

# Rethinking “Traditions”: Reading the Classics as Ritual

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## Abstract

How do generations of Chinese remain connected across history? How do the anthropological studies of religion help us to reconceptualize the realm of sociality and historicity? This paper argues that reading the classics is a ritual to bring together many heterogeneous traditions in a subjunctive historical community. In the Chinese context, reading is first done aloud in the presence of other people, in what can be broadly envisioned as a teacher-student relationship. Reading as such is rhythmic, public, and historical, by which both the deceased and the yet-to-be-born are brought together by readers' embodied acceptance of “sages.” Thus “traditions” in China could be discussed more in terms of orthopraxy than orthodoxy. This perspective of reading suggests one is capable of understanding by “doing” rather than by “thinking” alone; and reading activities serve not only to regenerate but also to create new relationships among and between contemporaries and their historical relatives.

## Keywords

Historical community – reading classics – ritual tradition

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## Ritual: Creating Subjunctive Worlds and Synchronizing Movements

Many global historians and anthropologists have been concerned with the problem of the coexistence of multiple modes of history, in which perspective the idea of "tradition" is particularly troublesome. The questions may be put in this way: given that there are many routes to many traditions in China and in many other places in the world, how does any community of people reconcile the different traditions and live together? How do we identify the way that common experiences are formed here and now, when that which each of us calls the past can be so different? And, as social analysts, how do we find a plane on which some or any shared future is theoretically possible?<sup>1</sup>

This paper suggests an approach to answering these questions that makes use of recent studies on the public dimension of rituals in religious studies and on the anthropology of religion. In a more differentiated, privatized, fragmented, and changing society, religion and ritual seem to have a capacity for creating and recreating bonds that both sustain the flux of change and bridge individualized temporalities.<sup>2</sup> The theoretical potential of this perspective is not only that religion and ritual offer a source of preexisting authority whose effects and conditions could be explained rather than invalidated.<sup>3</sup> In a way, rituals show us how a community stabilizes itself over time when the flows are

- 1 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); David A. Bell, "This Is What Happens When Historians Overuse the Idea of the Network," *New Republic*, October 25, 2013; Maurice Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present," *Man* 12 (1977); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Arif Dirlik, "Confucius in the Borderlands: Global Capitalism and the Reinvention of Confucianism," *Boundary 2* (1995); Keith Hart, "What Anthropologists Really Do," *Anthropology Today* 20, no. 1 (2004); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
- 2 Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Robert W. Hefner, "Religious Resurgence in Contemporary Asia: Southeast Asian Perspectives on Capitalism, the State, and the New Piety," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, no. 4 (2010); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Robert P. Weller, *Alternate Civilities: Democracy and Culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).
- 3 See Maurice Bloch, "Symbols, Song, Dance and Features of Articulation: Is Religion an Extreme Form of Traditional Authority?" *European Journal of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (1974); Richard Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

no longer homogeneous, as well as the possibility of a space in which heterogeneous time achieves synchronization. Or, as Seligman and colleagues express it concisely, rituals, by their performative and authoritative nature, construct a common subjunctive "as-if" world, thus generating a shared reality, "creat[ing] and re-creat[ing] a world of social convention and authority beyond the inner will of any individual."<sup>4</sup> As long as ritual practices remain central to given traditions, however "such traditions understand the world as fundamentally fractured and discontinuous," so there is space for synchronizing various entwined histories. Ritual theory suggests that it is by doing and feeling together, rather than believing and thinking together, that people gradually construct a historical "community of fate."<sup>5</sup>

The empirical example I use to illustrate the way in which rituals help construct a historical public is the ritual tradition of reading the classics in China. I consider the ritual of reading the classics a tradition not in terms of orthodoxy but in terms of orthopraxy.<sup>6</sup> The Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and many other traditions all stress reading the classics as a ritual; they share important formalistic characteristics at the level of practice, even though their choice of scripture, their intellectual principles, and the many concrete ways in which they read their scripture are not the same. In fact, even a casual observer would note much diversity in doctrine even within one such tradition. My point is that reading the classics constitutes a mode of action, in which knowing is embodied and implicated, more than a mode of knowing, by which action is necessitated. The former approach leads to the community in practice and the latter framework seeks community by precepts. Therefore while my case examination is based on reading Confucian classics, the ritual is not peculiar to the "Confucians" and does not preclude other traditions in China.<sup>7</sup> By considering reading the

4 Adam B. Seligman, Bennett Simon, Michael J. Puett, and Robert P. Weller, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11.

5 Ibid., 105.

6 While Bourdieu's concept of "habitus" has invited much criticism since its publication, especially regarding its emphasis on its un-reflexivity of given conduct, my usage of "orthopraxy" in this paper nonetheless shares this concern for plain but proper actions. Here it can be pointed out that the usefulness or effectiveness of "habits," which themselves are neutral, deserves further elaboration especially because both "good" and "bad" habits can be formed over time. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); see also Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), especially pages 128-152; 446-453.

