
*Text and Ritual with Regard to Writing and Authority*

*Text and Ritual in Early China*, edited by Martin Kern, is an important book. While reading it, I was repeatedly reminded of Mark Edward Lewis’s *Writing and Authority in Early China* (State University of New York Press, 1999), not just because of the formal and lexical similarities of the titles or to the many references to Lewis’s book. Both Lewis and the contributors to *Text and Ritual* are meticulous in their scholarship, broad in their sources, assiduous in supporting their claims, cautious but insightful in their generalizations, and forward looking in their scholarship. They approach the texts of early China with a view to understanding the sociopolitical dynamics of the time and draw on every available text, leaving no stone unturned and taking nothing for granted. Given the time span of the period they cover, the multiplicity of texts, the variety of media on which the texts were recorded, the array of secondary sources, and the difficulty of the early language in its many manifestations, the task does not come easy.

Even though the dates of the publication of *Writing and Authority* and of the conference “Text and Ritual in Early China” on which *Text and Ritual* is drawn are fewer than two years apart, there are two ways in which *Text and Ritual* can be seen as an updating of *Writing and Authority*. First, whereas Lewis makes numerous references to the Mawangdui, Baoshan, Yunmeng, and Fangmatan manuscripts, he makes little or no reference to such recent finds as the Guodian and Shanghai materials, which the contributors to *Text and Ritual* repeatedly bring into the discussion. Second, although Lewis and the contributors to *Text and Ritual* are on equal ground as outstanding expositors of the field of early Chinese studies, some of these same contributors have extolled Lewis’s work as a grand synthesis of scholarship in the field, thus giving it, by default, a position of predominance and authority to which related books in the field, for the time being, will naturally be judged as responses and extensions.¹

Lewis, showing a concern for the authority associated with ritual and with the texts that developed around it, notes that the relationship of writing and ritual goes all the way back to the earliest days of the Chinese polity and its persistent preoccupation with natural and spiritual forces. That writing was created seemingly for the purpose of recording the significance of events associated with these forces should signal the central importance of ritual in the history of texts in early China.

In the first part of this review, I will summarize what I find to be the main insights of each chapter. Though there is very little to criticize, I will, in the sec-
ond part of my review, examine three important areas of concern that fall under the general heading of terminological precision. As a heuristic for approaching the diversity of topics in *Text and Ritual in Early China*, I will group the chapters as they relate to the broad themes of *Writing and Authority*.

**Nylan, Falkenhausen, and Brashier on Text and Authority**

Both *Writing and Authority* and *Text and Ritual* begin with the nexus of ritual and political authority. Lewis details its origins in the oracle bones and then shows how later texts, such as covenants (*meng* 盟), local registers, and coins, developed out of the tradition of using ritual texts for the purpose of political control.

Michael Nylan, in her chapter, “Toward an Archaeology of Writing: Text, Ritual, and the Culture of Public Display in the Classical Period (475 B.C.E.–220 C.E.),” extends this theme in the direction of artifactual displays. The chapter can be seen as a long and involved answer to the question, why do we “find what we ordinarily think of as ‘secular’ texts buried in tombs?” (p. 34).

Nylan begins with a nice summary of “writing’s share in ritual,” identifying six areas in which writing and ritual converge in early China. From here she moves on to the specific case of the *ru* functionaries and officials (“classicists,” as she problematically refers to them) depicted in the “Rulin” biographies of the three standard histories of the Han and how these treatments are distinct from Sima Qian’s. Her analysis adumbrates a core problem that not only haunted the Chinese bureaucracy throughout history but is even disturbingly relevant to a democratic system of government that seeks to elevate individuals based on moral probity, namely, how “to distinguish the ethical…from the opportunist” (p. 22).

Nylan’s final and most insightful section concerns the display culture of early China. Through both textual and archaeological evidence, she explicates rationales for ornate display (including ritual display) based on desire as fundamental to human nature and suggests that however well intentioned and well reasoned the system may have been, it necessarily collapsed under its own weight. The texts now being found in tombs, she concludes, were a part of this elaborate system. They were among the many possible final gifts from well-wishers, who were threads in the web of relationships that constituted the security and status of the tomb occupants while among the living. In this way, seemingly “secular” texts are shown to have ritual value while also serving the purpose of maintaining political authority.

Another kind of text that Lewis identifies as manifesting political authority is the tally. He describes two kinds of tally conferred by a king: the general’s tiger tally and tallies for budgeting and tracking the economic and demographic accountability of local officials. Lothar von Falkenhausen, in his chapter, “The E Jun Qi Metal Tallies: Inscribed Texts and Ritual Contexts,” expands consideration of tallies in the direction of those used for allowing the bearer to transport goods to the capital and maintain an exemption from paying taxes along the way.
Five bronze boat and wagon tallies dating from the Middle Warring States period are inscribed with texts that identify the year of manufacture, specify routes of transport, and exempt the bearer from tax assessment along the way. Because no similar tallies have been found and no transmitted text describes their use, Falkenhausen turns to other sources to assay their use and significance. In an exemplary piece of scholarship, he draws on an impressive range of archaeological, textual, and secondary materials to determine that these tallies are likely examples of commonly used tallies in the Chu state and were as much symbols of ritual authority as instruments for the facilitation of the efficient transport of goods. Falkenhausen closes his piece with five ways in which the tallies may have fit the ritual milieu of the times.

