

Searching for Spirit : Shen and Sacrifice in Warring States and Han Philosophy and Ritual

Roel Sterckx

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Abstract

This paper examines the notion of *shen* in the context of early Chinese ritual and religion in practice. In ancient China significant conceptual parallels exist between the ways in which abstract notions such as *shen* "spirit" are interpreted by a philosophical tradition on the one hand, and their transformation in ritual and religious practice on the other. Following a discussion of attitudes towards the spirit world among the masters of philosophy in Warring States China, we examine sacrificial performance as a multimedia event that offered multiple routes of access to the spirits. Rather than addressing spirits as embodiments of a pre-existing order or pantheon, we argue that in early Chinese religion, sacrificial procedure was conceived of primarily as a progressive search or quest for spirit presence through performance. The latter was aimed at establishing a sensory bond between the ritual participants and spirits addressed.

摘要

Roel Sterckx

Résumé

A la recherche des Esprits. La question du sacrifice dans le rituel et la philosophie
à l'époque des Royaumes Combattants et des Han

Cet article situe et analyse la notion de *shen* dans le contexte rituel et les pratiques religieuses de Chine ancienne. On repère des parallèles entre le développement de cette notion dans le discours philosophique de l'Antiquité et sa transformation dans les pratiques religieuses, sacrificielles au premier chef. Après avoir passé en revue différentes attitudes-types des maîtres philosophes vis-à-vis du monde des Esprits, nous portons notre attention sur les modalités d'exécution du sacrifice, qui font apparaître ce dernier comme une sorte d'événement multimédia offrant une pluralité de voies pour accéder aux Esprits. Force est de constater que l'on ne s'adressait pas aux Esprits, mânes et divinités comme à des entités prédéfinies ordonnées en un panthéon : nous tentons de montrer au contraire que dans la religion chinoise ancienne, les sacrifices étaient conçus tout d'abord comme une quête et une enquête sur les Esprits par le truchement des procédures déployées à cette occasion. De telles procédures se donnaient pour fin d'établir un contact entre les participants de la cérémonie rituelle et les Esprits sollicités, par des voies multiples et toujours senties comme incertaines.

Searching for Spirit: *Shen* and Sacrifice in Warring States and Han Philosophy and Ritual*

Roel Sterckx

Disrobed of its temporal and authorial connotations the concept of *shen* presents itself as the Chinese equivalent to Western notions of the “numinous” and its many incarnations in cognate terms such as “spirit”, “divinity”, “spirit power”, “influence”, etc. In early China, as today, *shen* covers a semantic field ranging from abstract and ephemeral spiritual influences, to sages and enlightened human beings, to anthropomorphised deities and ancestors, or monsters and other ghostly denizens residing in mountains, lakes and forests.¹ Its etymology suggests that the graph originally may have represented a force or action involving the powers of nature (e.g. lightning, thunder), the idea of an unfathomable entity that extends beyond the human world, or a force transcending the regularities of the natural world.²

The polysemy of the term *shen* necessitates a careful contextual reading. Authors and texts frequently use the term in different ways to serve different purposes. Both ancient and modern commentators have, on occasions, overlooked the nuances associated with its use.³ On the other hand, universal definitions of *shen* fail to acknowledge its semantic elasticity and inherent opaqueness. One might argue that some of its inherent aura derives from the fact that it escapes fixed definition. It is often unrewarding, as a matter of principle, to set the term *shen* itself apart from the various binomes and semantic combinations in which it occurs such as there are: *gui shen* “ghosts and spirits”, *shen qi* “spirits of heaven and earth”, *shen ming* “spiritual luminescence”, *ming shen* “bright spirits”, *jing shen* “refined spirit”, *shen ling* “spirit power”, etc. Rules of grammar and syntax may assist the reader in rendering *shen* with an approximate translation: it commonly occurs as a stative verb (adjective) in literary Chinese, whereas its counterpart *gui* most often represents a nominal referent such as “ghost”, “contracting energy”, “spirit of the departed” or “demon”. Yet as soon as grammar appears to bring lexical clarity, one is sure to be confronted with exceptions and anomalies

both within one text or passage and across a larger corpus of writings. Furthermore authors play on these terms' multiple meanings and functions in philosophical puns and lexical definitions. Take for instance the following passage in a work attributed to the legalist philosopher Han Fei (d. 233 BCE), quoting from chapter sixty in the received version of the *Daodejing*:

Therefore it is said: "When one rules the world by means of the Dao, ghosts will not *exert their spirit power* (*qi gui bu shen*)." People of an orderly era and *ghosts and spirits* do not harm each other (*yu guishen bu xiang hai*). Thus it is said: "It is not the case that their ghosts have no spirit power, it is just that this spirit power does not harm [other] people (*fei qi gui bu shenye, qi shen bu shang ren ye*)."⁴

It goes without saying that passages such as this, and most notably their reference to the *Daodejing*, have been the subject of commentarial and exegetical scholarship for centuries and will no doubt continue to spark alternative readings.⁵ Yet, apart from the issue of translation, it is noteworthy that implied in this passage is the idea that the possession of spirit-like power does not necessarily coincide with being a spirit. The spirit world in ancient China rarely operated in a realm detached from the human world. Ancestors and demonic agencies respond to events in the human world. Likewise the potential to exert spirit-like powers was not solely reserved to ghosts and spirits; such powers could also be appropriated by humans, most notably sages, who, by extension, were associated with divinity, perspicacity and the ability to comprehend the changes and transformations that befall human fate, the natural world, and the cosmos at large.

Most philosophers and ritual specialists in early China were outspoken on the attitudes humans were to adopt toward the spiritual, either in its abstract or anthropomorphised guise. Yet this preoccupation with the spirit world did not translate itself into a scholastic tradition that sought to dissect key concepts such as *gui* and *shen* into theologically clear and distinct entities. Such terms are used interchangeably to denote nature deities, ancestral spirits or both, and no canonical authority has restricted the attribution of one meaning over the other.⁶ Just as Judeo-Christian theology attempted to mould the concept of God into a universally recognisable idea and image, so the notion of *shen* and its cognates often remains elusive to circumscribed definitions or a permanent identity in early Chinese texts. Yet whereas the Judeo-Christian tradition is marked by protracted polemics over the precise definition of its supreme spirit(s) and divine power, the Chinese in pre-Buddhist China were less troubled by ontological uncertainties and, instead, more preoccupied with the problem of how to deal with the spirit world in practice.

To be sure, intellectual pragmatism is present, in more or less developed forms, in all philosophical and religious traditions. However, most accounts of early Chinese intellectual history and philosophy tend to pigeonhole the discussion of key concepts such as *shen* by limiting their analysis either within the framework of classical Chinese philosophy or, alternatively, by attempting to assign distinct meanings to these concepts within the context of religion, mythology or even folklore. I remain unconvinced of the value of dichotomizing so-called philosophical and religious usages of terms such as *shen* as they cannot easily be assigned to either a philosophical vocabulary or, alternatively, to the language of religious practice. To label such concepts as *either* philosophical *or* religious also obscures underlying commonalities that make them potent in both abstract philosophical debate as well as practical ritual discourse. In ancient China, significant conceptual parallels exist between the ways in which abstract notions such as *shen* are treated by a philosophical tradition on the one hand, and their transformation in ritual and religious practice on the other.

***Shen* and the Masters**

In order to locate early Chinese attitudes towards the spirit world in their ritual context, it is useful to review their status in the works of the protagonists of Warring States thought. Confucius (551-479 BCE), whose assumed aporia about the spirit world is alluded to several times in the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), is reticent to engage in analytical discourse on the existence of ghosts and spirits. He “does not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly chaos or spirits” (7.21), defines wisdom as an attitude in which one “respects spirits but keeps them at a distance” (6.22), and admonishes his disciples not to be distracted by the service to spirits in the afterlife but instead concentrate on life in this world (11.12). Generations of scholars, from *les philosophes* in the 17th and 18th centuries to Marxist-Leninist historiography in the 20th century, have quoted these statements, uncovering in Confucius an ally as a self-proclaimed agnostic.⁷ Yet nothing could be further from the truth than to claim that Confucius was indifferent to the spirit world at large. Ancestral spirits are a cornerstone in Confucius’ moral program, which requires living descendants to perpetuate care and respect for the spirits of the deceased through sacrifice (*Analects* 2.24, 8.21). To understand the — often whimsical — nature of spirits, Confucius insists that one should be prepared to deal with them as if they are a genuine, yet not easily identifiable, presence in human life.⁸ Spirits ought to be the recipient of sacrifices “as if they are present (*ji shen ru shen zai*)” (*Analects*, 3.12). This caveat to serve spirits “as if they are present”

reveals an important feature of early Chinese religion. The passage suggests that, given the intangible and unfathomable nature of the spirit world, humans should aspire to obtain cosmic security by investing in those modes and methods of spirit communication that remain firmly within their own control.⁹ Human agency, guided by sacrificial ritual, occupies a central role in establishing contact with the spirits and manipulating the extra-mundane world to the benefit of human life. In Confucius's case, the sacrificial act in itself enables the worshipper to efface doubts about the existential efficacy of the spirits. To placate the spirits and find mental solace with them, the question of their very existence needs to be left in the middle. The authority of the spirit world is thus reinforced by the ritualist's self-acclaimed uncertainty about their very existence or presence near the venue where they are invoked, appeased, or exorcised. In essence, Confucius's admonition "to sacrifice to the spirits as if they are present" is another version of what historians and anthropologists of religion have called the "silent trade" paradigm of gifts and ritual gestures; that is, to remedy for the impossibility of having direct contact with spirits and send up gifts directly to the spirit world, the supplicant leaves offerings in a dedicated space following a temporal sequence of ritual gestures in the hope that the spirits may descend, collect their due and reciprocate. The unclear and diffuse nature of the spirit world necessitates the ritualist to construct or invent their presence either ideologically, in practice, or both.¹⁰ I will elaborate on how this mechanism manifests itself in early Chinese sacrificial religion in the second part of this paper.

