the view of ritual that Radcliffe-Brown himself was developing.

For Radcliffe-Brown, then, the central distinction is between the participants, who actually believe in the efficacy of the rites, and the analyst, who sees ritual in purely functional terms rather than belief. The analyst, in other words, unmask the beliefs concerning the rituals that the participants possess. For Radcliffe-Brown, the authors of these chapters would be in the same position as a contemporary social scientist: unmasking the superstitious beliefs of the people.

I would disagree with Radcliffe-Brown—both in his reading of the Chinese material and in his theoretical views on ritual. I turn first to the former issue, beginning with the notion of unmasking the beliefs of the people. The *Liji* is a text that would later be canonized as one of the Five Classics and would ultimately become a standard text in the education curriculum for all educated people in China. Moreover, as alluded to earlier, it would become the standard of ritual practice for the elites in medieval China, and for the populace as a whole beginning in the late imperial period. This is hardly an unmasking of participants' belief: it is a prescription for the practice of ritual, and one that proved to be extraordinarily successful.

Clearly there is something else going on here. The first step in unpacking the argument is to look at what the text is reacting against. According to Radcliffe-Brown, texts like the one under discussion give a proper functionalist response to the prevailing ritual practices of the day. As Radcliffe-Brown sees it, those prevailing practices were based upon a belief in the efficacy of the rites in bringing blessings, averting evil, and the like—a belief that texts like the *Liji* and *Xunzi* have rejected. I suspect that such an interpretation will need to be re-thought.

The chapter in question calls for a return to the forms of sacrifice prevalent during the Bronze Age. Although the authors were of course re-interpreting certain elements of those rituals, they also were quite faithful to the other elements. The prevailing view of ritual practice during the Bronze Age was indeed based upon the efficacy of ritual, but that efficacy was based upon the notion that ritual could, in a sense, humanize the divine world—it could transform capricious and potentially antagonistic divine forces into anthropomorphic deities that would (hopefully) act as ancestors on behalf of humanity. As David Keightley has argued, Shang sacrificial practice was aimed at “making ancestors” (Keightley 2004). The goal was thus to transform (as much as possible, anyway) the divine powers into an ancestral hierarchy that would hopefully function in support of the living. As I argued elsewhere:

The Shang sacrificial system was an attempt to domesticate these highly agonistic forces and place them within a hierarchy manipulable for the sake of human interests. . . . [S]acrificial practice in the Shang was aimed at a radical transformation of the divine world, a transformation undertaken precisely so that humanity could appropriate and domesticate nature for its purposes. Such an attempt to transform both

the divine and natural worlds does indeed involve an enormous investment in sacrificial action, but that investment emerged not from an assumption of harmonious collaboration between man and god; it emerged out of a sense of radical discontinuity and lack of harmony. (Puett 2002, 78)

The efficacy invoked in these practices is of a very particular type: the attempt to transform the divine world into a hierarchy modeled on the human realm, and thus to create a divine pantheon that would hopefully act on behalf of humanity:

The concern, in short, was to transform a capricious and potentially antagonistic spirit world into a hierarchical pantheon of ordered genealogical descent interested in its living descendants' welfare. (Puett 2002, 198)

If we compare practices of this sort with the text we have been discussing, one is at first struck with a crucial similarity. In both, the concern is to start with the hierarchy of the living and to create a world of divine powers based upon that same hierarchy. The basic difference between these practices and the position we have seen in the “*Ji fa*” is that the latter takes out the view that the divine forces are capricious. For the authors of the “*Ji fa*,” the cosmos is perhaps best described as indifferent: things exist, and sacrifices serve to define those things into a hierarchy serviceable for humanity. Gone, in other words, is the claim that the divine powers are potentially antagonistic to humans and in need of transformation through the sacrificial act. But the notion that the spirits and ancestors are the product, not the cause, of ritual is still very much in place. The divine is placed into and defined by a hierarchy useful for humanity. And also very much in place is the notion that human ritual is the source of order—or at least of the order that is useful for humans: were it not for these sacrifices, the hierarchy and order necessary for a proper human appropriation of the natural world would not exist.