Yet another kind of text that is available for scrutiny but that Lewis does not find relevant to his treatment in *Writing and Authority* is the grave stele. As K. E. Brashier points out in his chapter, “Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Stelae,” the inscriptions on Chinese grave stelae differ significantly from the very brief notices on Western-style tombstones. According to his analysis, Chinese stelae of the Han dynasty (to which he confines himself), have elements of cliché, exaggeration, “memory place” groupings, and a verse format, marking them all as texts to be memorized as well as inscribed (p. 253).

These aspects of grave stelae fit into a “memorial culture,” as Brashier calls it, in which memorization of texts was a standard pedagogic method. High officials were expected to be able to recite texts on demand. Brashier spends the first half of his essay establishing the mnemonics of grave stelae before moving on to sections on stelae as text and stelae as ritual. Writers of stelae texts viewed their texts as belonging to a tradition going all the way back to the *Shangshu*, in which texts bring significant events to a close and put them into words for perpetuity.

In one of his most interesting sections, Brashier develops the argument that grave stelae are the evolutionary artifacts of bronze ritual vessels, thus linking the first period of florescence of the Chinese empire back to the earliest days of Chinese civilization through the forward development of inscriptional media from bronze to stone. One could use Brashier’s work to supplement Lewis by noticing three aspects of authority that inhere in these grave stelae: (1) they are the final authority (in that they are typically the only surviving source) of a person’s life and deeds; (2) as only the elite had access to the resources required to erect them, they have a place in the contemporaneous web of political authority; and (3) the memorial culture that inheres in them was a means, when cultivated on an individual level, of entering the ranks of the elite and thereby acquiring political authority.

*Boltz and Kern on Textual Emergence*

In the second chapter of *Writing and Authority*, Lewis examines the philosophical milieu of the Warring States period and explains how schools and texts were formed over time. He describes a society in which masters, disciples, and texts are all mutually defining, and in which texts, rather than being the work of a single author, are
constructed by various hands over a long period. The basis of this arrangement, according to Lewis, was the nature of the book at the time. Written most often on thin bamboo strips that were lashed together, texts were to a large extent modular, allowing chunks to be inserted and removed in a way that is unthinkable with printed and bound material. William Boltz, in his chapter, “The Composite Nature of Early Chinese Texts,” offers an important expansion of this theory.

Taking the notion of modularity a step further, a notion that Boltz himself has championed over the years through his use of isocolometrical analysis, Boltz proposes that virtually all early texts were created, at least in part, by cobbling together components from existing texts. He divides his chapter into sections focusing first on evidence from excavated texts and second on evidence from transmitted texts.

For excavated texts, Boltz compares in fine-grained detail excavated versions of the *Yijing*, *Laozi*, and *Ziyi*, with their transmitted counterparts, finding that they are composed of paragraph-length building blocks that bear no pattern of assemblage from version to respective version. Building blocks in a literary sense cohere nicely with building blocks in regard to the medium of the book at the time. One might add that if these texts had been transmitted in an oral tradition, they would have been most easily transmitted in short, discrete units, which would have been especially important to oral recitation when considering the lack of any narrative or polemical thread.

In his second section, Boltz demonstrates that we need to peer beneath the paper image of transmitted texts as we see them today and try to imagine them in their earliest manifestations. A chief characteristic of early texts that allows for this kind of analysis is that discrete episodes appear in different texts and are even iterated more than once in the same text. We can infer from this phenomenon that these episodes originated in even earlier, separate texts and were selected for inclusion in a process of componential construction. To further substantiate this likelihood, Boltz analyzes distinct episodes as they appear in texts, painstakingly counting the number of characters and dividing passages into equal length lines, the way they may have originally appeared on bamboo strips. As a result, he finds a remarkable number of instances in which discrete passages separate nicely into lines of equal length, concluding that such passages originated from a single earlier source.

What could account for this high number of incidences in which particular passages happen to perfectly fill out lines of equal length? When we look at excavated bamboo strips, after all, we don’t find strips that end with the end of an episode and begin with a new episode—the episodes flow from strip to strip, regardless of the physical length of the strip. In excavated texts, content and medium are independent. To overcome this discrepancy and account for the unusually high rate of incidence that he has found, Boltz suggests that there may have been archival versions of texts or of episodes and that one of the formal features of these archival versions was that the end of a narrative comes to completion at the end of a bamboo strip.
By assuming that short passages of texts could be physically removed from a larger work, both Lewis (p. 54) and Boltz speculate in a direction that is not currently supported by the archaeological record. Nevertheless, the attractiveness of this theory, as Boltz demonstrates, is that we could conceivably subject all of our existing texts to analyses that would divide them into passages that would be composed of lines of equal length. In this way we could emulate the work of Biblical scholars who isolated a “Q” text that underlies and predates the gospels of Matthew and Luke and reconstruct fundamental texts of the Chinese tradition that predate the texts we have today.