7 This paper does not deal with debates regarding the difference between humanistic "classics" and religious "scriptures."

classics as a ritual tradition in practice—a sort of practical intuition—I try to explore how this Chinese example offers a way for us to think about how people cross temporal borders, first diachronically, and then synchronically. The diachronic aspect will bear more weight in this article; the synchronic aspect deserves more careful study, and I plan to discuss it in a future paper.

### Reading Confucian Classics as Ritual: Crossing Temporal Boundaries

This paper considers reading the classics as one of the ways in which many heterogeneous traditions come together for the Chinese. In other words, I argue that reading the classics in China constitutes a ritual action, in the sense that it creates a subjunctive space in which contemporaries are brought into a historical community. I certainly do not mean that those who read the classics will necessarily agree with what the text says. This is simply impossible, as generations of anthropologists devoted to fieldwork have informed us. Texts as “symbols are not in themselves the representation of ideas; their power of meaning arises in the conjunction of an image and the knowledge and experience you bring to it.”<sup>8</sup> The agreement lies not so much in the selection or meanings of the texts as in a minimalist common action: “we” all read.

The Chinese have lived with multiple interpretive traditions, and there is not a single text like a blank sheet of paper on which one message is automatically inscribed but not another. An interesting example is the endless disputes among the Confucians, Buddhists, and Daoists over constant appropriations and reinterpretations of “their” canons by the other parties. Even the Christian missionaries in the seventeenth century noted the flexibility of books and joined this collective activity of reinterpreting the Chinese popular classics.<sup>9</sup> I am not concerned with their respective arguments here. A practical consequence of these debates is that they have broadened the readership of a wide range of classics and enlarged the common discourse on every side. More importantly, such debates render reading the classics a preeminent and important activity for any respectable person regardless of her interpretive framework or level of understanding. Reading the classics is not limited to a

8 Fredrik Barth, *Balinese Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 332.

9 Jacques Gernet and Janet Lloyd, *China and the Christian Impact: A Conflict of Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7–16; Henrietta Harrison, *The Man Awakened from Dreams: One Man's Life in a North China Village, 1857–1942* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24–26.

"small group of elites." Literacy is important to the Chinese, but they never consider it a privilege exclusive to a closed group. Anyone who reads would read the classics (and not just because in imperial China one became literate only by reading them), and one who does not read worships the classics. This extends to the popular belief of worshipping written words; historically, the Chinese even built temples and pagodas for this purpose.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, what I mean by "historical community" does not refer primarily to the accumulation of interpretations and relevant knowledge that generations of people associate with given texts, even though this dimension is implied. The community's defining characteristic is people's willingness *to read what is written down and to read in specific manners*. They may agree or disagree with one another's interpretations, but their repeated reading activities create a common imaginative space for different walks of life. In this "as-if" space, in contrast to an "as-is" space, people living in later periods in history feel the presence and influence of earlier generations, and they, too, leave their mark for those yet to come. The more a classic is read, the livelier the space becomes. This enactive and performative aspect of reading the classics can be seen as a form of ritual, in line with Seligman and Weller's insight into the constitutive capacity of rituals.<sup>11</sup> In their recent book following up on their ritual theory, they write that ritual actions, by a series of iterated acts that are "not entirely encoded by the performer," generate a shared sense of empathy, or, more precisely, "a shared acquiescence to convention."<sup>12</sup>

10 The decline in this worship can be illustrated by an anecdote of Liu Dapeng, a local gentleman in the late Qing. He wrote in his diary, "And there were cigarette wrappers all over the ground with writing on them. So I collected them up and brought them home, following the ancient teaching that we should respect paper with writing on it. People today do not know this teaching, and actually laugh at me for being so unworldly." See Harrison, *The Man Awakened from Dreams*, 157. Nonetheless, worshipping written words constituted a crucial element in Chinese popular belief before the Chinese dominant culture of reading was challenged by a culture of speaking and oratory. My sense is that it still exists, but in indirect forms. The Chinese willingness of educational investment disproportional to their affordability may be the continuance of such belief. See also Andrew B. Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

11 It should be pointed out the efficacious/utilitarian aspect of rituals are not dealt with in this paper. See also note 6.

12 Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 24; Adam B. Seligman and Robert P. Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 93.