Inducing the spirits to respond and share in the ritual space of the worshipper is not self-evident. As Walter Burkert puts it, "the commerce with the divine is executed by formulas and symbolism that, from a distanced view, may come close to tricks."¹¹ To be able to do so, the worshipper is required to engage in techniques in which he or she imagines, reflects on (*si*), recalls and visualizes the ancestors through the performative act of a sacrificial rite in which food offerings, liturgy and music forge a sensory bond between the living and the departed. Offering sacrifices does not imply affirming one's emotional or familial bond to a *pre-existing* spirit landscape where each ancestor or spirit occupies a fixed and pre-determined place. Instead the sacrificial ritual itself provides the performative tool that enables the worshipper to make the spirits manifest themselves in varying degrees of proximity. Such rites include remembrance through text, song and dance, and require from the performer an attitude of utmost mental sincerity and ceremonial correctness in the execution of ritual procedure. Just as for the individual spiritual enlightenment might be achieved progressively through a

program of moral self-cultivation, for the ritualist inducing a spirit or spirits to manifest themselves depends on the sacrificer's ritual efficiency. And since sacrificial ritual presents itself as a medium that can be manipulated by human officiants, the performance of the rite itself and the mental sincerity that accompanies the procedures become the quintessence of moral action. To quote a legendary advisor to the Shang king: "Ghosts and spirits do not always appreciate (*xiang*) sacrifices; they only accept sacrifices offered by those who are sincere (*ke cheng*)."¹² Indeed a lack of virtue might even result in the spirits vomiting out the fragrant offerings.¹³

The impenetrability of the realm of *shen* is acknowledged by Confucius's follower Mencius (Mengzi; 4th century BCE). For Mencius, *shen* is a force that transcends the reaches of human sagehood: "what cannot be known despite the fact that one is a sage (*sheng*) is called *shen*."¹⁴ Xunzi (ca. 310-211 BCE) adopts a more cosmic view and locates *shen* within the bounds of human sagehood. He conceives of *shen* as a spirit-like power that transforms the world into a harmonious order through the efficiency of its ruler who is able to govern without apparent effort. A notion of order and hierarchy, both social and cosmic, underlies Xunzi's use of *shen*: "I say that the completely good and thoroughly ordered are called *shen*."¹⁵ And hence Xunzi speaks of a "Great Divine Order" (*Da shen*), the ideal of a peaceful world in which all social classes pursue their proper function and in which material resources from across all regions are accessible and put to use for the benefit of all.¹⁶

In a sense, Xunzi here echoes perceptions of *shen* as they appear in Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, some chapters in the *Guanzi*, or, later, the *Huainanzi*. There, *shen* and its cognate concepts are presented in a more metaphysical, transcendent and abstract capacity. *Shen* represents a force, a cosmic energy underlying all existence. It corresponds to the miraculous or mysterious nature of all that exists or, alternatively, it is used to denote the spiritual dimension or counterpart of one's physical or bodily existence. Hence, the *Zhuangzi* speaks of *shen* as a spiritual energy that enables one's bodily form (*xing*) to remain healthy and intact.¹⁷ *Shen* represents a force that enables a more refined or enlightened sense of existence, a purified cosmic energy that can be invited to lodge itself within the body. The term *gui shen*, in addition to preserving its original meaning of "ghosts and spirits", also occurs in these texts to describe the contracting and expanding phases of all that exists, similar to the logic of *yin* and *yang*. The *Guanzi* transforms the notion of a personified ancestral *shen* into an invisible force of vital energy. Its "Nei ye" (Inner Workings) chapter claims that the very same force that endows creatures with divine powers is not ephemeral and transcendent but accessible to humans in the form of a spiritual energy, provided that one

adheres to a strict regimen of physical and mental self-cultivation. The religious notion of *shen* as a spiritual being is extended into a supreme spiritual force enhancing the adept's sensory powers and energy. And just as sacrificial offerings serve to appease or feed ancestral spirits, so techniques of self-cultivation (breathing exercises, gymnastics, sexual techniques, diet, meditation, etc.) are aimed at attracting and facilitating spiritual energy to lodge itself within the body of the adept.¹⁸

Whereas for Confucius the actual existence of "spirits as spirits" was met with scepticism and disbelief, other intellectual lineages such as the followers of Mozi (ca. 480-390 BCE) conceived of the spirit world as being conscious and prescient of human actions: "Now, if we could persuade the people under Heaven to believe that ghosts and spirits are capable of rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked, then how could there ever be disorder in the world?"¹⁹ For the Mohists respect for the spirit world was not predicated by the supposition "that they might be present" but by the certitude that spirits were real and present and could avenge the living if humans failed to propitiate and appease them.

The "Ming gui" (Explaining Ghosts) chapter in the *Mozi* offers the most sustained defence of the existence of anthropomorphised spirits in Warring States China. Mozi holds that people's own witness accounts of spirit activity ought to be taken as proof of their existence. Historical precedent and chronicled encounters with the spirits of the past should be adduced to confirm "what the multitudes claim to have seen and heard". Finally Mozi argues that legends surrounding the sage-kings of the distant past that acclaim authority beyond the written word reinforce the existence of a spirit world that is knowledgeable of human affairs.

Many of the examples of spirit encounters Mozi singles out for comment do however not deal with lofty moral arguments on human conduct. Instead they are straightforward episodes in which ghosts and spirits avenge themselves on historical personalities. Several concern incidents that occur during the actual sacrificial procedure, that liminal juncture in time and space where humans and spirits could meet: a shaman appears in front of the sacrificial officiant reprimanding him that "the sacrificial jades are not of the proper size, the sacrificial wine and millet are not pure and clean, the animal victims fail to be spotless and fully fattened, and the seasonal sacrifices are not performed at the proper time"²⁰; a sacrificial sheep rises up during an oath to butt and break the legs of one of the conjurors who is subsequently struck dead by the spirit of the altar as he failed to be sincere while swearing an oath.²¹ It is clear that, throughout, practical shortcomings during sacrificial occasions make up a great deal of Mozi's proof, as people fell short from the perfect model of sacrificial provision set up in antiquity:

In the time of Yu and the sage-kings of the Xia, Shang and Zhou, on the first day that they established their states and set up their capitals, they invariably selected the most perfectly aligned sacrificial altar (*zheng tan*) in the capital to serve as their ancestral temple. They always chose the finest and most luxurious trees to erect near the altar of the soil. They invariably selected the most kind, filial, upright and good among the elders of their states to act as priests at their sacrifices. They always selected the most plump, physically perfect and properly coloured among the six domestic animals as their sacrificial victims and ensured that the jade tablets and insignia were of the appropriate material and size. They always chose the most fragrant and ripened of the five grains in order to make their sacrificial wine and cakes, and therefore the quality of these offerings would vary with the abundance of each harvest. In these ways, when the ancient sage-kings ruled the world, they invariably put ghosts and spirits ahead of the people.²²

Noteworthy in Mozi's analysis is that his arguments in favour of the existence of ghosts and spirits in the context of sacrifice are frequently put *ex negativo*: the spirits only manifest themselves in response to imperfection, moral deficit or practical and material shortcomings. While overall there can be little doubt that Mozi takes the existence of ghosts and spirits as an accomplished fact, in one passage, quoted below, some doubt is cast on the predictability of such a moral pantheon by offering a sociological alternative. Mozi states that, even if sacrifice would not prove to be an efficient way of communicating with the spirits, at least such rites create social bonds amongst the performers. So even if the actual existence of ghosts and spirits is subject to occasional speculation and imagination, the social interaction they invite among the worshippers participating in ritual sacrifice remains a certainty and justifies the acceptance of their purposeful existence. Mozi's utilitarian analysis thus condones sacrificial rituals for the benefits they bring to a community:

If it were the case that ghosts and spirits do not really exist, then we would only be wasting resources of wine and millet in offering sacrifices. But although we would be spending these resources, we would not simply be pouring wine into a ditch or gully or throwing millet away. Clan members and people living out in the villages and towns all have an opportunity to drink the sacrificial wine and savour the offerings. So even if ghosts and spirits do not really exist, these offerings would still be a means for welcoming and gathering relatives and promoting friendship among people living out in the villages and towns.²³

And here theoretical conviction gives way to pragmatism reminiscent of Confucius' exhortation to entreat the spirits as if they were present: spirits are what spirits do. The ontological question as to whether the spirit world exists is abandoned to make place for a perception of the numinous in which the verification of a spirit's existence and the actual ritual sacrifice addressing

them are one and the same process. Scepticism as to what constitutes actual spirit power is allayed by the efficiency with which ritual procedure manages to serve and control them.