Perhaps we have just such a text in the Guodian Laozi. But the Guodian Laozi is itself composed of short, discrete units that could have been cobbled together from previous sources. At some point, someone must have written down a passage for the first time. If, as Lewis claims, texts of this period usually got their start as the recorded words of a master, then the passages themselves must have been oral in form and perhaps even circulated as such for some time before being recorded on bamboo. It is plausible, then, that rather than there having been archives of quotable quotes tailored in length to bamboo strips, the stories, anecdotes, and aphorisms that are repeated in and among texts circulated as modular parts of orally transmitted works before being written down and persisted orally even after texts were recorded. If the memorial culture of the Han dynasty that Brashier examines in his chapter extends backward into the Warring States period and earlier, as it almost certainly does to at least some extent, this latter possibility seems likely (see pp. 268, 281–282). Boltz acknowledges the likelihood of oral transmission, but he also has a point that we must explain away the unusual number of coincidences he finds in line length before confirming the orality hypothesis.

Schaberg, Csikszentmihalyi, and Gentz on Ritual in Literary Genres

In chapter 3 of Writing and Authority, Lewis turns to accounts about the past, which were used as authorities for substantiating claims about the present. Beginning with the Shang shu, Lewis adduces text after text, demonstrating how scholars employed events and figures of the past to make points about the conduct of government in the present. He ends with the Zuo zhuan and Gongyang zhuan, texts that posit ritual-based theories of conducting moral government. In the fourth chapter, Lewis, confining his remarks to the Shi jing, considers what happened when rational persuasions regarding proper governing failed and a speaker resorted to less direct means of making a point.

David Schaberg, in his chapter, “Playing at Critique: Indirect Remonstrance and the Formation of Shi Identity,” supplements Lewis by presenting a history of indirect remonstrance. Although it has no apparent relevance to ritual, it has very much to do with writing and authority.

The fanciful stories of remonstrance that abound in early texts and purport to date back to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods are usually neglected by scholars due to their lack of historicity. What can be learned from them,
after all, if they are merely fictional? Schaberg has lent the eye of the historian to literary theory and proposed that the usually fictitious stories of indirect remonstrance were the products of a shifting of the political power differential. As the several states gave way to empire and the emperor became insulated from frank advice due to bureaucratic formalization, the fictitious means to which shi (men of service) turned reflects a new reality of vastly unequal players. The bureaucratization of the empire meant that functionaries replaced nobility as key administrators, and as has been pointed out above, these men of service displayed their political promise through literary means. It is natural, then, that the Han shi would find great pleasure in stories of men using their wit and words to transform distant despots prone to arbitrary violence.

Schaberg traces the evolution of remonstrance settings from those of direct remonstrance between nobility to indirection required between entertainers or low-level courtiers and an autocratic ruler. In so doing, he develops a morphology of the indirect remonstrance and locates themes and recurring characters in the literary history of the period. He also comments on the inception of Chinese drama in the indirect remonstrance.

Schaberg closes his chapter with the comment that later in the tradition the “fiction [of indirect remonstrance] would prove to be very powerful” (p. 218). I wished, on reading his chapter, that Schaberg would have extended his excellent analysis from the narrow foundation of a single literary genre to a broader consideration of the role of indirection itself in early literature, and even in early Chinese culture. What made it more powerful than other means of expression? In what ways was the power manifested? In commenting in a note on the shelun (hypothetical discourse, p. 224), Schaberg points to another kind of indirection in discourse, but this and the indirect remonstrance were not the only kinds of indirection in early Chinese literature. Lewis covers the indirect uses of the Shijing and refers to Francois Jullien’s excellent analysis of indirection as a uniquely Chinese literary device (pp. 160–161). These broader considerations are relevant because indirection not only appears in the case of fictional remonstrance after the rise of the empire but is quite common in other aspects of early Chinese culture even before the Han, and so the new political power differential that Schaberg adduces cannot be the only factor in its development or its persistence.

Martin Kern’s own contribution to this anthology takes us deep into the lexicography of the Shijing. In his chapter, “The Odes in Excavated Manuscripts,” he meticulously compares the orthography of Shijing fragments from excavated manuscripts with the received Shijing text. Although for the most part there is little pretense at tying the topic in with ritual, the chapter being straightforwardly competent and informative piece of literary scholarship, it acts as evidence for Kern’s larger project, namely demonstrating the place of performance with regard to poems/songs/hymns of the Shijing, performance in the same sense that a ritual is performed.
Lewis highlights the prominence of the *Shijing* in Chinese literary history by devoting an entire chapter to it, detailing its role as a vehicle for expressing opinions about political circumstances. Kern, in an important contribution to the growing scholarship on excavated texts, attempts to account for the many orthographic variants that we see in these manuscripts.

Analyzing texts from the Mawangdui, Guodian, and Shanghai finds, and comparing them with the received Mao version, Kern demonstrates through orthographic, phonological, and semantic examination that in nearly all cases, orthographic variants amount to graphic variation with phonological foundations, as opposed to genuine lexical variation. Because these types of variants are not restricted to the *Shijing* when it comes to the excavated texts, and because the *Shijing* arguably provides us with the most reliability due to its profound phonological component, Kern's work here is an important step in understanding why we find these variations between excavated texts and received texts. His conclusion is that rather than being copyist or scribal errors, the variants are simply the result of the secondary nature of written texts compared to oral texts. The texts were learned and used phonologically. The writing of them was important but not nearly as important as it is for us today.