Although this paper does not attempt to relate reading the classics to religious behaviors (which are defined by intention), it understands Chinese society as lacking distinctive religious and secular spheres. Chinese people *do* religion “not only by praying and presenting offerings to the deities but by building temples, organizing and participating in temple festivals, sponsoring and watching local operas, making and buying incense and spirit paper money, bribing local state officials, networking with other temples and other institutions, fighting over temple leadership positions, and even planting trees and building schools.”<sup>13</sup> Adam Chau was describing the way in which people “enable the establishment of human-deity relations and interactions,” yet the actions he listed must sound striking to those who are not familiar with the Chinese spiritual landscape. I think the description is honest, if one becomes accustomed to less conventional paradigms of religiosity.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the presence of spirits and the deceased is much more diffuse and accessible in Chinese society than in others.<sup>15</sup> This sometimes leads to an insufficient appreciation of the subtleties of Chinese life.

Here it suffices to say that there is a unique subjunctive space in Chinese spiritual life. Reading the classics, especially the Confucian classics in imperial China, involves behaviors that constitute rituals like those practiced in many traditions, such as alternate modes of reading, learning by heart, burning incense before the altar of Confucius, and kowtowing. Studies of Confucian reading movements at the grassroots level particularly emphasize this ritual aspect.<sup>16</sup> The comprehensive bodily and sensuous experiences thus involved are believed to trigger self-transformation and transcendental unity and to facilitate integration of knowing and being. These auxiliary actions, with their formality, help to induce crucial commitment from the participants and engage them in a unique space.

In addition to these auxiliary aspects, reading the classics deals with reading directly. Reading is not simple. One needs a long period of training in order to become a skilled reader. The process has multiple levels and dimensions,

13 Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 2.

14 See also Robert P. Weller and Lizhu Fan, ed., *Jiangnan diqu de zongjiao yu gonggong shenghuo* 江南地区的宗教与公共生活 [*Religion and Public Life in Greater Jiangnan*] (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2015).

15 Francis L.K. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow: Kinship, Personality, and Social Mobility in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971); Ching-Kun Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

16 Sébastien Billioud and Joël Thoraval, “Jiaohua: The Confucian Revival in China as an Educative Project,” *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (2007): 4–20.

each of which has both nuanced and direct effects. However, a comprehensive examination of the Chinese pedagogy is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore I focus on three aspects that are crucial and have received less attention in the works of anthropology.

### Reading as a Public Event

When the learners read, they should keep their shoulders upright and their back straight. They take their time in reading; and they read it out moderately. Their heart is free and not haughty, taking in messages gradually. They reflect on their problems and learn things with their whole body.<sup>17</sup>

Conventional pedagogy in Chinese society calls for students to read the classics aloud. In contrast, in the English language, "reading" as an action points to visual and interior experiences that are private and silent. This reflects a gradual but decisive shift in Western civilization from reading as a public activity to a private one.<sup>18</sup> But in the Chinese language, *du* (讀), "to read," essentially triggers sound. In classical Chinese, reading also includes punctuating the text through the rhythm at which it is spoken aloud. As a result, when one reads, one necessarily reads out loud, stops, ponders, waits for a moment, and moves on, forming a rhythm. *Du* is a general word covering a range of specific verbs, including "to chant" (*yin*, 吟), "to sing" (*chang*, 唱), "to read aloud" (*song*, 誦), "to recite" (*bei*, 背), "to intone" (*yong*, 詠), "to exclaim" (*tan*, 嘆), and "to patter"

17 Zhu Xi, "Zhu zi yu lei 朱子語類 [Collected Sayings of Master Zhu]," 11:5, in *Zhu zi quan shu* 朱子全書 [Complete Works of Master Zhu], vol. 14, ed. Zhu Jieren et al. (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2002), 14: 334. Unless specified in the text, such as the quotation from the *Analects* translated by James Legge in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), I am responsible for all English translations from Chinese sources. Regarding citation format, it should be pointed out that "Zhu zi yu lei" is closer to scriptural passages and much easier (as well as by convention of Chinese scholarly community) to locate by book and chapter number. Therefore in addition to exact page number of the reference consulted, I cite the book number and chapter number, such as 11: 5.

18 Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Also Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).



(*nian*, 念).<sup>19</sup> Small children are always encouraged to read aloud; the habit is so engrained that a major task for educators dealing with teenagers is to teach them to read silently, so that they will not interrupt others in public. This vocal aspect has its roots in the Confucian tradition of reading as public ritual. As Zhu Xi said, "When it comes to the matter of reading books, one should read and should not be preoccupied by thinking. When one reads by the mouth, one's heart becomes free and available, where learning springs out naturally."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, the Chinese way of reading is highly vocalized (thus public). It is very important to note that to read aloud is not to read loudly. The focus is not on the volume but on forming rhythm. Reading has a formalistic character. There are many modes of reading: a teacher reading to students; a student reading or reciting to the teacher or others; collective or group reading; alternating reading (one reads a passage and then another continues it); a teacher reading or reciting line by line followed by students repeating line by line together; varying rhythms (e.g., emphasizing words and slowness), and so on.<sup>21</sup> The students do not even have to read the same text when they read aloud together in the same space. In discussing this pedagogy, Xu Jianshun picked out a passage worthy of examination. Lu Xun (1881-1936), a renowned modernist Chinese writer, remembering his childhood school life, wrote:

[The teacher called,] "Read!" Then, from a hundred throats came the voices of reading, just like a kettle on the boil. Some read "is virtue a thing remote I wish to be virtuous and lo virtue is at hand"; some read "laugh at people missing teeth, says the dog shows privy"; some read "first nine hiding dragons do not use"; and some read "rhetoric of soil under bud cross the above." The teacher read as well. In a while our voices went lower and lower; only the teacher was still reading aloud, "suave commander/ surprises all/ dripping alas/ shall not get drunk/ after a thousand cups!" I speculated this was an excellent article, because he always smiled, lifted his head, shaking gently, and bent farther and farther.<sup>22</sup>

19 Xu Jianshun 徐建順, "Yin song yu jiao yu 吟誦與教育 [Intonation and Education]," *Renmin jiaoyu* 人民教育 [People's Education] 23 (2009): 16.

20 Zhu Xi, "Zhu zi yu lei," 11: 5, in Zhu, *Zhu zi quan shu*, 334.

21 Billioud and Thoraval, "Jiaohua," 14; Xu, "Yin song yu jiao yu."

22 Lu Xun, "Cong bai cao yuan dao san wei shu wu 從百草園到三味書屋 [From Herbs Garden to Three Tastes School]," in *Lu Xun quan ji* 魯迅全集 [Complete Works of Lu Xun] (Beijing: People's Literature Press, 2005), 2: 290-291.



I did not add punctuation to the sentences read by the students and not only because I would like to be true to the essayist's original sketch. The Chinese language is composed of monosyllabic characters, constituting the elementary units of meaning; and classical Chinese does not come with ready punctuation. The characters run on and on in order to form a sentence; and conjunctions are far less useful in Chinese than in English. Therefore if one is capable of receiving a text properly (which is one extended meaning of "reading" in English), he should be able to read it aloud well, comprehending punctuation, tone, emphasis, and groupings of single characters. The students here were apparently less sophisticated readers than their teacher, who entered the subjunctive space created by his performative reading action.

More importantly, by reading aloud and by hearing the students, the teacher was not indulging in a private relationship between himself and the text-triggered subjunctive world. The nuanced point here is that the relationship is personal but not private. First, in Confucian pedagogy, the teacher's traditional duty is to assist the students in creating a personal relationship between individuals and the wider community behind and beyond a text. They do this by attending the reading performances of the students, recognizing their landmark progress (remember: "to read" includes a group of actions that I have listed), demonstrating his own way of reading (aloud) the passage, and suggesting further reading materials. Several different texts are mentioned in the above ethnographic vignette, including excerpts from *The Analects*, *Children's Knowledge Treasury*, *The Book of Changes*, and *Tribute of Yu*, the most abstruse passage in the most obscure *Book of Documents*. Not all of these are classical in the strict sense; for example, the *Children's Knowledge Treasury* was a popular book that was not compiled until the late fifteenth century. Nonetheless, they all point to a historical civilizational community in which anyone who tries to master reading is welcome to participate.

The shared subjunctive sociality comes into being in a somewhat chaotic scene of people reading together. Individuals—students and teachers alike—see, hear, effect, and respond to one another, while their reading activities also bring to life whoever may have read the same passages, through "my" breath and heartbeat. The personal willingness of the individuals is irrelevant in this unique ritual field of reading practice. The voices of the participants extend beyond their physical existence, forcing them to act upon one another. To a tranquil reader with a strong sense of privacy, such a ritual arena of reading may be disturbing. Yet this public effect lies at the heart of a ritual in which one recognizes others (rather than building walls against "the other") along with (instead of "other than") herself. The medium of the classical texts is no negligible matter. The temporal distance between the age of the text and the time

of the more contemporary readers helps establish a more or less independent status of the classics and the “as-if” world behind and beyond it. The old books evoke the presence of ancestors and spirits in classrooms visibly occupied only by living students and teachers. In a dynamic interaction between the readers and the spirits in the broad sense, facilitated by reading, one joins with a shared community across time and generations that is larger than one’s own interior life but yet not engulfing.

Chinese society today continues to provide space for this tradition of reading aloud, from kindergarten all the way to university (even including graduate school). In the United States, you would not expect to find individuals bringing Shakespeare’s sonnets or Thoreau’s essays to campus and reciting them aloud, unless they were preparing to mount a play. Even in that case, it would be considered more proper for these students to find a separate space for privacy, such as a backstage rehearsal room, a classroom with podium, or a café. Admittedly, few people will object to such behaviors openly as long as they are only occasional and do not intrude on others. Most observers tolerate such behavior without comment, as is the custom of politeness and privacy in American society. Reading and speaking in American culture tend to be two separate activities: one belonging to the private sphere, the other to the public.