But, at least as importantly, this is a view of ritual that operates much the same regardless of what the participants believe pre-exists the sacrifices. In other words, whether the participants believe it is an indifferent cosmos of natural forces or a cosmos filled with potentially antagonistic forces that really will be eating the sacrifices is irrelevant. Some participants may believe that capricious divine powers are really being transformed into benign ancestors, whereas others may not. Either way, the common belief across the board would be that it is the act of performing sacrifices that creates a proper hierarchy of ancestors, divinities, and living humans. Indeed, the chapters of the *Liji* themselves go back and forth on this issue: some chapters present the cosmos as being populated by natural forces, others present it as being governed by capricious spirits. As an example of the

latter, one can turn to the “Biao ji” 表記 chapter:

The Master said, “As for the sacrificial victims, ritual, and music being properly arranged and flourishing, this is the means by which there is no harm from the ghosts and spirits and no resentment from the hundred families.” (*Liji*, “Biao ji,” ICS, 151.33.27)

Here, one of the goals of the rituals is to pacify the ghosts and spirits. But what is interesting is that, although the vision of whether the cosmos is populated by natural forces or capricious spirits, the logic of sacrifice throughout the *Liji* is remarkably consistent: regardless of what existed before the sacrifices, the consequence of sacrifices is the creation of a hierarchy of ancestral and divine forces defined by living humans. Belief is crucial here, and belief in the efficacy of the rites is crucial as well. But the belief in what pre-existed the rituals is not the belief that is relevant. What is relevant is the belief that ritual is a product of humans: human sages created it, and the order of divine powers is thus a result of that creation.

If such a claim concerning the efficacy of rituals is not an unmasking of superstitious beliefs, then it will be necessary for us to explore in further depth the logic of sacrifice as articulated in these chapters. As we will see, many of the specific rituals will vary over the chapters, but a consistent logic will emerge. And it is one that is very telling for understanding aspects of sacrificial practice in early China.

The Temple and the Tomb

Let us turn to an alternate deployment of the terms “ghost” (*gui* 鬼) and “spirit” (*shen* 神), placed in an alternate narrative of the origin of sacrifice. The “Ji yi” 祭義 chapter includes a dialogue between Zai Wo and Confucius. Zai Wo begins by asking what ghosts and spirits are, and Confucius provides a lengthy explanation.

Zai Wo said: “I have heard the names ‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits,’ but I do not know what they mean.”

The Master said: “*Qi* is the flourishing of spirit; the earthly soul (*po* 魄) is the flourishing of the ghost. Combining the ghost and the spirit is the highest teaching.” (*Liji*, “Ji yi,” ICS, 126.25.24)

Confucius immediately defines ghosts and spirits as consisting of substances existing in a living human being: spirit consists of *qi*, and ghosts are made up of the earthly soul. At death, the two will naturally separate, and the goal of ritual is therefore to combine them again, although this time not in a human body. The explanation continues:

Everything that is born will die. When one dies, one returns to the ground. This was called the “ghost.” The bones and flesh wither below;

hidden, they become the earth of the fields. Their *qi* is sent out above; it becomes radiant brightness. According with the essence of things, instituting the pivot of action, [the sages] clearly named “ghosts” and “spirits,” taking them as a pattern for the black-haired people. The populace was thereby awed, and the myriad people thereby submitted. (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 126.25.25–27)

When a person dies, the material remains return to the earth, while the *qi* floats upward. If these natural processes are left alone, the remains of humans thus become part of the heavens and the earth, unrelated to humanity. Instead of allowing this to occur, the remains were instead termed “ghosts” and “spirits” respectively. Such a nomenclature, it was hoped, would help bring about the submission of the populace.

The naming of ghosts and spirits, however, was still not sufficient to create the society the sages desired, so the sages went on to create temples and ancestral halls:

The sages took this as still insufficient, so they constructed dwellings and houses, and set up temples and ancestral halls. They thereby differentiated closer and more distant kinship, and closer and farther removed in terms of descent. [The sages] taught the people to turn to the past and look back to the beginning, no longer forgetting where they came from. The populace submitted to this and therefore obeyed with greater urgency. (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 126.25.28)

The goal of creating temples and ancestral halls was to teach the people to remember the past. And for much the same reason, the sages went on to create sacrifices:

When these two ends were established, they responded with two rituals. They set up the morning service, burning fat and manifesting it with the radiance of [burning] southernwood. They thereby responded to the *qi*. This taught the populace to return to the beginning. They offered millet and rice, and served liver, lungs, head, and heart, presenting them and separating them into two bowls, and supplementing them with sacrificial wine. They thereby respond to the earthly soul (*po*). This taught the people to love one another, and taught superiors and inferiors to utilize their dispositions (*qing* 情).⁵ This was the utmost of ritual. (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 126.25.29)

The sages established two separate sacrifices for the substances that they had termed “spirits” and “ghosts.” For the former, they burned fat, allowing the smoke to rise up to the *qi* that had floated upward after the death of the person in question. By doing so, they focused the attention of the ritual participants on the past. Although the link here is not spelled out, it is presumably the same issues as we noted in the “*Ji fa*” chapter: the spirits are arranged in

a lineage hierarchy through the ancestral temples, so sacrifices to the spirits will focus attention on the ancestral line. The ghosts, on the contrary, are offered a full meal of delicacies. The goal of the ritual meal is to teach the participants a love for their kin.

The gentleman returns to antiquity and looks back to the beginning. He does not forget where he came from. He therefore directs his reverence, extends his dispositions, and exhausts himself in attending to affairs. He thereby responds to his kin and does not dare not to exert himself to the utmost. (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 126.25.30)

Thus, the remains of humans, instead of becoming simply a part of the heavens and earth—unrelated to living humans—are instead brought into a sacrificial cult that links them with living humans.

If this is true for humans in general, then there is a specific implication for the ruler. Instead of defining elements in the heavens as an ancestor, the ruler—as the Son of Heaven—defined Heaven itself as his father and sacrificed to it accordingly:

Therefore, in ancient times, the Son of Heaven maintained a thousand *mou* of fields; in a cap with red tails, he personally held the plough. The lords of the states maintained a hundred *mou* of fields; in caps with green tails, they personally held the ploughs. They thereby served Heaven, Earth, the mountains, streams, gods of the soil and grain, and the earliest forefathers. They thereby made sweet wine, cream, and arrayed vessels. They therefore took hold of them. This was the extremity of reverence. (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 126.25.31)

For the king, the sacrifices to powers in the heavens and earth are in fact sacrifices to Heaven and Earth themselves, which the ruler, as Son of Heaven, presents as his ancestors. As is stated elsewhere in the chapter: “Only the sage is able to sacrifice to god (*di*) and the filial son is able to sacrifice to his parents” (*Liji*, “*Ji yi*,” ICS, 124. 25.6). This is undoubtedly the same logic that underlies the reference to the royal sacrifices of old in the “*Ji fa*”:

With a roasted-meat burnt offering on the great altar, they sacrificed to Heaven; with a buried offering on the great mound, they sacrificed to Earth. (*Liji*, “*Ji fa*,” ICS, 122.24.2)

The goal of the sacrifices, therefore, was, as Confucius is reported to say at the beginning of the dialogue, to combine the elements of the heavens and of the earth with living humans. The opening creations of sacrifices, therefore, were aimed at taking those elements of dead humans that went to the ground and floated into the heavens, calling them “ghosts” and “spirits” respectively, and building a sacrificial practice around them. The latter became the basis of a lineage cult, and the former became the basis of a cult

to individual deceased figures. The two cults thus created proper lineage relations and familial dispositions among the living, and then defined the ruler as the Son of Heaven.

Just as the “Ji fa” chapter was building upon elements of earlier sacrificial practice to develop its arguments, the same is certainly true for the “Ji yi” chapter. The distinction between sacrifices at the temple and tomb was crucial in ancestral sacrifices in early China.⁶ But the goal of such sacrifices was somewhat different.

Sacrifices at the temple were indeed oriented toward creating a defined ancestral line, but sacrifices at the tomb were concerned much more with keeping the remains of the dead away from the living. Thus, the occupant of the tomb would be buried with objects that he enjoyed while alive—presumably to keep the occupant in the tomb happy. As Anna Seidel has demonstrated, the souls in the tombs would even be called upon not to return to the living (Seidel 1987). In short, the goal was to keep the soul removed from the world of living humans. There is also some evidence that there were hopes of the soul achieving a continued life or rebirth of sorts in a paradise (Loewe 1979; Seidel 1982).