The importance of orality that both Kern and Brashier emphasize is a significant supplement to Lewis' emphasis on writing. Although Lewis (1999) explicitly eschews consideration of vocal manifestations of the language (p. 1), a properly comprehensive treatment of the relationship of writing and authority, given that discourse and recitation were such large parts of the literary tradition, must examine the development of writing out of the spoken language and the persistence of orality in parallel with writing.

In chapter 5 of *Writing and Authority*, Lewis discusses the “grounding of textual authority in accounts of the past,” specifically in the mythological or semi-mythological figureheads of Fu Xi, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius (p. 195). Mark Csikszentmihalyi’s “Reimagining the Yellow Emperor’s Four Faces” considers the case of the mythological figurehead Huangdi, the Yellow Emperor. As with other contributors to *Text and Ritual*, Csikszentmihalyi has an outstanding command of both the received literature of the period and of the archaeological record. And like Schaberg, he uses this comprehensiveness to identify a new subgenre of writing.

Lewis describes in detail how political authority derived from or was intimately related to the authority invested in mythological or semi-mythological figureheads of the written word. Csikszentmihalyi extends the authority of the figurehead from politics to the sacred, and from traditional texts to artifacts created from what he calls “ritually privileged” media (p. 227). In fact, his claim is that some texts attained their valorized status through association with a ritually significant medium.

To make this point, Csikszentmihalyi introduces the reader to the tradition of engravings created for the purpose of remembering the words of authoritative figures, such as the Yellow Emperor. It was common, he says, in the third and second
Likewise, there are existing texts and references to other texts that are self-identified as *ming* 銘 (engravings/inscriptions). Csikszentmihalyi proposes that texts written on traditional media, such as bamboo and silk, but identified as inscriptions bear a close and important association with three-dimensional artifacts and, therefore, constitute their own literary subgenre, which he dubs “literary inscriptions” (p. 227).

By reestablishing a link between the abstract admonitions and their purported artifactual counterparts, historians of literature can make important connections that might otherwise be missed. Csikszentmihalyi uses his chapter to do just that, with evidence too involved even to be summarized here. Suffice it to say that he finds plausible relationships among the Mawangdui Liming, the mysterious *Huangdi ming*, and the *Laozi*, suggesting that the *Laozi* may have at least partial origins in just this kind of self-admonitory genre.

Joachim Gentz’s chapter, “The Ritual Meaning of Textual Form,” is the chapter most relevant to the theme of the book and most conceptually complex. In an ambitious attempt at both consolidation and generalization, Gentz straddles two themes of *Writing and Authority*. The first, and the one at which he is most competent, is that of chapter 3 mentioned above, in which accounts of the past are used to substantiate claims about the present. Complicating this, however, Gentz ventures problematically into the realm of natural philosophy, which Lewis treats with remarkable acumen in chapter 6 of *Writing and Authority*.

Gentz operates in fairly safe territory while analyzing the *Gongyang zhuan*, explaining that the author’s strategy is to identify a typical pattern of exegesis in the *Chunqiu*, to note when the author of the *Chunqiu* departs from that pattern, and to explain how the formal deviation was viewed as an indirect commentary on the way in which the event described is itself a deviation from the expected norm. This method of exegesis is common also to the *Guliang Zhuan*, and Gentz identifies a similar method used in a commentary on a minor text called the *Xia Xiao Zheng*, which was incorporated into the *Da Dai liji*.

Gentz refers to his method as “ritual reading,” explaining that it is “a reading entirely based on textual form where the evolving meaning may either supplement the grammatical surface meaning or serve as a commentary on it” (p. 128). Based on this careful and insightful analysis, Gentz, like Csikszentmihalyi, proposes generalizing his method to other texts in order to attain similar insights. Perhaps it is a sign of my own deficiency, however, that I am having a hard time thinking of any other texts, outside of the three mentioned by Gentz, to which this method could apply. Gentz, unfortunately, does not suggest any.

I will consider Gentz’s chapter further below.

*On Extending Terminological Precision*

If it had not been apparent already to anyone reading *Writing and Authority*, after completing Lewis’s chapter 6, “The Natural Philosophy of Writing,” one comes to
understand the justification for the encomia heaped on it. Lewis moves effortlessly among some of the most difficult and chronologically disparate texts in the tradition, rigorously grounding his claims in specific references and articulating them in clear and precise language. He begins with the origins of writing in divination and goes on to explain the development of the *Yijing* out of these origins as it was used by diviners and how the *Yijing* was eventually co-opted by the “schoolmen” as a way of accounting for events in terms of moral action.

Lewis recounts the process of late moral divination—if one may call it that—stating that the commentators gave “pride of place to interactions between units, which are inherently moving and dynamic, rather than their nature. They thus create[d] a proto-science of generating and mutating signs, rather than fixed essences, to account for the patterns that underlie change in the world” (pp. 265–266). He says that the images were viewed as capturing the “truth of the world” (p. 257), that the *Yi* was “directly rooted in the patterns of the cosmos” (p. 255) and that “the power of the *Yi* depended on correspondences between the text and the world” (p. 255). From this perspective, the purpose of divination, according to Lewis, is to master both the future and the past.