Social sentiment regarding reading in China is quite different. Even a casual observer will find students around any campus reading aloud in the early morning. In the primary and middle schools, there is actually institutional support for this reading aloud, and morning reading is part of each school’s curriculum almost without exception. However, this is not a national or legal obligation. The students read in the classroom during the time slot arranged by schools; at other times, you find them in the aisles, in front of plants, around a lake, or under a tree. Reading can take place anywhere, preferably somewhere with sunshine.<sup>23</sup> It is not obligatory for college students to read aloud, yet morning reading remains one of the most common scenes on campus and the most common experience of university students in China. While the choice of reading materials in the modern educational system is wide, students prefer selections in the humanities and social sciences (from the *Mencius* to English essays and from Chinese history to abstract Western philosophy, such as the works of Kant) due to the convention of reading aloud. At least in the treatment of this

23 Regarding the morning activities in terms of a theory of humanistic “energy” (*qi*), see Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012). *Mencius* is particularly relevant here; see Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.

essay, this is a specifically Chinese convention, which I attribute to the ritual tradition of reading the classics.

### Reading that Elicits Empathy

We have touched upon the rhythmic aspect of reading the classics as ritual in the previous section, with regard to the way in which the forming of rhythm shows an understanding of the text. The art of it is not so much in the sounds themselves as in the particular understandings that make sounds meaningful. As a parallel, one could contemplate the different effects made by a four-year-old learning the keys on a piano and by a fine pianist playing her favorite polonaises by Chopin.

Indeed, to intone a passage publicly is quite a typical pedagogical method in teaching the Confucian classics. In remembering his teacher Aisin Gioro Yuyun, then known as Liu Yuyun, Edward Shaughnessy described the reading part of his teaching method in detail. Again, the scene is not limited to his individual account but reflects an important dimension of reading the classics in the Chinese tradition:

I still remember it clearly. He entered the living room wearing a long robe. His right hand was holding a thread-bound edition of *Lectures in Tao Te Ching*, and the left hand an incense stick. He said one must be devoted to the book when one read the classics; and one must burn incense for that sake. After he lit the incense, he put it in a tripod-shaped burner on the desk. The smoke was just between the two of us. Then he began to ask me if I had done any preparation. I answered affirmatively. He asked me to read the text. Once I finished reading "dao ke dao/ fei chang dao/ ming ke ming/ fei chang ming," teacher Yu asked me very loudly, "What does it mean?"

I replied, "I am sorry, teacher; I am not very sure about what it actually means."

He said, "You are not sure. Well, let me tell you. The meaning of 'Dao ke dao/ fei chang dao' is 'Dao—,'" his voice was sonorous and he stopped three seconds after he uttered it, "'Ke—,'" he read as if it was very long, "'Dao—,'" loudly, again, "'Fei—,'" another long and drawn-out word, "'Chang dao! Understand?"

"I am sorry, teacher; I am not clear yet."

"You are still not clear. Okay, let me tell you in the vernacular. It means 'Dao-ke-dao-fei-chang-dao,'" he spoke noticeably fast, "understand?"

"Sorry, teacher; it's somehow still unclear."

"Unclear. Fine. Let me read it to you again. The meaning of 'Dao-ke-dao' is 'Dao' (loudly) 'Ke' (stressing its falling-and-rising third tone) 'Dao' (emphasizing its falling tone); the meaning of 'Fei-chang-dao' is 'Fei-Chang' (connecting 'Fei' and 'Chang' together) 'Dao' (emphasizing the fourth tone again). Understand?"

We continued like this for more than ten minutes. All of a sudden, I felt as if I was getting it; it seemed the meaning of "Dao-ke-dao, fei-chang-dao" was all clear to me. . . . I continued reading. . . . In half a year we finished his *Lectures in Tao Te Ching*. I was asked to read every single sentence in every chapter to the teacher. After I finished reading, he would ask me to elaborate each sentence in my own words and explain it to me when I had questions. Occasionally he might make a note in the margin in his book and ask me to copy it in my own book.<sup>24</sup>

In this passage, instead of translating the classic texts read aloud into English equivalents as in the previous section, I preserve the Chinese pronunciations of individual characters. Shaughnessy and his teacher were reading the opening verses of the *Laozi*, indeed, a sentence quoted frequently in ordinary Chinese lives. It is worth noting the role of reading aloud, of uttering and hearing readings, in facilitating understanding on a substantial and not just a formalistic level. This absorption of meaning demands patience from both the teacher and the student, as the example shows: the teacher demonstrates how he himself practices reading and watches how his student works until the passage is understood; and the student also makes an effort to connect with the meanings behind and beyond these simple words. During this process, not only will mispronunciation be corrected by the teacher and other students but one also learns the connotation of the flow of words by feeling their very sensible auditory texture. Think of a fine piano teacher, strict in tempo, watching over her students as they play the instrument.