So both Confucius, who is reticent to contemplate the existence of extra-ancestral spirits, and Mozi, who is adamant that they are omnipresent and conscious of human affairs, insist on the correct performance of sacrificial rituals. It is as if the spirit world only presents itself as an existential concern through the medium of the sacrificial rituals devoted to them. Judging from this selection of comments, early Chinese sensitivities toward the spirit world can not be understood if one isolates the materiality of ritual performance and sacrifice as a mere means to an end or an intellectually more inchoate stage toward spiritual illumination. Instead it is the apparatus of sacrificial ritual itself that shapes, creates, invents and re-invents the spirit world. To deal with the spiritual therefore does not consist of simply recognising that spirit powers are omnipresent or permanently sanctioning the world of the living. Rather, it means *creating* the spirits' presence through sacrificial ritual. Without ritual enactment spirits might not even manifest themselves. It is this pragmatic theology that underlies debates on the spirit world in early China. The crux is not whether the spirit world controls human actions or whether humans construct a fictitious spirit hierarchy that enables them to legitimise or pardon their actions. At the heart of Warring States and Han polemics on the spirit world lies the question whether or not the sanctioning voice from the spirit world should be invited and invoked at all and, if so, what ritual tools and procedures were most suitable to facilitate this artificial consultation. The power of sacrificial ritual thus revolved around its ambiguous potential of both facilitating direct communication with the spirit world while, at the same time, enabling ritual participants to keep the spirit world at bay.

Both those authors claiming to grasp the intricate workings of the spirit world, and those admitting that such knowledge is unattainable, link the spirit world to their respective cosmic, moral, or social views of the world. They invariably do so by attempting to describe *shen* or its cognate concepts in definitions that aspire to some degree of universality (the standard formula in literary Chinese being: such-and-such [*zhi wei shen ye*] "is what is called *shen*"). Yet whereas most masters of philosophy profess to possess some kind of knowledge of *shen*, they are equally adamant that having such knowledge does not imply that one fathoms and controls the deepest meaning or workings of the spirit world. Claims to theoretical knowledge among the philosophers were not always congruent with the performative awareness of ghosts and spirits in the context of ritual.²⁴

Sacrifice

Despite claims by some philosophers that the actions of the spirit world were predictable and counterclaims by others emphasising the spirits' capricious and unpredictable nature, the power and authority of sacrificial ritual itself originated from a sense of apprehension that any ritual, liturgy or sequence of offerings contained within itself the potential of failing to establish contact with the spirit world. Sacrificial rituals in early China were organised on a principle of probability; that is, the sacrificial procedure was made up of an ensemble of ritual actions and offerings presented in variable sequences and combinations in the hope that one or several moments among these orchestrated performances would be successful in influencing or appeasing the spirits. Thus a sense of reverence generated by sacrificial performance was partly informed by the idea that the entire procedure could fail in achieving its most essential aim: establishing contact with the spirits or "making the spirits descend (*jiang shen*)".²⁵

Sacrificial rituals therefore were multimedia events that offered multiple potential routes of access to the spirit world. The sacrificial procedure involved all human senses in an amalgam of music, dance, fragrance and visual spectacle. The sacrificial space represented a symbolical arena to which spirits were to be lured by sensory means: the officiant or priest enters the sacrificial space, where, in full ostentation, offerings of flesh, blood, vegetable and boiled offerings are presented.²⁶ In this sanctified space and among its actors, the world in its totality was represented: animal and vegetable, humans and spirits, living descendants and ancestors, elders and younger members of clan and lineage. The offerings are sanctified not so much because they have been processed, slaughtered and prepared according to ritual precept but because they might, when presented correctly, be consumed. Only the consummate offering, the offering that establishes sensory contact with the spirits, ultimately acquires the status of a numinous gift. To promote the efficacy of sacrificial offering, ritual officers test out multiple performances and offerings. No single procedure guarantees invariable success at every occasion or juncture in the ritual cycle. Instead the ritualist seeks out the spirits "as if they are present" in the hope that one action in the sequence might prompt a verifiable spirit presence. The following passage in the "Li qi" chapter of the *Liji* (Book of Rites) illustrates the procedure vividly:

Within the great ancestral temple reverence prevailed. The ruler personally led the victim forward while the grandees assisted and followed, carrying the offerings of silk. While the ruler personally took charge of the preliminary sacrificial

preparations, his wife presented the dish in which [the offering] would be presented. The ruler personally cut up the victim, while his wife presented the sacrificial ale. The ministers and grandees followed the ruler and ordered their wives to follow the ruler's wife. How grave and solemn was their reverence! How absorbing their serenity! *How intense was their desire that [the spirits] would accept the offerings!* The arrival of the victim was announced (*zhao*) (to the spirits) in the courtyard; upon presentation of the blood and the flesh with the hair on it,²⁷ an announcement (*zhao*) was made (to the spirits) in the chamber; when the sacrificial stew was ready, it was announced (*zhao*) (to the spirits) in the hall. *Announcements were made thrice, each time in a different place; indicating how they were seeking for the spirits but had not yet found them.* Then the sacrifice was set forth in the hall, and was repeated outside the gate of the temple; and thus arose the saying, "Are they in there? Are they over here (*yu bi hu, yu ci hu*)?"²⁸

This scene underscores the fickle and erratic nature of establishing contact with the spirit world. Uncertainty about a spirit response results in repeated announcements in different parts of the ancestral temple, each performed with a sincerity and care as if the ancestral spirits are present at each occasion. Perhaps Confucius's axiom that one ought to serve the spirits "as if they are present" does not refer to a reverent mimicry of ritual procedure reflecting the moral integrity of the Confucian gentleman but, instead, suggests that sacrifice was to be conceived of first and foremost as a *search* for spirits. And like any quest, such process is subject to mental obstacles, procedural hurdles, and the challenges of ritual protocol. In the passage above, a sequence of announcements is made while officiants lure the spirits — by means of blood, raw and cooked offerings — to manifest themselves.²⁹ Just as adepts of self-cultivation claimed that spirit power was to be invited into the purified body and mind of the practicing individual through progressive stages of mental exercise, so the ritual officiant prepares the physical surroundings of the sacrificial altar and the sacrificial goods for a search that might result in the spirits lodging themselves temporarily among the participants. The ancestral sacrifice, at least in its prescriptive and systematised version preserved in the *Liji*, could therefore involve an "offering of search", a procedure aimed at addressing spirits that have not (yet) been located:

One summoned the priest to the chamber, seated the impersonator of the dead in the hall, killed a sacrificial victim in the courtyard and offered up its head in the chamber. In the case of a regular (direct) sacrifice (*zhi ji*) the priest addressed himself to the spirit tablet (*zhu*) of the deceased. If it was an offering of search (*suo ji*) he would take place at the gate outside the main temple (*beng*).³⁰ Since one did not know where the *shen* were located — whether it was there or here (*yu bi hu, yu ci hu*), or far away from men — might it not be said that by offering at the gate (*beng*) one searches (for the spirit) in a distant place (*qiu zhu yuan zhe*)?³¹

Shen present themselves as nowhere and everywhere, not readily predestined and prepared for contact with human supplicants, but constantly taunting and testing the patience of the sacrificer. Sacrifices to spirits located and fixed in a spirit tablet are distinguished from offerings to itinerant and unidentified spirit forces that need to be ushered into the temple. Uncertainty about a favourable response surrounds the entire procedure. As the same chapter states later on, one may present the sacrificial meats raw and whole, or cooked and cut but “how do we know what the spirits enjoy” (*qi zhi shen zhi suo xiang ye*)?³² Even the terminology for sacrificial offerings possibly reflects the distinction between offerings aimed at luring spirits to descend upon the sacrificial locus versus offerings presented for actual consumption by spirits that have already been located. The *Zhouli* (Rites of Zhou), for instance, speaks of a “consumed-ox-offering” (*xiang niu*) and a “search-ox-offering” (*qiu niu*). The former, according to commentators, refers to an ox one day before it is to be consumed by the spirits whereas the latter is used to invite spirits to make themselves manifest at the proper time for the sacrifice.³³