Although Lewis does not venture a systematic description of Chinese cosmology from the perspective of the commentators of the *Yi*, one can see that he identifies two significant features: (1) patterns, which are related in a fundamental way to natural (including human) processes of change, and (2) this dynamism itself, which is a fundamental aspect of the universe. Given these two fundamental features of the cosmology, one would expect corollary presuppositions and extrapolations.

One of the greatest difficulties for scholars writing about the cosmology of early China is putting it into readily understandable Western terminology. One can see the care that Lewis takes in this regard in his emphasis on a lack of fixed essences. A singularly important feature of Western speculation in regard to cosmology—one that is common to many influential strands of religion, philosophy, and science since Abraham and Thales and all the way up to Descartes, Newton, and Russell—is the presupposition of a fundamental ontology of fixed essences and/or relations—God, souls, arché, logos/ratio, elements, laws—behind the changes that we observe in the world is a realm of certainty and stasis that is ultimately tractable by us now, by our afterlife selves, or by God. Even today, scientists struggle to find a Grand Unified Theory that will once and for all tell us what material the universe is fundamentally made of and what laws the things made of it invariably follow.

The desideratum of explanation and its extrapolation into prediction appear to be what can unify Western and Chinese cosmological speculation, and that is why Lewis refers to the late philosophical cooptation of the *Yi* as a “proto-science” (p. 266). What separates them, however, in my opinion, is the basis on which the explanations and predictions are made, and this should give translators and interpreters working in the field today pause. The emphasis between dynamism, on one side, and stasis, on the other, is important and grows in importance when con-
considering how to put the categories of early Chinese cosmological speculation into English terms that necessarily developed out of Western cosmological speculation.

To ask what kinds of things the world is made of is to presuppose an answer to an even more difficult question, namely, which categories we use to identify the kinds of things the world is made of. Western and Chinese speculators of cosmology all deal with ostensibly the same cosmological reality. One thing that distinguishes many influential Western conceptualizations of this reality, however, is an assumption of tractability through reduction—everything in the world can be reduced to a finite number of discrete generalizations that will exhaust all explanations without remainder, either by us, or at least by a divine being related to us. For Plato, there was a reduction to *eidos* and *logos*. *Logos* held for Aristotle and was coupled with his categories and natural teleology. For Christians, Jews, and Muslims, the explanatory basis is God. And for modern science, the explanatory basis is mathematics and theoretical physics, with their discrete laws, axioms, and particles.\textsuperscript{5, 6} For all of these and all dominant Western cosmologies throughout history, the reduction has been theoretically complete and the basis of it static. When the world was explained, the *whole* world was explained, and the notion of prediction was tied up inextricably and demonstrably with determinism and/or fatalism, implying a comprehensive nomology (with the exceptions, usually, of God and humans).

For expositors of the *Yi*, however, although there was a set of interpretive tools for explaining events in the world and although their power and utility were described in superlative terms, there was no dream of a synchronic comprehensive nomology. In other words, there was not the view that the workings of the world could be brought, even theoretically, under one umbrella all at once. Only slices of it were tractable at any one time and only in coarse-grained detail. There was not a discrete number of rules or entities to which all phenomena could be reduced in the service of comprehensive explanation and prediction. In this sense, although there was a clear goal of explanation and prediction in the early Chinese mantic arts, it was not a proto-science in the same way that we use the term for Western proto-sciences that do assume the possibility of exhaustive reduction and theoretically deterministic prediction.\textsuperscript{7}

One may speculate as to why the Chinese explanatory and predictive efforts were not even theoretically comprehensive. It may be that they believed the world was fundamentally nondeterministic. It may be that they believed that human beings were fundamentally incapable of plumbing the depths of natural nomology. Or it may be that they felt the tools at our disposal, namely the categories of human thought and language, were fundamentally inadequate to the task.

The cooptation of the *Yi* by the intelligentsia of the Warring States period developed as neither pseudoscience nor proto-science. Neither was it science in a modern sense nor rationalistic philosophy in a Hellenistic sense, nor even humanism of the Renaissance variety (which relied on robust conceptions of God and human exceptionalism). And it obviously was not monotheistic religion in
an Abrahamic sense, nor was it shamanism in an aboriginal sense. Because it fits none of our typical rubrics for labeling comprehensive human intellectual endeavors, scholars must take great care in how terms from early Chinese intellectual history are put into contemporary English and other Western languages.

To conclude, I will give several examples, drawing from the two texts under examination, to illustrate why this sort of terminological precision matters to the enterprise of early Chinese studies. I would like to emphasize that it is obvious in reading Lewis’ and Kern’s texts that terminological precision is the order of the day for all the authors, and my suggestion here is that this concern for precision be judiciously extended to the items below.

The Performative
The first book that came to mind while reading Text and Ritual was Writing and Authority, for the reasons given above. The second book that came to mind was Herbert Fingarette’s Confucius: The Secular as Sacred® for its unusually trenchant and influential treatment of Chinese ritual. In its introduction and development of the performative with regard to Confucian ritual action, this book has stood the test of time.