As in the account given by Shaughnessy, students are first introduced to the ritual of reading by listening to and watching it performed by teachers or other students who have already participated in a subjunctive community behind

24 Chang Hui-cheng 張輝誠, *Yu lao zhen jing shen* 毓老真精神 [True Spirit of Teacher Yu] (Taipei: INK Press, 2012), 110-111. As I confirmed with Professor Edward Shaughnessy via email, he wrote the passage in Chinese at the request of Chang, who was collecting memorial accounts from Teacher Yu's former students. I translated the account by Prof. Shaughnessy that was collected in Chang's book into English, and thank him for his suggestion on wording and kind permission for using his account here.

and beyond the text. The demonstration by experienced teachers in particular acquaints them with the rhythmic style of reading. When they perform the ritual themselves, the students imitate the pronunciation of words—a much easier way to grasp pronunciation than looking up words in dictionaries—read, form their own understanding, and read again. Such performances, along with the witness of one another, constitute a repetitive but positive feedback circle.

This mentorship relationship resembles the "community of practice" described by Jeffrey Samuels concerning Buddhist education for novices in Sri Lanka, which "entails a more active process of learning and more socially grounded manner of training."<sup>25</sup> Yet Samuels used the word "social" in its literal sense, as community of coevals. The community of practice constructed by reading activities in the Chinese tradition, however, is first and foremost a community over time and includes more dead than living readers. Such a community is fundamentally historical and thus distinguishes itself from religious communities, whose aspirations are essentially ahistorical. But it is not a "secular" community either. When readers of different ages punctuate, intone, and read the texts that have been read by their ancestors time and again, they necessarily engage in conversations with the ancients, in spite of their intangibility. An apt word for this community is "subjunctive," as Seligman and colleagues have used it consistently in their books to designate an "as-if" and "would-be" universe.<sup>26</sup> This points us to the third aspect of reading the classics as ritual, creating a shared temporal community over time: namely, the "as-if" presence of the sage.

### Reading as Subjunctive: the "as-if" Presence of the Sage

Pattberg has suggested that perhaps the Chinese term *shengren* (聖人) could stand on its own, as do Buddha or bodhisattvas in the Buddhist tradition, or ayatollahs and imams in the Islamic tradition. He listed thirty-six translations and argued that *shengren* is neither Greek "philosophers" nor Christian "holy men" or "saints." "Sage" in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, referring to "a profoundly wise man, esp. one who features in ancient history or legend" (*OED*) might be

25 Jeffrey Samuels, "Learning to Be Novices: Monastic Education and the Construction of Vocation," in *Attracting the Heart: Social Relations and the Aesthetics of Emotion in Sri Lankan Monastic Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 77.

26 Seligman and Weller, *Rethinking Pluralism*; Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*.

its closest rendering. Yet, as Pattberg pointed out, “*Shengren* is above philosophy and beyond religion.”<sup>27</sup>

Admittedly, it is feasible to articulate the transcendent in the Chinese tradition by soliciting a discourse of “world religions” and considering Christianity a key comparative reference.<sup>28</sup> There are also scholars who focus on an idea of “immanent transcendence” stemming from an Enlightenment legacy.<sup>29</sup> I, however, am concerned primarily with other approaches, for example, the route by way of “history.” In this approach, Chinese tradition is transcendent not in the sense of relating to an other-world in contrast to this-world, but by going beyond the differences between one human and another and one generation and another. The essence of Chinese sociality and sacrality is neither among the coevals nor between humans and gods, but is first and foremost expressed by constantly negotiated relations between generations, from the long deceased to the yet to-be-born.

Many historians regard the historical mindedness of the Chinese as simply looking into the past. It is true that there are “traditionalistic traditionalists,” to use a phrase from Levenson when drawing the significant distinction between “Confucianists” and “Confucians.”<sup>30</sup> Yet there are also innovations and innovators within a tradition, who aim to bring about hitherto unrealized potential implicated in one tradition, as Levenson also recognized. In other words, what is “tradition” is not a given but is to be accepted critically and developed and constructed conscientiously. For the Chinese, a term like *wanshi* (tens of thousands of generations to come) is not just hyperbole, but a valid and acceptable expression that makes imaginable sense; and this turns out to be highly culturally specific through comparative insights. This futuristic element of Confucian historicity is by no means mundane. As I have tried to argue in this paper, such a transcendent characteristic in a historical community over time is expressed and made possible by the ritual of reading the classics. The ritual

27 Thorsten Pattberg, *Shengren* (New York: LoD Press, 2011).

28 Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Weiming Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in Cultural China* (New Delhi: Center for Studies in Civilizations, 2010). Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

29 Shu-hsien Liu, “The Confucian Approach to the Problem of Transcendence and Immanence,” *Philosophy East and West* 22, no. 1 (1972).