In both sacrificial procedures described above we witness a theatrical enactment of a well-known adagio often found in philosophical texts, namely, the sentiment that *shen* are visible but not to the human eye, audible but not to human ears, perceptible but not through normal human sensation. The human eye can look out for spirits but is unable to see them, the human ear may listen out for them without being able to hear them. Equally, just as the ritualist possesses the knack to communicate with a spirit world that operates beyond normal human sensation, sages are capable to “listen to what is soundless and observe what is shapeless.”³⁴ A passage in the *Huainanzi* justifies the rationale behind sacrifice precisely in those terms: offerings, prayers and divinatory procedures substitute the normal human senses and can enable the ritualist to induce forces, otherwise absent to human sensation, to be ritually present:

Thus if one looks for ghosts and spirits, they have no shape. If one listens out for them they remain silent. Yet that being the case we (still) offer suburban sacrifices to Heaven, vista sacrifices to mountains and rivers, present supplication offers and prayers to seek blessings, offer sacrifices to request rain, divine by shell and milfoil to decide on affairs. The Book of Odes states: “A visit from the spirits can never be foreseen, the better reason for not ignoring them (*shen zhi ge si, bu ke du si, shen ke she si*)”³⁵

Divination here is presented as a procedure aimed at narrowing down the search for spirit. At best therefore sacrifice offers a tool to search for spirit presence and, to no great surprise, commentators in the Han explained technical terms for sacrificial procedures as activities aimed at “searching” or

“seeking out” the world beyond the immediate reach of the human senses. In a chapter on the meaning of sacrifice (“Ji yi”) Dong Zhongshu (ca. 179-104 BCE) glosses the verb *ji* “to offer sacrifice” as *cha* “to search, to reach into”, a homographic pun:

“To sacrifice” (*ji*^a) means “to reach into” (*cha*), which signifies that (the sacrificer) is able to establish contact with ghosts and spirits. If he is capable of achieving this he reaches into what cannot be heard or seen. That is why he is said to “reach into” ... The fact that “sacrifice” (*ji*^a) is also referred to as “entering into contact with” (*ji*^b) means that following a sacrificial offering one is capable of making manifest what is invisible. When one is capable of observing the manifestation of what is invisible (*jian bu jian zhi xian zhe*) one will understand the command of heaven and the ghosts and spirits ...³⁶

Later on in the text, its purported author links this definition of sacrifice directly to Confucius’ ambition to serve the spirits “as if they were present.” The same idea is also echoed by a requirement in the *Liji* that “in all cases when sacrifices are offered, one’s countenance and facial expression ought to be such as if one sees those to whom one sacrifices (*fan ji rongmao yanse ru jian suo ji zhe*).”³⁷ Elsewhere the same text prescribes that, during the fast preceding sacrifices to one’s departed, the mourner mentally recalls (*si*) where they sat, how they smiled or spoke, what intentions and ideas they had, what they found pleasurable and what they relished. On the day of the sacrifice, the mourner should be under the impression of seeing the deceased in the place where his spirit-tablet is located and appear to hear the ancestral spirit’s sounds and sighs.³⁸ A similar idea is reflected in an Eastern Han paronomastic gloss for the graph *miao* “ancestral temple” as *mao* “appearance” inspired by the idea that a temple is the place “where the ancestors’ form and appearance is present.”³⁹ In short, sensory memory here serves as the fibre that ties descendants and ancestral spirits together. Or, as Xunzi argues: “One takes up the offerings and presents each of them in sacrifice as though someone really were going to taste them.”⁴⁰

The equation of sacrifice with a process of “searching” is also apparent in another highlight in the Han ritual calendar, the annual winter sacrifice known as the *la* festival. *La* is defined in the *Liji* as *suo* “searching out.” Both text and commentaries suggest that this winter ritual aims to “search out” the products of the harvest in order to identify suitable offerings among them.⁴¹ Likewise some commentators insist that this ritual mainly consisted of a search for the presence of eight spirits that required sacrificial offerings. Cai Yong (133-192 CE) writes: “*La* means to search (*suo*), so on the day of sacrifice one searches for these eight spirits and offers sacrifice to them.”⁴² Other sources insist that the actual presentation of sacrificial offerings follows

after a procedure during which ritual officiants first conduct a “search” (*suo*) for spirit presence. The *Zhouli* for instance includes the following task among the responsibilities of an official known as *dang zheng* “head of a ward”: “When throughout the state ghosts and spirits are searched out and presented with sacrificial offerings (*guo suo guishen er jisi*), then he uses rituals to assemble the people and organizes drinking ceremonies in the apartments (for the elderly) in order to rectify the ranks of seniority.”⁴³

Other episodes are reported that insist on the obligation for humans to search for spirit presence. One is set at the court of Han Wudi in the run-up to his performance of the *feng* and *shan*^b sacrifices on Mount Tai in 110 BCE. Having already been duped twice by crank “masters of recipes” (*fang shi*) who promised him successful quests for spirits and immortals, Han Wudi turns sceptical when yet another advisor reports having seen, among other things, the footprints of an immortal on top of a city wall. Both the language in which the episode is reported in the *Shiji* as well as the response to the emperor by the official in question (Gongsun Qing) are noteworthy. The story starts by stating that Gongsun Qing went to search out the region of Henan for spirits (*hou shen Henan*). When Han Wudi asked him for assurance, Gongsun Qing replies:

It is not the case that immortals seek for the ruler of men, it is the ruler who must seek them. Unless one goes about one’s methods with a liberal and open-minded attitude, the spirits will not appear. When people discuss spirit affairs, their words are apt to sound wild and irrational, but if these matters are pursued for a sustained number of years, spirits can eventually be persuaded to come forth!⁴⁴

Two years later, the emperor builds a pavilion named the “Terrace that Reaches Heaven” in his capital and has sacrificial implements displayed at its foot to summon spirits and immortals to descend upon it.⁴⁵

If sacrificial procedure was conceived of primarily as a quest for spirit presence rather than the actual entreaty of the spirits and recompense for received blessings, the sacrificial offering itself becomes important as the central material medium capable of facilitating spirit contact. To no great surprise ritual literature elaborates in great detail on the materiality of offerings (ingredients, size, colour, combination, manner of preparation, etc.). One might argue that the predominant share of theoretical debate on sacrifice in early China amounted to a theology of the sacrificial offering itself. In the following apocryphal tale, Confucius underlines the central nature of the sacrificial victim and does so again by glossing the term for “sacrifice” (*ji*) with the graph for “searching” (*suo*).

Gongsuo Shi of Lu was about to perform a sacrifice but lost his sacrificial animal. Confucius heard about this and said: “Gongsuo Shi is certain to perish before three years have passed.” A year later he did in fact perish. A disciple asked (Confucius): “Formerly when Gongsuo Shi lost his sacrificial animal, you Master said that he would certainly perish before three years had passed. Now a year has gone by and he has perished. How did you know that he would perish?” Confucius replied: “Sacrifice could be said to be a search (*ji zhi wei yan suo ye*). Since searching (for spirits) means to exhaust (*jin*) oneself, this implies that (sacrifice) is the means whereby a filial son exhausts himself towards his kin. If one loses one’s sacrificial animal at the point of sacrificing then the things one will lose besides this will be numerous. This is how I knew that he would perish.”⁴⁶

The ancestral temple was not the only ritual space that presented itself as a multi-dimensional arena in which spirits were to be attracted, identified and worshipped. The sacrificial altar — in the form of an elevated platform, a levelled space, or a pit structure — provided another space upon which cosmic and spiritual forces could exert their energies. In many sacrificial procedures, the search for spirit presence starts with an officiant determining or fixing the location for an altar and erecting a surrounding boundary to consecrate the enclosed space.⁴⁷ Unlike the ancestral temple or shrine, a sacrificial “platform” (*tan*), “levelled space” (*shan*) or “pit” (*kan*) was not normally roofed or covered, leaving both the ritual participants and the offerings exposed to the elements of nature.⁴⁸ In their most basic form, altars consisted of heaped up earth or a walled compound within which the forces of nature were condensed into a communicable code. Some altar structures had paths or spirit roads radiating outward to channel the spirit influences toward the altar.⁴⁹ Sources also refer to a sacrificial plot or boundary (*zhao yu*), a space that could be screened off from the natural elements.⁵⁰ Sacrificial mounds likewise could be screened off. According to the *Liji*, the *she* altar where the spirits of the land were honoured, provided a space for congregation in which one would empower the soil with spirit-like powers. By erecting the soil altar one pays “spiritual homage” to the Way of the Earth (*she suoyi shen di zhi dao ye*).⁵¹ In origin *she* altars were conceived of as a simple mound of stamped earth with or without a tree or group of trees planted on and around it.⁵² To represent the genie of the soil, the *Zhouli* states, the choice of tree on the earth altar was to accord with the local terrain; likewise the tree could lend its name to the altar.⁵³ In the same source the altar tree is called a *tian zhu* “host of the field” suggesting that the spirit powers associated with the land are symbolically “channelled” (*zhu*) into a tangible natural object represented by the tree. One Han source notes that the *she* altar was to remain unroofed to ensure that the tree planted on it would connect with the vapours (*qi*) of heaven and earth. Another purpose of the tree was to make the location of the

altar visible from a distance.⁵⁴ Most ritual texts suggest that the spirit of the soil was to be worshiped with sacrificial offerings that were interred or with libations of blood or wine.⁵⁵