The notion of the performative was brought to intellectual prominence through J. L. Austin’s development of the theory of speech acts, namely that human utterances are more than just expressions; they can directly and immediately accomplish things in the world. Examples include “You’re fired,” “I do” (in a wedding ceremony), and “I sentence you to twenty years.” Such utterances have an effect in the world equivalent to other human actions. The theory of speech acts states that some important presuppositions of successful performative utterances are a common language, a common set of cultural norms, an acceptable milieu in which the words are uttered, and the standing of the speaker as bearing appropriate authority. The term “performative” is used in just this sense by Lewis, when he says in regard to the judgments in the Chun Qiu (How to Do Things with Words. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962):

Linking the Chun Qiu to Confucius’ supposed role as a judge is significant. Law, together with religion and government, is one of the spheres of activity in which language most frequently plays a performative role. The declarations of the judge, like those of the official or the priest, produce social realities. His pronouncement of guilt creates the fact of guilt in a way not possible for ordinary people. (p. 140)

In a rather illegitimate way, Fingarette extends this notion of the performative utterance to the actions of Confucian ritual. It is illegitimate in the sense that it is redundant to say that an action is performative because “performative” in Austin’s sense is distinct from dramatic performance and refers only to utterance as action—of course, an action is an action.® Fingarette’s purpose, however, is to account for the supererogatory effects, the “magic,” that occur in ritualized action.
He claims that ritual action gains its efficacy through the same set of presuppositions as performative utterances, namely a common set of cultural norms, an acceptable milieu in which the action is performed, the standing of the speaker as bearing the appropriate authority, and, extending the notion of a common language into behavior, one could say, a common language of gesture. Fingarette says in *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper, 1972):

There is no power of *li* if there is no learned and accepted convention, or if we utter the words and invoke the power of the convention in an inappropriate setting, or if the ceremony is not fully carried out, or if the persons carrying out the ceremonial roles are not those properly authorized. (p. 12)

One notices the subtle elision of utterance and action, which makes use of the term “performative” problematic but acceptable for ritual action. Fingarette was not the only one, although he may have been the first, to make this move. Since him, other scholars have also noticed that ritual action is a kind of signification that has an extra force lent to it by its social context, and hence is performative. My shaking your hand in greeting is performative in the sense that it not only signifies my intention to greet you but accomplishes it as well. The same movements, if conducted in early China, would not carry the same force, even if the actor’s intentions were the same. No greeting would be accomplished.

An unfortunate side effect of the popularity of the term “performative” has been that an ambiguity has crept in. We find potential confusion due to this ambiguity in fully half of the chapters of *Text and Ritual*.

The term “performative” should be distinguished from the term “to perform” in its barest sense, which in various inflections occurs dozens of times throughout *Text and Ritual* in every chapter, meaning severally:

- To carry out an action, to execute
- To execute with formality or solemnity
- To be theatrical in nature
- To play a social role

The most common usages in the book involve performing a ritual, performing a poetic piece, and performing entertainment. Now the question is, are any of these kinds of performance performative? On examining the context of the usage of “performative,” it may appear that the term is being used, at least some of the time, as an adjectival form of “to perform.” Stopping here, however, would be to overlook the larger context of the book and neglect that, properly speaking, “performative” is not an adjective of “to perform” in its barest sense.

The “performative” in “performative role” (p. 61), “performative elements” (p. 175), “performative compositions” (p. 50), “performative and theatrical aspects” (p. 125), “performative context” (p. 127), and “recitative and performative baggage” (p. 268) cannot simply be replaced with “active” or “performance” with no loss of meaning. It is true that the term “performative” is occasionally used loosely in some
academic fields, but if the standard of precision that the authors of this anthology have established is to be upheld, its usage should be more carefully considered.

How, then, is the Austin/Fingarette notion of the performative applicable to this topic? How does it fit in with the kinds of ritual, textual, and theatrical performance discussed in this anthology? The answer comes down to the observation that the four distinct meanings of the term “performance” as listed above are not completely discrete and that the term carries a full-bodied polysemy that allows it to be used appropriately in very different contexts. To act formally or solemnly is, nevertheless, to act; performing a ritual solemnly and formally is most often done, especially in a Chinese context, in public and resembles a theatrical performance in this regard; both ritual and theatrical performance requires the adoption of domain-specific, domain-constituted roles recognized and tacitly authorized by a community of observers. In other words, the ritual performances described in this text that carry elements of solemnity and theatricality are performative in Austin’s (and Fingarette’s) sense—they are gestures that presuppose a common set of cultural norms that gain their efficacy from general community acceptance of these norms and that are executed in appropriate milieux, at appropriate times, by people with the authority to play their accepted roles.¹⁴

Perhaps the most trenchant and widely noted observation regarding ritual in this text is that early poems/songs were fundamentally performative. Although Kern does not elaborate on this idea here, he has written influentially about it elsewhere,¹⁵ and that influence is displayed in several chapters in this anthology. Considering a poem to have the aspects of a hymn radically alters one’s perspective on its sociocultural function; in fact, its immediate sociocultural function is what makes it a hymn rather than a literary pursuit of merely diachronic significance. The fundamental claim made throughout this anthology—that texts in early China have a profoundly ritualistic aspect—rests on the premise that the performance of these texts is performative in nature, which is to say that they accomplish something for members of the community, by virtue of accepted communal norms, that goes beyond the face value of the performance itself.