The “Ji yi” chapter, however, shows no concern with any of this. While the discussion of temple sacrifices seems quite similar to actual sacrificial practice, the tomb sacrifices are quite distinct. Absent in the chapter is any concern with keeping the soul removed, or with the afterlife of the soul. Instead, the concern is with connecting the remains in the earth, along with those in the heavens, to the genealogical lines of the living—just as the ruler does at a higher level in connecting Heaven, Earth, and man.

Here again, then, we see a chapter building upon sacrificial practice, but doing so in order to make an argument for sacrifice as a means of creating a sense of genealogical continuity amongst otherwise disparate phenomena.

Feeding the Corpse

The mechanism by which offering food creates this social hierarchy is laid out in the “Ji tong” 祭統 chapter. One of the keys is that, when the deceased is to be offered sacrifice, the grandson serves as the impersonator of the deceased.⁷ This means that the son of the ruler acts as the ruler’s dead father, and that the ruler thus serves his son as he would serve his father:

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)

The serving of the father by the ruler is also an occasion to inculcate within the son proper hierarchical values. The father places himself in a subservient

position vis-à-vis his dead father, whom he thus presents as his ruler. During this ritual moment, the son, by serving as the impersonator of the grandfather, becomes the ruler of his father, and thus learns from his father the proper form of subservience to an elder.

And here again we see an overt emphasis in the text on marking off this ritual moment from mundane reality:

The ruler met the victim but did not meet the impersonator. This avoided impropriety. When the impersonator was outside the gates of the temple, then he was seen as a subject; when he was inside the temple, then he was fully the ruler. When the ruler was outside the gates of the temple, he was seen as the ruler; when he entered the gates of the temple, he was fully the subject, fully the son. Therefore by not going outside, he made clear the propriety of ruler and subject. (*Liji*, “*Ji tong*,” ICS, 131.26.13)

The ruler thus symbolically gives himself up to his deceased father, and then eats the leftovers after the ancestor has eaten. He thereby presents his power as an inheritance from his father. By having the son incarnate the grandfather, the son can be said to have the values of feeding the ancestor inculcated within him. But the reverse, of course, is equally true: the ritual plays out the fact that the ancestor is just a child, needing the food given by the father in order to survive. The real power, therefore, lies in the sacrificer, not in the recipient of the sacrifice: even if the overt posture of the ritual is the submission of the sacrificer to the ancestor (i.e., the father to the ancestor), the consequence of the ritual act is that the sacrificer is the one empowered by the sacrifice.

And for the ruler, this is taken to a higher extreme. We saw in the “*Ji yi*” chapter how the sacrificial logic that defined elements of the heavens and earth in ancestral and familial terms allowed the ruler to define himself as the Son of Heaven itself. The “*Ji tong*” chapter makes a comparable move.

In all cases, as for what Heaven generates and Earth grows, everything that could be offered was included, with the altars exhausting all things. Externally exhausting all things and internally exhausting one’s will: this is the mind of sacrificing. Therefore, the Son of Heaven personally ploughs the southern suburbs so as to fill the arrayed vessels. (*Liji*, “*Ji tong*,” ICS, 130.26.5)

If the sacrificer defines himself as the inheritor of what the ancestor had given him, then the ruler presents himself as the son of Heaven.

And the chapter works out the implications in the other way as well: if the ruler, after sacrifice, makes himself into the Son of Heaven, he also, by the same logic, makes himself into the father and mother of the people. The consequence of this is that all of the lower generations in the realm (all of the “sons and grandsons”) come to regard the ruler as the father and mother

of the people and grant him full reverence:

Therefore, if his power is flourishing, his intent will be deep. If his intent is deep, his propriety will be displayed. If his propriety is displayed, his sacrifices will be reverent. If his sacrifices are reverent, then none of the sons and grandsons within the borders will dare be irreverent. . . . If his power is slight his intent will be light, if he has doubts about his propriety, then, when seeking to sacrifice, he will not be able to be reverent when it is necessary to be so. If he is not reverent when sacrificing, how can he be taken as the father and mother of the people? (*Liji*, “*Ji tong*,” ICS, 133.26.22)

As long as the ruler is reverent when undertaking the sacrifices, those within his realm will be reverent as well and identify the ruler as their father and mother. The ruler is both the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people—not because, biologically, Heaven gave birth to the ruler or the ruler gave birth to the people, but because the logic of sacrifice creates these new relationships.