Yet, what made sacrifices to the soil a force for social and religious cohesion was not so much the physicality of the actual altar but rather the idea that participants congregated in a space susceptible to spirit influence: "The most reverent form of sacrifice does not require the heaping up of an altar, it only requires sweeping clean a spot of soil and setting out a sacrifice on it."⁵⁶ By Han times explanations of the role of the *she* increasingly focused on its function as a spirit receptacle through which cosmic elements would approve or reprimand the political and moral expediency of the communities linked to it through sacrificial obligation:

The great *she* altar of the Son of Heaven had to receive the frost, dew, wind, and rain in order to reach into the *qi* of heaven and earth. Therefore a *she* altar of a state that had perished was roofed in, so that it was not exposed to the *yang* (solar) energy from Heaven. The altar (of the Shang) at Bo had an opening in its northern wall to allow the *yin* (lunar) energy to shine into it.⁵⁷

The Han critic Wang Chong notes that "when a state has ceased to exist, its altar of the land is roofed above and fenced with wood below to indicate that its connection with Heaven and Earth has been cut off."⁵⁸ Likewise walling off the *she* from four sides would undo its efficacy as a receptacle of spirit influences.⁵⁹ In other words the altar or shrine presents itself not as a fixed abode for the spirits but as a negotiated space that offers a potential conduit to the spirit world. And, as some of the mishaps and anomalies occurring during sacrifice reported by Mozi suggest, they were primarily a venue where officiants *search* for a spirit presence that does not necessarily always manifest itself.

Indeed the unpredictable nature of spirit appearances in response to sacrificial offerings runs as a continuous theme through accounts of sacrificial events alleged to have taken place centuries apart. Sima Qian reports how Duke Wen of Qin (ca. 765-716 BCE) established a shrine on the northern slopes of mount Chencang to worship stone-like objects that had come into his possession:

Sometimes, the spirits (*shen*) of the objects would not appear for a whole year, while at other times they would come several times in the year. When they came it invariably happened at night, when they shed a glowing light like shooting stars, coming in from the southeast, and gathering on the wall around the shrine (*ci cheng*). They looked like roosters and made a screeching sound so that the fowl in the fields began to crow in response, although it was in the middle of the night. Duke Wen made an offering of one set of sacrificial animals and named the objects "The Treasures of Chen" (*Chen bao*).⁶⁰

On completion of a successful sacrifice, the altar space could figure as a focal point where spirit influences gathered together as reported in the following edict by Han Xuandi (dated 58 BCE):

At sunset during our retreat and fast, a spirit luminescence manifested itself (*shen guang xian zhu*). During the evening presentations of fragrant liquor, spirit luminescences criss-crossed each other, some descending from Heaven, some rising up from the Earth, others arriving from the four quarters to congregate at the altar. The Lord on High assented and appreciated (our offerings) and all within the seas received blessings.⁶¹

It is noteworthy that, at times, the sanctioning of an area as a space that invites a spirit presence appeared to be based on more worldly or economic motives. For instance in an exchange preserved in the *Guanzi*, the Yellow Emperor receives the following answer to his question as to how he could “mould all under heaven into one family”:

If a mountain reveals its riches, a lord should carefully seal it off with an earthen boundary (*feng*) and offer sacrifices to it. At a distance of ten *li* from the sealed-off area he should construct an altar (*tan*). This being done he should make those who are riding dismount and walk and those who are walking should be required to quicken their steps. Those who violate these orders should be sentenced to death without pardon. In this way, they will be kept far away from any opportunity to exploit the mountain’s wealth.⁶²

Elsewhere in the text these less edifying ploys are known as “establishing sacrifices to restrict the entrance to mountains and marshes.”⁶³

To assist the officiant in fixating the spirits during his search, ritual codices offer aids and alternatives to circumvent and narrow down the ephemeral and capricious nature of the spirits. A central role in such procedures is played by the “representative of the dead” (*shi*). This person, a living descendant of the deceased, is a main actor in ancestral sacrifices. He physically impersonates the ancestral spirits, eats, drinks and speaks on their behalf, and toasts the living clan members during the banquet that follows the sacrifice.⁶⁴

In sum, the ritual space, the representative of the dead, the temple, its altar, its sacrificial vessels and their food offerings all provide potential conduits through which spirit influences might manifest themselves. Yet as indispensable ritual tools fully integrated in sacrificial procedure their efficiency to attract spirits to reside temporarily in the presence of the worshipper depends on how well these human and material instruments are cultivated, purified and consecrated. One could argue that ritual actors and

their paraphernalia provided the exteriorised or ritualised equivalent of the human body of the self-cultivation adept. The latter likewise wants the body to be purified and prepared through dietary regimes and meditative techniques to invite *shen* energy to lodge itself within. Just as the adept of self-cultivation attempts to attract and channel the subtle energies of the cosmos within himself, so the ritual officiant tries to establish a spirit presence within his ritualised space. Without being lodged in an effigy or an object such as an ancestral tablet or channelled through media accessible to the human senses such as music, dance, or a human impersonator of the dead, *shen* remain transient and invisible to the observer.⁶⁵ On the other hand, *pace* a passage in the *Liji*, the paraphernalia of ritual mastered by priests and ritual officiants remain empty tools if not accompanied by an understanding of the underlying principles or ideas.⁶⁶ Without a ritualised search (*li*) guided by correct intentions (*yi*), *shen* revert to being mere “influences”, mysterious vapours travelling through the ritual space but failing to be “settled down” by means of offerings, music and ritual pomp and circumstance:

The Master said: “When ghosts and spirits display their powers, how abundant they are! We look at them but do not see them; we listen to them but do not hear them, yet they enter into all things and nothing can be without them. They cause the people under heaven to fast, purify themselves, and put fine clothing to carry out sacrifices to them. Like welling water it is as if they are above the head and to the left and right (of the worshippers)”. The Book of Odes says:

“The descent of the spirits
Cannot be fathomed –
How much less can it be ignored”.

Such is the manifestness of what is minute, such is the impossibility of repressing the outgoings of sincerity.⁶⁷

The social power, mystery and psychological ambiguity of sacrifice in early Chinese religion lies precisely herein: in order to attract a category of powers that escape the sensory radars of ordinary mortals, the sacrificer can only find recourse to the use of a sophisticated set of visual, olfactory, sonorous and savoury tools that originate in human sensation. Ritual robes, flashing colours, penetrating fumes, foodstuffs, enchanting dances and liturgy are no more than a functional repertoire at the disposal of the ritualist, or paraphernalia of ideas, intentions and subtle meaning.

It is against the background of this ideological conflict apparent in sacrificial literature – namely the question of how humans can influence a spirit world that operates beyond normal human sensation through the very same sensory means that provide the basic tools for humans to indulge in the sensory pleasures of this world – that depictions of sagehood and self-

cultivation in early China could be usefully re-examined. I suggest that the origins of much of the imagery used to describe key “philosophical” concepts — such as the Dao or the sage — across a variety of Warring States and Han texts (e.g. the Dao as insipid, the sage as someone who blocks off his senses, the metaphorical power of water as tasteless and colourless, etc.) will become clearer when charted against the realities and ambiguities inherent in the practice of ritual sacrifice as I have outlined above.

Finally, my *caveat* not to assign the spiritually subtle to philosophical discourse and reserve anthropomorphised spirits to religious practice does of course not imply that these two poles are not present, nor that spirit power was never conceived along those lines. I merely hope to have illustrated that what underlies the notion of *shen* and its cognate concepts in early China, more than anything else and even in the context of sacrificial religion, is its non-fixity. The spirit world by nature is a cultural construct. In early Chinese religion *shen* did not constitute spiritual embodiments of pre-existing or pre-conceived powers in nature or the world at large. Instead at the heart of sacrificial religion was the question of how humans can temporarily channel ever-changing and permutating forces into a ritual space by means of sensory offerings and ritual performance.