30 Joseph Richmond Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 2: 16.

action of reading enables the living coevals to enter a lofty community beyond their immediate temporal experience.

An alert reader might have noticed my careless use of terms such as "transcendent," "religious," and "sacred." Such a reader should legitimately doubt the propriety and relevance of these terms in a discussion of historicity and temporality. After all, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, what is transcendent is inevitably beyond this world and out of the bounds of time and space. Even in discussions of the "Axial Age" in which the Chinese civilization is included, scholars, such as Tu Weiming and Robert Bellah, both following Karl Jasper, are devoted to the rise of the transcendent and reflect on the Chinese conception of "heaven," the idea of which is beyond temporal.<sup>31</sup> The problem is articulated by Herbert Fingarette in *Confucius, the Secular as Sacred*, published in 1972, where he comments on English commentators who try to "minimize to the irreducible, the magical claims in the Analects" because they "accept... an axiom in our times that the goal of direct action by incantation and ritual gesture cannot be taken as a serious possibility."<sup>32</sup> The sacrality of a historical community in the Chinese tradition could not be compared to Christian historiography with a fatalistic teleology, the modern discipline of the science of history, or even the ahistorical Buddhist tradition, which has been understood better in societies without distinctive Buddhist traditions.<sup>33</sup> But this recognition is not enough. For lack of better terms, my paper describes the transcendent quality of human relatedness embedded in the ritual of reading the classics as "subjunctive," an "as-if" possibility. Its necessary distinction from more common words, such as "imaginary" or "imagined" is that the "subjunctive" suggests more than a work of the mind or simply "lived reality," but is inalienable from the grammar of life.

In the ritual of reading the classics, the most crucial "as-if" presence is the sages or *shengren*. In the example of Shaughnessy's first class, the teacher burned incense before they read the classics and emphasized that "one must be devoted to the books." Indeed, here the reading experience is more about the people and ideals behind and beyond the book than about the book itself or objective knowledge. It is not until the modern revolution in the realm of

31 Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011); Tu, *The Global Significance of Concrete Humanity*.

32 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 6.

33 Cf. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand Against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).



education that people began to read for specialized and technical knowledge, for which purpose they would have found a teacher and established apprenticeship. In the Chinese tradition of learning, reading is necessarily about the people who make knowledge relevant to specific circumstances rather than about the acquisition of knowledge for its own sake. It is a cultivation practice that turns an immature student into a mature human being who shares the ideals and basis of a sage's community over time. This concern is expressed by the Confucians most consistently but is widely shared by other traditions.<sup>34</sup>

Conventionally, reading involves symbolic actions like kowtowing, which would look odd to today's readers with democratic sentiments. However, bearing in mind the invisible presence of earlier teachers and later teachers-to-be, kowtowing suggests a more equal relationship between coevals, as the standard of judgment turns out to be historical and futuristic. Not only do the students kneel and bow low enough to touch their heads to the ground before the their teacher, both sides kneel down and prostrate themselves before memorial tablets or portraits of earlier venerable teachers all the way back to Confucius. Both sides are obliged to acknowledge their deep respect for the "as-if" presence of all earlier teachers to whom they are indebted and to recognize their equal responsibility to continue the line to future generations. And, as Yue shows in his ethnography, such a recognized "as-if" presence of the deceased teachers could actually be used by students to regulate their living teachers and provide legitimacy for innovations.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps it is easier to understand such sages as exemplar figures embodying the efforts of self-perfection. As Tu writes, it is "not so much a state of attainment as a process of becoming,"<sup>36</sup> or an endless process of self-improvements. Confucius, a human example who existed in history, suggests the possibility of pursuing such ideals, even though he once said himself, "The sage and the man of perfect virtue—how dare I rank myself with them? It may simply be said of me, that I strive to become such without satiety, and teach others without

34 Again, this is not limited to Chinese traditions. Regarding the role that trust plays in what and how we know, see also Adam B. Seligman, "Trust and the Problem of Boundaries" (paper presented at the 18th ISA World Congress of Sociology, Japan, Yokohama, July 13-19, 2014).

35 Yue Yongyi 岳永逸, "Ke tou de ping deng: Sheng huo ceng mian de zu shi ye xin yang 磕頭的平等：生活層面的祖師爺信仰 [The Equality of Kowtow: Bodily Practices and Mentality of the Zushiye Belief]," in his *Ling yan, ke tou, chuan shuo: Min zhong xin yang de yin mian yu yang mian* 靈驗·磕頭·傳說：民眾信仰的陰面與陽面 [*Efficaciousness, Kowtow, Legend: The Double Facets of Popular Belief*] (Beijing: SDX Joint, 2010), 302-346.