Making the Cosmos into a Family

Thus far, we traced how various chapters in the *Liji* have utilized and reinterpreted aspects of sacrificial practice to argue how the offering of food can build lines of genealogical descent among otherwise unrelated humans and phenomena. The full logic of such an argument is worked out in the “*Li yun*” 禮運 chapter. The chapter opens with a dialogue between Confucius and Yan Yan. Confucius is lamenting the decline that has occurred since antiquity, when what he calls the “Great Way” was in practice:

In the practice of the Great Way, all under Heaven was public. They selected the talented and capable. They spoke sincerely and cultivated peace. Therefore, people did not only treat their own kin as kin, and did not only treat their own sons as sons. (*Liji*, “*Li yun*,” ICS, 59.9.1)

In contrast, the contemporary period had lost this greatness:

Now, the Great Way has become obscure. All under Heaven is [divided into] families. Each treats only its own kin as kin, only their own sons as sons. (*Liji*, “*Li yun*,” ICS, 59.9.1)

Confucius goes on to explain how people of the day are selfish, concerned only with their own enrichment and empowerment. The basic distinction with which the authors open the chapter is thus between a world in which people think of only themselves and their families, versus a Great Way in which kinship relations are not restricted to one’s own kin.

Yan Yan then inquires as to how the Great Way was achieved in antiquity, and Confucius explains that it was developed through the creations of the sages. And food was the key:

Now, when rituals were first started, they began with drinking and eating. They roasted millet and slices of pork.⁸ They hollowed out the ground to hold liquids and drank with their hands; they used straw drumsticks and earthen drums. Even so, they were able to direct their reverence to the ghosts and spirits. (*Liji*, “Li yun,” ICS, 60.9.4)

The first rituals were based upon drinking and eating, and, despite their primitive state, they still allowed humans to direct reverence to the ghosts and spirits. But it was not until the sages invented fire, and therefore cooking, that the rituals fully became what they needed to be:

In ancient times, the former kings did not yet have dwellings and houses. In the winter they lived in caves, in the summer in nests. They did not yet know the transformations of fire. They ate the fruits of grasses and trees, and the meat of birds and animals. They drank their blood and ate their flesh and hides. (*Liji*, “Li yun,” ICS, 60.9.5)

The narrative continues:

The later sages arose. Only then were they able to utilize the advantages of fire. They worked metals and pulled clay, and they thereby made towers and houses with windows and doors. They thereby baked, roasted, boiled, and broiled. They made sweet wine and gruel. (*Liji*, “Li yun,” ICS, 60.9.6)

Once the techniques of cooking were created, the people were able to practice proper rituals to nourish the living and divine alike: “They thereby nourished the living and sent off the dead, and thereby served the ghosts, spirits, and High God” (*Liji*, “Li yun,” ICS, 60.9.6). In short, it was cooking that allowed humans to nourish their own and serve the divine powers: only by transforming the raw into cooked were humans able to produce the Great Way.

Confucius then describes how the rituals work. The key is that the rituals allow the ruler to extend kin relations to all of his people and to the divine powers as well. To begin with, as Confucius emphasizes, the ruler makes himself the “Son of Heaven” by sacrificing to Heaven and Earth: “Therefore the Son of Heaven sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, the lords of the states sacrifice to the altars of the land and grain” (*Liji*, “Li yun,” ICS, 61.9.10). Only the ruler can sacrifice to Heaven and Earth, for only he is allowed to set up kinship relations with these powers. And this is done, Confucius explains directly, in order to gain control of the realm: “Thus, the sage forms a triad with Heaven and Earth and connects with the ghosts and spirits so as to

control his rule" (*Liji*, "Li yun," ICS, 61.9.18). The way this works is that Heaven and Earth and the people are all worked into kinship relations:

Therefore, Heaven generates the seasons and the Earth generates materials. As for humans, fathers generate and teachers teach them. As for these four, the ruler thereby corrects and utilizes them. Thus, the ruler stands on the ground without error. (*Liji*, "Li yun," ICS, 61.9.18)

Heaven and Earth are natural processes, generating seasons and materials respectively, while human relations include those of father and teacher. The ruler combines these, presenting Heaven as father and teacher, and presenting himself as father and teacher of the people.