Divination

The notion of the performative in this context answers an important question, namely, what is it that consecrates one action but not another as a ritual act? The answer, as we see through the work of Austin, Fingarette, and the authors of this anthology, is the constitution of ritual by a normative community. The individual performance matters less than the actual meaning of it that is conferred by a community.

Joachim Gentz attempts to answer the question in a different way. From his carefully documented textual starting point as described above, Gentz expands his claims into the realm of ritual. He says:
In a ritual action, Confucius treats the historical material [of the Chunqiu] as he would meet a guest, encounter an official, offer a sacrifice, handle a covenant, or behave at the death of a person. On the basis of his righteousness, and following a moral and ritual pattern, he evaluates the historical situation and then chooses the adequate ritual form to bring about a correct and adequate correspondence to the situation. At the same time, he thereby expresses the moral and ritual pattern together with his own righteousness in a historiographic physiognomy. (p. 134)

Attempting to answer the question of what makes an action ritually significant, Gentz proposes an argument that can be summarized as follows:

- A certain action is meant to be interpreted as a sign.
- A sign is "physiognomic."
- Physiognomy is a special branch of ritual.
- Therefore, the action in question is ritually significant.

Gentz's use of the term "physiognomy" is idiosyncratic and would be better expressed with the word "divination." This being said, is it true that certain actions were intended to be divined, and if so, would that have made them ritually significant?

Ritual, as understood in early China, certainly has elements of magical power, of a hermeneutic process, and of patterned action, as Gentz says, but a hermeneutic process is not necessarily reducible to divination, nor is patterned action necessarily reducible to ritual. So it does not necessarily follow that the hermeneutic patterns of the Chunqiu and Gongyang zhuang are candidates for ritual action.

What makes them candidates for Gentz is the implicit correspondence between the action (or deviation from normative action) and a hidden order that is an immanent feature of the universe. In early China, there was certainly a branch of ritual expertise that read significance from natural events based on a presumed sense of natural order as manifested in patterns, but it is a stretch to say that all ritual action was meant to be a sign of the manifestation of this order to be divined by others. Indeed, the author of the Gongyang zhuang engaged in a hermeneutic process of uncovering the hidden message in the Chunqiu's formalism, but to identify that process with traditional ritual as outlined in the Analects, as Gentz does, is to distort the idea of ritual from one in which harmony emerges through actions (ritual as performative) to one in which actions are merely a sign of one's own interpretation of the current state of the world. Interpretation may be presupposed in the performance of a ritual action, but interpretation does not entail ritual.

So while it may not be the case that early texts require a “ritual reading,” as Gentz claims, it is certainly true that they require a hermeneutic sensitivity to form as well as to content, with Gentz's chapter being exemplary in this regard.

That one bring a sensitivity to both the ontological presuppositions of early authors and the terminology in which one explains them is also imperative. For instance, the term “invisible ideal order” that Gentz uses is too ambiguous. It can refer to a supernatural, nomological order that is ontologically prior to and axiologically superior to our visibly apparent physical/political/moral order (thereby
resembling a Platonic worldview); or it can refer to a less strictly nomological order that is inherent in our physical/political/moral order, and if allowed to manifest itself, is axiologically superior to a distorted world in which it fails to manifest itself adequately. The first holds the ideal as inherent in the world, whether we realize it or not, and the second holds up the ideal as a possibility to aim for, but that may never be manifested. It is unclear which of these Gentz is proposing. I would suggest that only the second is applicable to early China. This second kind of order does not preclude supernatural elements and, more important, enfolds them into the normal order, so that both the hidden and the manifest are on the same plane of reality. If one speaks of an invisible ideal order, one must separate the invisible from the ideal. That it is invisible does not make it ideal, and that it is ideal does not make it invisible. Any mention of idealism in an early Chinese sense must be clearly noted to be aspirational and not metaphysical.

Gentz’s handling of key cosmological notions such as divination, ideal order, and, further, *ganying* (which he renders with the behaviorist terms “stimulus and response” [p. 141]), leaves more to be desired with regard to terminological precision. Precision in scholarly writing is always desirable, but it is especially so when the terms can inadvertently smuggle in concomitant notions that are entirely foreign to the context in which the term is used.

Functionalism

My examination of terminological precision in this anthology is intended to contribute a grain of insight to its mountain of valuable scholarship without detracting from its overall quality. I would like to add in closing that, in addition to the many linguistic, literary, and historical contributions that this text obviously affords, there is a general contribution that a reader may overlook and that needs to be stated explicitly, in precise terms. This is the implicit understanding shared among these authors that ritual in early Chinese society was not a matter merely of sterile traditions performed out of slavish conventionalism or a form of antiquated superstition. Instead, it is treated by these scholars as a fundamental, pervasive, and multifaceted aspect of life for the early Chinese elite. Recognizing this functionalist approach to ritual is vital to the development of the academic study of early China because it removes Orientalist blinders that would have scholars dismiss this pervasive aspect of early Chinese society as an inconvenient irrationalism in the inevitable march of Chinese thought from archaic superstition to full-blown humanism. On the contrary, the social functions that Xunzi adumbrated so long ago in *li* have recently come to be appreciated by scholars with regard to Western forms of ritual, and the expansion of ritual studies into the realm of early Chinese studies finally allows for a full consideration of early Chinese worldviews that incorporated *li* as a core philosophical notion.