36 Weiming Tu, "The Confucian Perception of Adulthood," *Daedalus* 105, no. 2 (1976): 109.

weariness."<sup>37</sup> Like the teachers before and after him, Confucius views himself consciously as a transmitter whose task is to "make sure that the humanity of the former sages always remains a felt presence in the world," a mission "to assure cultural continuity."<sup>38</sup>

Reading is a necessary reminder of such presence. When teachers read to students, they are demonstrating a way of reading empathetically beyond mere characters, meter, or rhythm—a way by which a reader is absorbed into a subjunctive world created by the activity of reading. There are the ancients who are concrete human examples of the sage ideal; there are the teachers as transmitters sitting or standing beside the students. The ideal of the sage as a possibility and orientation also points to the future, entailing continuous efforts by current students as well as subsequent generations long after them. Both individuals and the community as a whole try to match the examples of the deceased and try to improve so as to offer better examples for the yet-to-be-born. Defined by the common activity of reading, such a relationship is essentially a flexible one—an open invitation for anyone who would like to take it up.

## Conclusion

The ritual orientation of reading in China deals more with orthopraxy than orthodoxy, and this enables us to understand the ritual tradition of reading as less about a set of prescriptive doctrines than about a series of constructive practices. What is termed "tradition" here is more dynamic than static. Through reading the classics, among many other rituals, a tradition is formed and constructed exactly by inducing affirmation from later generations of the legacies of earlier generations. It sounds plain and simple, but the task is actually difficult. Note here that we are not just dealing with how knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another. That may be part of the question, but it is not the heart of it. The core is the question of how particular attitudes, especially of an affirmative sort, are able to be transmitted at all from generation to generation and how later generations can live at ease with the seemingly incompatible legacies that they may, all at the same time, inherit from earlier generations.

Before the modern period, Chinese history was not always peaceful—quite the opposite. Yet in the eyes of Western "historians" such as Hegel and Weber,

37 *Analects*, 7: 34, in Chan, *Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*.

38 Tu, "The Confucian Perception of Adulthood," 120.

the Chinese had achieved incredible historical stability or, perhaps, “ossification.” If this were true, where did this stabilizing force come from? Weber pointed out that the source was the ethos of Confucian literati shaping this conservative tendency.<sup>39</sup> But how was such an ethos transmitted during great social changes? Historical sociologists like Weber included traditional authority in their social analyses, yet they were more interested in using it as a comparative parameter than treating it in its own right. Here, I prefer to follow the path suggested by social historians such as Gombrich, who attempt to elaborate how the “forces of conservatism” work.<sup>40</sup>

As this paper tries to show, the forces of conservatism are not highly structured, nor are they manipulated carefully according to certain religious doctrines or by a particular social group—say, the Confucian literati. The semantic field opened up by the ritual of reading the classics is surprisingly rich and open to very different interpretations. The subjunctive community is possible specifically because it tolerates different interpretive frameworks. After all, it is the activity rather than doctrines that defines such a community with incredible historical depth. Even when it comes to the subjunctive, the possibilities are unusually open. Whoever reads or at least worships the classics is considered a member, who recognizes other members’ presences, including the deceased, the coevals, and the unborn. The realm is public, but different from the rational and reasoned public sphere that we might find in Habermasian cafés.<sup>41</sup> In this Chinese reading public, common opinion scrupulously examined and agreed on at an individual level is not necessary. Reading suffices as a value in itself. And to read properly, one goes beyond one’s individual existence and has to consider improving oneself by reading better and more. This is not primarily for the sake of knowledge but for the sake of participating in an ever larger and grander human community.

It is here that we come to the synchronic aspect of reading the classics as ritual. This is an aspect of reading that is of great interest but, because of space limitations, should be addressed in another paper. In the light of this ritual tradition, heterogeneous traditions and temporalities are not unconquerable; they could be tamed by ever-wider reading-the-classics activities. I believe that, in the future, one could pursue this line of thinking by examining historically how various traditions in imperial China crossed each other’s borders

39 Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

40 Gombrich, *Theravada Buddhism*, 9.

41 Also comparing the rational model of forming a public opinion, Chau made an interesting argument about an “agrarian public sphere” in rural China. It is worth examining how an “as-if” reading public may work in rural contexts. See also note 10.

by this ritual orientation of reading. One may pursue these lines of thinking while also examining cultural history in contemporary China, which has been unequivocally involved in complicated and multi-stranded world histories in our time. Particularly workable at an observational level, the ritual approach to reading enables us to investigate how a "historical community of fate" is not only imagined and enacted but also constantly reshaped and expanded. Its religious significance also helps us to rethink the place of "tradition" in our modern public world.

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