Accordingly, the ruler places himself in a supreme position. Even though he claims to take care of the people, they are in fact serving him:

Thus, the ruler is he who is brightened; it is not that he brightens others. The ruler is he who is nourished; it is not that he nourishes others. The ruler is he who is served; it is not that he serves others. (*Liji*, "Li yun," ICS, 61.9.19)

This is the same point emphasized in the "Ji tong": the ruler does not feed his underlings; instead, the food they receive from the ruler is symbolically presented as simply that leftover by the ruler, just as the portion the ruler eats is that leftover by the ancestor.

The consequence of this is that all under Heaven is forged into a single family. But it is done so covertly, by playing upon the dispositions, experiences, and sense of propriety that the people have within their own families:

Therefore, as for the sage bearing to take all under Heaven as one family and take the central states as one person, it is not something done overtly. He necessarily knows their dispositions, opens up their sense of propriety, clarifies what they feel to be advantageous, and apprehends what they feel to be calamitous. Only then is he capable of enacting it. (*Liji*, "Li yun," ICS, 62.9.22)

In other words, the ruler utilizes the basic dispositions of humans and through rituals creates a situation where everyone serves him: all of the world is one family, with the ruler himself as the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people, and all of the central states as a single person, embodied by himself.

The full argument of the chapter thus recapitulates the opening lines. The period of degeneration is one in which the rituals are not working—a world in which all under Heaven is divided into families that simply operate for themselves. After the invention of rituals by the sages, the entire state and cosmos is perceived to be a single family, with the ruler as the Son of Heaven and the father of the people.

Reverse Descent

The argument running through these chapters is that, through sacrifice, the sacrificer is able to create lines of descent that are clearly recognized as not being biologically based. The ancestral lines—including dead humans and elements of the larger cosmos—are thus defined by the living through the acts of offering food in sacrifice. And this also means, of course, that the hierarchy of ancestors changes as the hierarchy of the living changes. The logic of this is clear when we turn to the founding ruler of a dynasty. There is no claim that, for example, a given ruler was in fact born of Heaven rather than of human parents, or that the lineage of a given ruling dynasty has a closer biological link to Heaven than other lineages. On the contrary, the relations are always defined *ex post facto*—a ruler takes power and only then, through sacrifice, does he define his ancestral lineage as royal and does he define Heaven as his father. The authors thus describe the sacrifices after the Zhou conquest:

Muye was the great accomplishment of King Wu. After this accomplishment, he withdrew, made a burnt offering to the Highest God, prayed to the Earth Altar, and established the offering of libations at the house of Mu. . . . He retrospectively gave the title of king to Taiwang Danfu, King Jili, and King Wen Zhang. (*Liji*, “Da zhuan” ICS, 91.16.1)

Here we see a moment where the logic of the living defining the ancestral line played out at the highest political level. When King Wu defeated the Shang armies at Muye, he became the new ruler of all under Heaven. He thus gained the authority to sacrifice to the highest god (otherwise called Heaven), and his ancestors retrospectively were granted the royal title as well. Again, it is the actions of the living that define the ancestral hierarchy.

And what about the problem that, after these sacrifices, a ruler would have, in a sense, two fathers—a human father and Heaven? The text addresses this as well in a discussion of the nature of victims in Zhou sacrifice:

If the oxen for the god (*di*) is not felicitous, it is taken as the oxen for Hou Ji. The oxen for the god must stay in a pen for three months; the oxen for Hou Ji must simply be complete. This is the means to distinguish serving the spirits of Heaven and the ghosts of man. The root of the myriad things lies in Heaven, the root of humans lies in ancestors. This is why one becomes a counterpart to the god on high. (*Liji*, “Jiao te sheng,” ICS, 71.11.20)

Heaven is the root of the natural world, while ancestors are the root of humanity. For the Zhou clan, the highest ancestor was Hou Ji. According to the text, the Zhou ruler offered oxen to both Heaven (the god on high) and Hou Ji. The difference is that the oxen to be given to Heaven would be penned for

three months—a ritual separation that would mark it as distinct from the oxen to be offered to human ghosts. But the key is that the ruler is the sacrificer both to the human ghost deemed the ancestral founder and to Heaven. As such, he bridges the divide between them, making himself the descendant of both and thereby becoming a counterpart to Heaven. He is, therefore, both the Son of Heaven and the descendant of the defined ancestral line.