NOTES

1. For references to spirits as denizens of mountains, rivers and lakes, see e.g. *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (*Shisanjing zhushu* ed.), 3.5a (“Shun dian”), 8.13b (“Yi xun”). A much quoted definition is preserved in the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites): “Mountains and forests, rivers and valleys, hills and mounds able to produce clouds, occasion winds and rain, and make appear strange phenomena were all regarded as *shen* ...”. See Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji jijie* 禮記集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1995), 45.1194 (“Ji fa”).
2. For a survey of theories on the etymological origins of the *shen* graph see Lei Hanqing 雷漢卿, *Shuowen “shi bu” zi yu shenling jisi kao* 說文‘示部’字與神靈祭祀考 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2000), 150-168. The *shi* 示 signfic in Shang oracle bones refers both to specific spirits as well as the performance of sacrifices to them. See Chen Nianfu 陳年福, *Jiagu wen dongci cihui yanjiu* 甲骨文動詞詞匯研究 (Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe, 2001), 133 (no.101). See also Li Maokang 李茂康 and Yan Jiahui 顏嘉慧, “Shuowen ‘shi’ bu shuojie yu tongyuanqi yanjiu” 說文示部說解與同源詞研究, in *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊 3 (2006), 26-28.
3. For a recent criticism of the idea that one can hide behind polysemy at all times and in all contexts see Michael Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 21-26.

4. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 ed., *Han Feizi jishi* 韓非子集釋 (Gaoxiong: Fuwen, 1991), 6.356-57 (“Jie Lao”)[my italics]. Variations of this passage are quoted frequently in later sources. See e.g. *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974), 19.600; and *Songshu* 宋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1974), 17.487. In Han times, an age when literati were particularly concerned with systematizing and explaining terminology transmitted from the past, scholars continued to use the terms in a loose fashion. For instance, in a chapter on exorcism Wang Chong 王充 (27-ca. 100 CE) coins antithetical phrases such as *shi gui shen* 使鬼神 (“if ghosts were spirit-like ...”) and *shi gui bu shen* 使鬼不神 (“suppose ghosts did not have spirit-power ...”). See Liu Pansui 劉盼遂 ed., *Lunheng jiaoshi* 論衡校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1990), 25.1042 (“Jie chu”).
5. To illustrate how far *gui* and *shen* terminology are stretched in translation, I quote from Arthur Waley’s translation of the relevant lines in *Daodejing* 60: “They who by Tao ruled all that is under heaven did not let an evil spirit within them display its powers. Nay, it was not only that the evil spirit did not display its powers; neither was the Sage’s good spirit used to the hurt of other men. Nor was it only that his good spirit was not used to harm other men, the Sage himself was thus saved from harm.” See *The Way and Its Power* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), 215.
6. See Chao Fulin 晁富林, *Xian Qin minsu shi* 先秦民俗史 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 2001), 341-367; and Poo Mu-chou, “The Concept of Ghost in Ancient Chinese Religion,” in John Lagerwey ed., *Religion and Chinese Society* (vol. 1) (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong and EFEO, 2004), 173-191.
7. For early examples of studies hailing Confucius as a proverbial agnostic philosopher see J.H. Plath, “Die Unsterblichkeitslehre der Alten Chinesen,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 1866: 471-84; Paul Pelliot, “Die Jenseitsvorstellung der Chinesen,” *Erano* 7 (1939), 61-82. For typical treatments in Chinese scholarship see e.g. Ya Hanzhang 牙含章 and Wang Yousan 王友三 eds., *Zhongguo wushen lun shi* 中国无神论史 (Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1992), vol. 1, 64-72. Leibniz’s (1646-1717) comments on Confucius’s so-called agnosticism are discussed in David E. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1977), 106 ff.
8. Most Warring States and Han texts portray a Confucius figure who attempts to explain away spirit appearances and anomalous events in the natural world. See Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 216-25. Yet this Confucius figure, sceptical of sacrificial devotion to non-ancestral spirits, was probably only one among several portrayals of the Master. In a recently recovered mid-Warring States text among a collection of bamboo strips held at the Shanghai Museum — entitled “Lu bang da han” 魯邦大旱 (“Severe Drought in the State of Lu”) by the editors — Confucius appears less dismissive of the use of sacrifices to propitiate rain spirits. Whereas on the one hand he appears to emphasize that a ruler can end a drought by rectifying punishments and displaying virtue, he also

- acknowledges that the only way common people can respond to these events is by offering sacrifice to rain spirits. This juxtaposition of Han-type correlative thought insisting on a causal link between human behaviour and natural events and the view that such events are animated by spirits is noteworthy in a text possibly predating the received treatises on rain sacrifices preserved in the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 by at least two centuries. For the slips and transcription see Ma Chengyuan 馬承源 ed., *Shanghai bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhujian* 上海博物館藏戰國楚竹簡, vol.2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2002), 49-56, 203-210. My reading of the text follows Liu Lexian 劉樂賢, "Shang bo jian 'Lu bang da han' jian lun" 上博簡 '魯邦大旱' 簡論, *Wenwu* 5 (2003), 60-64. Liao Mingchun 廖明春 suggests the passage should be set in the fifteenth year of Duke Ai 哀 of Lu 魯 (481 BCE) but adduces no conclusive evidence. See "Shang bo jian 'Lu bang da han' zha ji" 上博簡 '魯邦大旱' 札記, in Liao Mingchun, *Chu tu jianbo congkao* 出土簡帛叢考 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), 79-89.
9. I concur with Michael Puett's reading that Confucius here presents the sacrificial act itself not as a means to influence the spirit world but to transform the officiant performing the ritual (cf. *To Become a God*, 98). However one could equally argue that Confucius's ambition to keep the spirit world at bay through ritual mimicry or discursive abstention is predicated on the assumption that humans are indeed able to influence the spirit world from intervening in human affairs through deliberated neglect.
 10. For a summary see Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred. Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), Chapter 6 ("The Reciprocity of Giving"), esp. 139-141, 145-155.
 11. *Creation of the Sacred*, 145.
 12. *Shangshu zhengyi*, 8.23a ("Taijia, xia"). The idea that sincerity or substance (*zhi* 質) is a prerequisite for a spirit visitation also appears in the context of the covenant. The *Zuozhuan* notes that only when trustworthiness (*xin* 信) accompanies the words uttered during an oath will spirits draw near and seal it. See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1995), 971 (Lord Xiang, year 9).
 13. *Zuozhuan zhu*, 309-310 (Lord Xi, year 5).
 14. Jiao Xun 焦循 ed., *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), 28.994 (7B.25).
 15. Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842-1918) ed., *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 8.133 ("Ru xiao").
 16. *Xunzi jijie*, 5.161-62 ("Wang zhi"). See also Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon*, 118.
 17. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 ed., *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Taipei: Guanya, 1991), 12.424, 12.436 ("Tian di"). For a concordance of occurrences of *shen* in binomes and set phrases in the *Zhuangzi* see Roel Sterckx, "Vergelijkende Studie van de Begrippen Kuei, Shen, Hun en P'o in de pre-Boeddhistische Filosofische Traditie van China," MA Dissertation (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1991), 52-59, 167-179 (Index 20-31).

18. On these continuities between self-cultivation and sacrificial religion see Romain Graziani, "When Princes Awake in Kitchens: Zhuangzi's Rewriting of a Culinary Myth," in Roel Sterckx ed., *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 63-74; Graziani, "Énergie vitale, puissance spirituelle et pouvoir politique: genèse de la souveraineté dans le discours philosophique en Chine ancienne", *Cahiers du Centre Marcel Granet* 1 (2003), 25-48; and Graziani, "Le Roi et le Soi ; ou de quel soi parle-t-on dans la Culture de soi ? Contribution à une anthropologie philosophique en Chine ancienne," *Cahiers du Centre Marcel Granet* 2 (2004), p. 141-195.
19. Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848-1908) ed., *Mozi jiangou* 墨子閒詁 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2001), 8.222-23.
20. *Mozi jiangou*, 8.231.
21. *Mozi jiangou*, 8.232-34.
22. *Mozi jiangou*, 8.236-37.
23. *Mozi jiangou*, 8.249-250.
24. Elisabeth Hsu has shown how this distance between a theoretical/cognitive and performative knowledge of polysemous terms is especially relevant in the context of Chinese medicine. Her study of the use of *shen* by medical practitioners in Kunming (Yunnan) in the late 1980s shows that the semantic range of the term *shen*, its use, and its observed avoidance varies according to the ways in which practitioners with different medical styles (e.g. the private *qigong* healer versus the institutionalized doctor) establish authority over their patients and colleagues. See "Spirit (*Shen*), Styles of Knowing, and Authority in Contemporary Chinese Medicine," in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 24 (2000), 197-229.
25. For examples of passages insisting that sacrificial rituals and their implements serve to make ancestral and other spirits "descend" (*jiang* 降), see *Liji jijie*, 21.588 ("Li yun"). Other frequently recurring terms for spirit contact include *tong* 通 and *jiao* 交 "to communicate with". *Liji jijie*, 42.1123 ("Za ji"), states that the blood consecration of a temple is a means whereby one "communicates with the way of the spirit *luminescences*".
26. Amidst the gravity and formulaic nature of early Chinese prescriptive texts on sacrifice, one aspect of sacrificial performance overlooked by scholars is the degree to which such activities were meant to entertain or amuse. An interchange between Zi Gong and Confucius in the *Liji* is telling in that respect. Back from having witnessed the New Year festival, Confucius asks Zi Gong whether he had derived any pleasure (*le* 樂) from the event. Zi Gong replies: "The people of the entire state behaved as if they were mad, I don't know yet wherein I should find pleasure." Confucius replies: "For the labour of an agricultural cycle lasting a hundred days, they enjoy one day of plenty, this is what you do not understand." See *Liji jijie*, 42.1115 ("Za ji").
27. The procedure referred to here is first described in the Book of Odes (*Shijing* 詩經; Mao 219), where the officiant "holds the bell-knife to lay open the hair, taking the blood and the fat." See also Wang Liqi 王利器 ed., *Yantie lun jiaozhu* 鹽鐵論校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), 18.231 ("Hui xue").