Kern says with respect to the importance of ritual to the early Chinese that a
prominent discourse in the representation of early Chinese culture is that of ritual. This discourse is not limited to the three early li canons; it pervades early Chinese texts in their quest for social, political, and cosmological order. (pp. xii–xiii)

It now falls to the rest of us to take this functionalist approach with respect to pervasive li into account and determine exactly what the early Chinese found in their quest for social, political, and cosmological order—How was the performative nature of ritual instrumental in tying these spheres together? How did it relate to the concern for patterns and dynamism that Lewis identifies as fundamental to early Chinese cosmology? And how do these core aspects (ritual, patterns, dynamism) of early Chinese thought distinguish early Chinese theories of human action in the world from counterpart theories in other cultures?

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NOTES

1. Martin Kern, in a glowing forty-one page review for this publication, refers to Writing and Authority as a “monument of scholarship,” “the most comprehensive, illuminating, and intellectually challenging tour de force through the early Chinese intellectual tradition that has been published so far,” and Lewis’ magnum opus (China Review International 7, no. 2, p. 336); Lothar von Falkenhausen, in a separate review, calls Lewis’ work a masterpiece, stating that Lewis is “the premier historian of the crucial centuries surrounding the unification of China” (Philosophy East and West 51, no. 1, pp. 127, 135); and William Boltz, on the back cover of Writing and Authority, says, “I would not be surprised to see this book rise to a level of lasting importance that few modern works of scholarship, even good ones, can hope for.”

2. Nylan averts to Nicolas Zufferey in support of her interpretation of ru, but Zufferey says that by the time of Emperor Wu, “Before all else, [ru] were officials” (To the Origins of Confucianism. Bern: Peter Lang, 2003, p. 360 [he addresses the issue of translation explicitly on p. 374]), which is certainly not a central understanding of “classicist” in any English sense. In my opinion, ru is one of those terms, like dao, qi, yin, and yang, that is best left, as Zufferey does, in transliteration and explained, if necessary, in a footnote. Translation in such cases tends to distort more than it conveys.

3. Lewis alludes to something of this sort when he refers to the Mohist theory of writing as a means of control, giving as an example that some former rulers, known only through military exploits preserved in “writing, carving, and inscribing,” were misunderstood through these sole remaining accounts as being concerned only with war (p. 115).


5. Although some have recently speculated that a Grand Unified Theory may be impossible, and others have speculated that physical theories do not exhaust our explanations of the world, other prominent scientists, such as E. O. Wilson, have argued that eventually science can unify all bodies of human endeavor, even the humanities (see, for example, Wilson’s Consilience).
6. The Uncertainty Principle, which calls ultimate reduction into question, is, itself, stated in general terms and allows for probabilistic generalizability.

7. When the Da zhuang says, “知變化之道者， 其知神之所為乎,” one may translate dao as “way” or “path” but still be tempted to understand it as a law, or set of laws, of change and transformation. We must remember, however, that dao as relating to patterns and their dynamism is not part of a deterministic order in the sense that Newton’s laws are supposed to be, and the Yi’s claim to ultimate knowledge is very different from Laplace’s assertion that if one knows all of the forces and positions of everything at one time, everything in the future can be predicted. The Da zhuang, despite its comprehensive tone, limits the knowledge from the Yi to those items relevant to proximal human endeavor. Whereas Laplace would claim to be able to know, given enough information, exactly when, where, and with what intensity a particular dog will scratch itself next, a sage reading the Yi would scoff at the very idea. Plato and Aristotle might also have scoffed at the utility of such a prediction, but they would have taken very seriously its theoretical possibility as it relates to their notions of causal, ethical, and logical necessity (Plato, Timaeus, esp. 53d, Republic X, and Phaedo; Aristotle, On Interpretation IX, Nicomachean Ethics III, and Physics II), notions that in their strict interpretations are, at most, peripheral in early Chinese thought.


11. Austin, as well as others, point out that the distinction between signification and force (constative and performative, as Austin puts it), is not always clear.

12. For instance: (1) Brashier (p. 268) refers to hymns that “were intended to be recited and performed” and then refers in the next sentence to their “recitative and performative baggage.” (2) Gentz (p. 127) refers to the “performative context of early Chinese texts” and in the same paragraph to the “ritual performance of composing a text.”


14. See especially Boltz’s use, pp. 50 and 51.


16. “Physiognomy,” as it is used in English, refers to a particular mantic practice in the West (and used as a translation for similar Chinese activities, such as mianxiang 面相) in which one’s character is said to be apparent in one’s physical features, and is not, as Gentz uses it, a general term for viewing the hidden by way of manifested signs, as is the term “divination.”

17. An explicit functionalist approach to ritual in early China has recently been adopted by T. C. Kline III and several other scholars in Kline’s forthcoming anthology Ritual and Religion in the Xunzi (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, forthcoming).