The Logic of Sacrifice in the *Liji*

The logic throughout these chapters is consistent. Without the sacrifices invented by human sages, the cosmos is at least indifferent, and perhaps governed by capricious spirits, and humans regard only members of their biological families as objects of concern. When people die, the energies that kept them alive float up to the heavens, and their souls settle in the earth—neither having a relationship with the living again. In short, the world without human sacrifice is one of discontinuity—families separated from others, humans separated from the rest of the cosmos, the living separated from the dead.

The sages of the past created sacrifices to change this. The basic goal of these sacrificial practices was to create a world of continuity in which all significant aspects of the larger cosmos—natural phenomena, spirits, and dissipated elements of dead humans—as well as living humans would be linked through hierarchical lines defined by the living ruler. Thus, the ruler would be defined as both the Son of Heaven and the father and mother of the people. And dead humans would be defined as ancestors to those alive, and the resulting lineages would be arranged hierarchically (the more important lineages being granted more ancestors), and all would be encompassed by the ruling lineage. In short, sacrifice created a world of continuity in which all of humanity and all of the cosmos were linked into ancestral lines defined by the living ruler.

To return again to a statement from the “Biao ji” quoted earlier:

The Master said, “As for the sacrificial victims, ritual, and music being properly arranged and flourishing, this is the means by which there is no harm from the ghosts and spirits and no resentment from the hundred families.” (*Liji*, “Biao ji,” ICS, 151.33.27)

Through sacrifices, the divine world and the hundred families are pacified, and the pacification is done even without creating resentment. The ideal is a set of sacrificial practices that would form the entire cosmos into a family of continuity, linking all of the disparate biological families, ghosts, and spirits into a single line of created descent.

The History of Sacrifice

So how are we to account for this argument concerning sacrifice? It is important to rule out immediately an explanation that would see such

a view as representing an assumption in the early period. Although the views outlined here would ultimately become highly influential, they were in the early period only one position among many.

To begin with, one should point out that the fundamental view here of sacrifice as having been invented by humans in order to create a hierarchy in the cosmic realm was hardly an accepted position across the board in the early period. The early Mohists, for example, famously argued the precise opposite, claiming that Heaven had created the hierarchy of the cosmos and the hierarchy among humans (Puett 2001, 51–56; Puett 2002, 101–04).

However, as we have seen repeatedly, the text is indeed building upon earlier sacrificial practice. We have already seen how the general framework of using sacrifice to transform the divine world into a pantheon of genealogical continuity is highly reminiscent of Shang and Western Zhou practice, and the authors of particular chapters are also building upon the practice of using the grandson as a personator for the deceased grandfather, and of distinguishing between sacrifices at the temple and the tomb. The claim of these texts to be calling for a return to Bronze Age practices is not completely false, although the practices were, of course, reinterpreted. So the crucial issue for us is to place this appropriation of earlier sacrificial practice into an historical context.

The chapters under consideration here were written in the Warring States and early Han. As seen, they argue for a return to a feudalistic form of governance and social hierarchy, presumably in opposition to the centralized forms of statecraft that were becoming increasingly dominant over this period.⁹ The authors make this argument through a description of a sacrificial system they claim was created by the ancient sages and should now be instituted again. By the latter part of the Western Han, several figures at court began supporting the arguments of the *Liji* in opposition to the forms of divine emperorship and imperial statecraft that had been developed during the reign of the First Emperor of Qin and consolidated during that of Emperor Wu of the Han.¹⁰ The sacrificial system put in place under Emperor Wu involved a divinization of the ruler, resulting in his ultimate ascension, and a strong symbolic claim for the personal control that the emperor should exercise over all sacrificial sites and the territories in which they were found. The *Liji* was strongly pushed by Han *ru* who opposed such a claim of divine emperorship and the forms of extreme centralized authority that it implied. At the end of the Western Han dynasty, when the empire was growing progressively weak because of imperial overreach, supporters of the *Liji* succeeded in convincing the imperial court to reject the sacrificial system that had been in place since the reign of Emperor Wu and replace it with one based upon the *Liji*. The sacrificial practices outlined in the *Liji* thereafter grew in importance over the course of the Eastern Han.