28. *Liji jijie*, 24.663-665 (“Li qi”)[my italics].
29. For a more detailed discussion of taxonomies of sacrificial offerings see Gilles Boileau, “Some Ritual Elaborations on Cooking and Sacrifice,” *Early China* 23-24 (1998-99), 89-123; and Roel Sterckx, “Sages, Cooks and Flavours in Warring States and Han China,” *Monumenta Serica* 54 (2006), 1-46.
30. The term *beng* is known as the name for a sacrifice to directional deities as early as the *Shijing*. In the context of ancestral sacrifices it denotes the gate area outside the main temple where guests would be waiting while a priest invites the spirits to come to the ancestral hall. See *Liji jijie*, 25.684; *Shuowen jiezi*, 說文解字 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1983), 1A.8a; and Wei Zhao’s 韋昭 (d.273 CE) commentary to *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1978), 2.57.
31. *Liji jijie*, 26.715 (“Jiao te sheng”).
32. *Liji jijie*, 26.719 (“Jiao te sheng”).
33. Sun Yirang ed., *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1987), 23.924 (“Niu ren”). Cai Yong 蔡邕 (133-192 CE) gives another gloss on sacrifice as a request. He points out that in spring, the season of growth, no sacrificial victims should be offered because it is the time of year when one is praying to fructify life. Cai defines *qi* 祈 as a “sacrifice of request” (*qiu zhi ji* 求之祭). See *Yueling da wen* 月令答問 in *Cai Zhonglang wen ji* 蔡中郎文集 (*Congshu jicheng* ed.), 10.60. To my knowledge this is the only occurrence of this definition in Warring States, Qin and Han sources.
34. As quoted in Chen Qiyong 陳奇猷 ed., *Lüshi chungiu jiaoshi* 呂氏春秋校釋 (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1995), 18.1157 (“Zhong yan”). Passages portraying both sages and spirits as operating beyond normal human sensory experience are numerous. The *Liezi* 列子 mentions a disciple of Lao Dan 老聃 (Laozi), who is able to “see with his ears and listen with his eyes”. See Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 ed., *Liezi jishi* 列子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), 4.117-18 (“Zhongni”). Other texts suggest that different levels of perception can be obtained depending on the organ that acts as the seat of perception. The received *Wenzi* 文子 lists gradations in acuity and the level of knowledge that can be obtained from it: at the top is the capability to hear with one’s spirit (*shen ting* 神聽), then follows hearing with the heart-mind (*xin ting* 心聽), and the lowest level of aural perception is that through the ears (*er ting* 耳聽). Next, in a few lines that have also been preserved in the Dingzhou 定州 *Wenzi* excavated in 1973, the text claims that aural knowledge obtained through these different channels is graded and located at different levels in the body: hearing with the ears gives rise to an understanding at the level of the skin, hearing with the heart produces learning that is lodged at the level of the tendons and flesh, and hearing with the spirit generates an understanding that is most integrated and therefore resides in the bone marrow. See Wang Liqi 王利器 ed., *Wenzi shu yi* 文子疏義 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2000), 5.218 (“Dao de” 道德). For the reconstructed Dingzhou *Wenzi* fragment against the received version of chapter 5, see Charles Le Blanc, *Le Wen zi à la lumière de l’histoire et de l’archéologie* (Montréal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2000), 18 (lines 012-014).

35. Liu Wendian 劉文典 ed., *Huainanzi honglie jijie* 淮南子鴻烈集解 (Taipei: Wenshizhe, 1992), 20.665 ("Tai zu"). The quote is from *Shijing*, Mao 256. Cf. Burton Watson, *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 264.
36. Su Yu 蘇輿 ed., *Chunqiu fanlu yi zheng* 春秋繁露義證 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996), 16.441-442. For a similar gloss for *ji* see *Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳 (*Congshu jicheng* ed.), 6.56. See further Hua Yougen 華有根, *Xi Han li xue xin lun* 西漢禮學新論 (Shanghai: Shanghai shehui kexue yuan, 1998), 25.
37. *Liji jijie*, 30.835 ("Yu zao").
38. *Liji jijie*, 46.1208-09 ("Ji yi"). Later on in the text, the act of entreating ancestral spirits (*xiang*/**xiang* 饗) is defined with the homophonic *xiang* 鄉 "to direct oneself to" suggesting that only when the supplicant "directs" his mental and bodily gestures fully towards them will the spirits accept the sacrifices. See *Liji jijie*, 46.1210 ("Ji yi").
39. See Liu Xi 劉熙 (fl. ca. 200 CE), *Shi ming* 釋名 (*Congshu jicheng* ed.; Changsha: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1939), 5.85.
40. *Xunzi jijie*, 13.377 ("Li lun").
41. *Liji jijie*, 25.694 ("Jiao te sheng"). The festival is studied in detail in Derk Bodde, *Festivals in Classical China: New Year and Other Annual Observances During the Han Dynasty, 206 B.C. - A.D. 220* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). See also Xia Rixin 夏日新, "La ri de jisi" 臘日的祭祀, *Tōyōgaku shukan* 73 (1995), 1-22.
42. *Du duan* 獨斷 (*Congshu jicheng* ed.; Shanghai: Shangwu, 1935-40), 1.12.
43. *Zhouli zhengyi*, 22.870; cf. Édouard Biot, *Le Tcheou-Li ou Rites des Tcheou* (Pékin: rpt. Wen tien ko, 1939), 251. For another occurrence of the expression *suo guishen*, see *Zhouli zhengyi*, 19.741 ("Da situ"). Here one commentator suggests it means re-cultivating sacrifices to spirits that had been abandoned.
44. *Shiji*, 28.1396.
45. *Shiji*, 28.1400.
46. Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯 ed., *Shuoyuan jiaozheng* 說苑校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2000), 13.318-319 ("Quan mou"). Another version of this story is preserved in *Kongzi jiaoyu* 孔子家語 (*Sibu beiyao* ed.), 2.9a ("Hao sheng"). Given the contents of the story it is not implausible that there is a pun intended in the name Gongsuo.
47. For examples see *Zhouli zhengyi*, 18.692 ("Da situ"), 20.814 ("Xiao situ"), 22.890-91 ("Feng ren").
48. On these altar structures see Zhan Yinxin 詹鄞鑫, *Shenling yu jisi* 神靈與祭祀 (Jiangsu: Xinhua shudian, 1992), 186-87; and Li Ling 李零, *Zhongguo fangshu xu kao* 中國方術續考 (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2000), 137-38. Interpretations of these terms vary. A passage in the "Jin teng" 金縢 chapter of the *Shangshu* states that the Duke of Zhou "set up three altars on the same cleared space" (*wei san tan tong shan* 為三壇同壇). Ma Rong 馬融 (79-166 CE) here comments that a *tan* is a "hall of earth" (*tu tang* 土堂). See Sun Xingyan 孫星衍 (1753-1818), *Shangshu jin gu wen zhushu* 尚書今古文注疏 (Beijing:

- Zhonghua, 2004), 13.324-25. In a commentary to *Shiji*, 32.1487, He Xiu 何休 (129-82 CE) notes that the soil basis of a *tan* is three Chinese feet (*chi*) high and that it has three steps.
49. For instance, the altar to Taiyi 太一 “Grand Unity”, established by Han Wudi (ca 121 BCE), was constructed so that it “opened out onto spirit roads of the eight directions” (*kai ba tong zhi guidao* 開八通之鬼道). See *Shiji*, 28.1386. They were removed from a similar altar constructed in 113 BCE. See *Shiji*, 28.1394.
 50. *Guoyu*, 18.560 (“Chu yu, xia”); *Zhouli zhengyi*, 41.1694 (“Zhong ren”). The *Liji* notes that for the suburban sacrifice a space was marked off (*zhao* 兆) and swept clean in the southern suburbs, a location where the solar energy is at its height. See *Liji jijie*, 25.689.
 51. *Liji jijie*, 25.686 (“Jiao te sheng”); also quoted in *Songshu*, 17.479.
 52. For an early occurrence of a *she* enclosed by a yard see e.g. the *she pu* 社圃 “she park” in the state of Lu in *Zuozhuan zhu*, p.80 (Lord Yin, year 11); cf. *Shiji*, 33.1529. The *she* graph showing a tree (木) over the earth element is well attested in excavated manuscripts. See e.g. Hunan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Xincui Geling Chumu* 新蔡葛陵楚墓 (Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2003), 196, slips A3:250, A3:251; 197, slip A3:285; 198, slips A3:308, A3:317, A3:325-2, etc. The classic study on the *she* remains Édouard Chavannes, “Appendice: Le Dieu du Sol dans la Chine Antique.” in *Le T'ai Chan. Essai de monographie d'un culte chinois* (Paris, 1910), 437-525. See further Claudius C. Müller, *Untersuchungen zum “Erdaltar” she im China der Chou-und Han-Zeit* (Munich: Münchener Ethnologische Abhandlungen no. 1, 1979). On the planting of trees on *she* altars see also Silvia Ebner von Eschenbach, “Trees of Life and Trees of Death in China,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 152.2 (2002), 372-378; Zhang Hequan 張鶴泉, *Zhoudai jisi yanjiu* 周代祭祀研究 (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe, 1993), 98-99; and Ma Xin 馬新, “Lun liang Han xiangcun shehui zhong de li she” 论两汉乡村社会中的里社, *Wenshizhe* 5 (1998), 90-94.
 53. *Zhouli zhengyi*, 18.692 (“Da situ”). See also *Shuowen jiezi*, 1A.15b. In the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 3.21) Zai Wo states that the Xia used pine, the Yin cedar and the Zhou chestnut trees. For examples of *she* carrying the name of its accompanying tree(s) see *Zhuangzi jishi*, 4.170 (“Ren jian shi”); and *Shiji* 28.1378. *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1962), 27B.1413, reports a locust tree on a *she* that had been chopped down miraculously reappearing overnight. The image of lingering trees on a spirit-less soil altar is evoked in a poem entitled “An Old Altar to the Soil” (“Gu she” 古社) by the Tang poet Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831 CE): “... the people have dispersed and the altar no longer harbours spirit power; only an empty-hearted tree remains...”. See *Yuan Zhen ji* 集 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 1.4.
 54. Chen Li 陳立 (1809-1869) ed., *Bohutong shu zheng* 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997), 3.89 (“She ji”).
 55. E.g. *Zhouli zhengyi*, 33.1314 (“Da zong bo”). For examples of blood offers to the *she* see *Shiji*, 33.1515. The exact correlation between earth altars and population

or residential units is subject to debate. Warring States and early Han sources suggest that a *she* altar was established for every *li* 里 “village, hamlet”. These *li* are associated with different numbers of households (*jia* 家) ranging from 25 to 50 or even more. In Han times, these essentially locally exclusive yet communal altars were established at virtually all major administrative levels (district, commandery, etc.), and adopted an increasingly public role with designated ritual officials participating in certain sacrifices (e.g. rain prayers). See Yang Hua 杨华, “Zhanguo Qin Han shiqi de li she yu si she” 战国秦汉时期的里社与私社, in Mou Fasong 牟发松 ed., *Guojia yu shehui guanxi shiye xia de Han Tang lishi bianqian* 国家与社会关系视野下的汉唐历史变迁 (Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006); reprinted (with modifications) at <http://www.jianbo.org/admin3/2006/yanghua001.htm>. On the evolving role of the *she* see further Roel Sterckx, “Religion,” in Michael Loewe and Michael Nylan eds., *Supplement to the Cambridge History of China: Qin, Han, and Six Dynasties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

56. *Liji jijie*, 23.639 (“Li qi”). I follow the reading suggested in Zhan Yinxin, *Shenling yu jisi*, p.186.
57. *Liji jijie*, 25.685 (“Jiao te sheng”). See also *Bohutong shu zheng*, 3.86, 3.89 (“She ji”).
58. *Lunheng jiaoshi*, 13.594 (“Bie tong”). This echoes statements that occur throughout several Warring States texts. See e.g. *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi*, 23.1532 (“Gui zhi”).
59. See e.g. *Hanshu*, 99B.4084.
60. *Shiji*, 28.1359. *Shiji*, 28.1374, notes that during Qin Shihuang’s reign the Chen Bao spirit received sacrifices in the seasons in which it appeared, and, at 28.1376, it is stated that these spirits were very noteworthy since their glowing lights moved the people. The religious landscape of Qin is described as follows: “Even the spiritually potent among its most insignificant spirits each received sacrifices according to the seasons in the year” (*Shiji*, 28.1375). For a study of the cult that developed around these spirits see Marianne Bujard, “Le culte du Joyau de Chen : culte historique, culte vivant,” in *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 10 (1998), 131-182.
61. *Hanshu*, 8.263. The appearance of a spirit presence in the form of sky lights or glowing emanations in various shapes is reported frequently. When Han Wudi performed the suburban sacrifice to Great Unity at Yunyang (in 113 BCE) his officials reported lights appearing over the offerings and “yellow vapours” rising from the altar and reaching Heaven. See *Shiji*, 28.1395. The appearance of spirit lights is also reported in response to suburban sacrifices and offerings to Houtu in the spring of 55 BCE. See *Hanshu*, 8.266.
62. Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳 ed., *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 2004), 23.576-77 (“Di shu”); tr. W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 423 (modified).
63. *Guanzi jiaozhu*, 23.590 (“Guo zhun”); Rickett, *Guanzi*, vol. 2, 444. See also *Guanzi jiaozhu*, 12.637 (“Chi mi”).

64. *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏 (*Shisanjing zhushu* ed.), 42.8a-14a (“Shi yu li”).
65. Cf. *Liji jijie*, 37.988 (“Yue ji”): “In the visible sphere (*ming* 明) there is ritual and music, in the invisible (*you* 幽) there are ghosts and spirits.”
66. *Liji jijie*, 26.706 (“Jiao te sheng”).
67. *Liji zhushu* 注疏 (*Shisanjing zhushu* ed.), 52.12a-b (“Zhong yong”); tr. Roger Ames and David Hall, *Focusing the Familiar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 96 [modified]. As in the *Huainanzi* passage quoted above, this passage reproduces the same lines from Mao 256, cf. note 35.

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GLOSSARY

beng 祊

Bo 薄

Cai Yong 蔡邕

cha 察

Chen bao 陳寶

Chencang 陳倉

ci cheng 祠城

Da shen 大神

dang zheng 黨正

Daodejing 道德經

Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒

Duke Wen of Qin 秦文公

fan ji rongmao yanse ru jian suo ji zhe 凡祭容貌顏色如見所祭者

fang shi 方士

fei qi gui bu shen ye, qi shen bu shang ren ye 非其鬼不神也，其神不傷人也

feng 封

Gongsun Qing 公孫卿

Gongsuo Shi 公索氏

Guanzi 管子

gui shen 鬼神

gui 鬼

guo suo guishen er jisi 國索鬼神而祭祀

Han Fei 韓非

Han Wudi 漢武帝

Han Xuandi 宣帝

hou shen Henan 候神河南

Huainanzi 淮南子

ji shen ru shen zai 祭神如神在

“Ji yi” 祭義

ji zhi wei yan suo ye 祭之爲言索也

ji^a 祭

ji^b 際

jian bu jian zhi xian zhe 見不見之見者

jiang shen 降神

jin 盡

jing shen 精神

kan 坎

ke cheng 克誠

la 蜡 (臘)

“*Li qi*” 禮器

li 禮

Liji 禮記

Lunyu 論語

mao 貌

Mengzi 孟子

miao 廟

“*Ming gui*” 明鬼

ming shen 明神

Mozi 墨子

“*Nei ye*” 內業

qi gui bu shen 其鬼不神

qi zhi shen zhi suo xiang ye 豈知神之所饗也

qi 氣

qiu niu 求牛

qiu zhu yuan zhe 求諸遠者

shan^a 壇

shan^b 禪

she suoyi shen di zhi dao ye 社所以神地之道也

she 社

shen guang xian zhu 神光顯著

shen ling 神靈

shen ming 神明

shen qi 神祇

shen zhi ge si, bu ke du si, shen ke she si 神之格思，不可度思，矧可射思

shen 神

sheng 聖

shi 尸

Shiji 史記

si 思

Sima Qian 司馬遷

suo ji 索祭

suo 索

tan 壇

tian zhu 田主

Wang Chong 王充

xiang niu 享牛

xiang 享

xing 形

Xunzi 荀子

yi 義

yu bi hu, yu ci hu 於彼乎於此乎

yu guishen bu xiang hai 與鬼神不相害

zhao yu 兆域

zhao 詔

zheng tan 正壇

zhi ji 直祭

zhi wei shen ye 之謂神[也]

Zhouli 周禮

Zhu^a 主

Zhu^b 主/ 注

Zhuangzi 莊子