Ultimately, the sacrificial practices outlined in the *Liji* would prove to be a highly effective mode of organizing an empire—far more effective than the forms of divine emperorship emphasized in the Qin and early Han. Time and again throughout Chinese history, states would return to the *Liji*

system—most recently in the late imperial period. Tellingly, the system was appealed to precisely during those periods when centralized authority proved incapable of controlling local areas. In such situations, the sacrificial system outlined here became highly successful.

Conclusion

The goal of sacrifice in the *Liji* chapters is to transform all the participants through the offering of food. In terms of the recipients of sacrifice, ghosts are transformed into ancestors, capricious spirits and natural forces are transformed into hierarchically proper spirits, disparate biological families are transformed into a single created family. Similarly, the sacrificer is then transformed by his new relationship to these transformed recipients of the sacrifice: he gains a proper reverence for the ancestors, familial feelings toward biologically unrelated people, and the like. If the sacrificer is the ruler, his position of power is greatly enhanced, as he comes to be situated in the crucial position between humanity and the world of ancestral and divine powers—he comes to be seen as the father and mother of the people as well as the Son of Heaven. But note that he is not changed through the sacrifice in the sense of being released of his sins, or of being transformed into a divine being. He is rather changed in the sense of gaining familial feelings toward otherwise disparate phenomena (capricious spirits, phenomena in nature, biologically unrelated humans, and the remains of dead humans), and the recipients of his offerings are hopefully also transformed and thus come to view him in terms of these links of genealogical continuity as well.

In short, the exchange of food creates a new arrangement of the social, political, and cosmic worlds. Indeed, the “*Li yun*” chapter places the invention of cooking through fire as the key innovation that allowed humans to set up this system. Humans, by learning to cook, were able to set up a sacrificial system that humanized the world and transformed disparate phenomena into a hierarchy defined for human purposes.

Given the full argument of the material, Radcliffe-Brown’s attempt to read texts like these as functionalist to some extent misses the point. The text is not unmasking ritual as, in fact (i.e., against the beliefs of participants) functioning to maintain social cohesion. It is rather arguing for a notion of sacrifice as having a fundamental transformative efficacy. And the very things that make such an argument not quite fit the interpretation Radcliffe-Brown gives it also make it interesting. With a functionalist analysis of ritual—particularly religious ritual, one is always involved in unmasking a given set of practices as being in fact about something other than what the tradition itself claims. And here we have an instance where that unmasking is indeed incorrect: the text is making an argument for a constructionist vision of ritual, and it is doing so precisely by appealing to, not unmasking, beliefs in the efficacy of sacrificial practice. The act of sacrifice here creates a new world—a world that is clearly recognized as being a

human creation, not a naturally or biologically given reality. Sacrifice is presented as a human construction, and the resulting order of the social and cosmic realms is as well.

Notes

1. See Jordan (1972); Wolf (1974); Harrel (1974); Watson and Rawski (1988); Weller (1987); and Sangren (1987). I would like to express my gratitude to Roel Sterckx for his invaluable comments on this paper.
2. See the pioneering works of Seidel (1982, 1987); von Falkenhausen (1994); Brashier (1996); and Rawson (1999, 2000).
3. My understanding of sacrifice in China has been aided immeasurably by the excellent analyses in Wilson (2002); Boileau (1998–99); Zito (1997); and Company (1992).
4. Liji, “Ji fa,” Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series (hereafter cited as ICS), 123.24.9. My translations here and throughout have been aided greatly by those of James Legge (1885).
5. On the notion of *qing* in early China, see Puett (2004).
6. See the superb articles by Brashier (1996); Wu Hung (1988); and Yu Ying-Shih (1987).
7. Here too, the authors are building upon earlier sacrificial practices. See in particular Carr (1985).
8. Presumably from natural fires, since, as we see shortly, the domesticated use of fire had yet to be invented.
9. For an excellent discussion of the text, see Nylan (2001).
10. Here I summarize an argument developed in full in Puett (2002). For the late Western Han ritual reform in particular, see Loewe (1974) and Kern (2001). On the Han *nu*, see Nylan (1997, 1999).

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