

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Attitudes toward food, thinking about food, and the offering up of food in sacrifice were formative elements in the conception of models of sagehood in early China. To the ancient Chinese, consuming, exchanging, and offering up food were often seen as acts of self-cultivation that could impart physical, moral, and political benefits on individuals, society, and its rulers. A cursory glance at the hoards of bronze vessels unearthed from Shang and Zhou sites, or the large array of stone and clay artifacts and lacquerware recovered from Warring States and Han tombs, suffices to illustrate that a vibrant culture surrounded the preparation, consumption, and ritual presentation of food. This rich world of food inspired an equally fascinating world of ideas.

This book seeks to shed light on the intricate world of ideas that surrounded sacrificial food culture in early China. It explores how the culture of sacrificial religion, its underlying philosophies, and the ritual practices associated with it helped shape the background against which the early Chinese conceived ideals of sagehood. In addition, this study examines how sacrificial religion influenced the ways in which the early Chinese explained the workings of the human senses and the role of sensory experience in communicating with the spirit world. In essence, I will argue that early Chinese ritual and religious practice was based on the premise that what was spiritual was “sensible,” and this book identifies sacrificial procedure as the core practice through which this becomes evident.

Early Chinese texts are replete with moral debates on food and the offering of sacrifice. One striking aspect of these debates is that discussions on how to nourish the human world were never far removed from concerns with feeding the spirits. Just as food fostered physical and moral well-being among humans, the offering of food and its associated crafts of cooking and butchering were also seen as instrumental in forging communication with the spirit

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

world. The early Chinese only rarely distinguished the ritual or religious manipulation of food from its secular role in society.

The fact that early Chinese food culture was deeply implicated in ritual, religious, and philosophical paradigms led to the development of numerous conceptual parallels along which ideas about cooking, flavor, sacrifice, and self-cultivation developed in Warring States and Han China. My analysis suggests that the ritual world where “table” and sacrificial altar met was a world marked by contending views on the ways in which the sage ruler should sense the world. Rather than seeking to distinguish secular or profane food culture from the world of ritual sacrifice, and rather than identifying a transcendent spirit realm divorced from the physical concerns of human society, early China’s ritualists and masters of philosophy saw in sacrifice a practice that confronted humans with a fundamental paradox between moral and material values. At the heart of the issue was the question how humans could engage with an ephemeral spirit world or pursue higher forms of self-cultivation through physical means, either through nutrition and other forms of bodily comfort, or through the presentation of ritualized offerings for the spirits. How could ritual participants and adepts generate forms of intangible spirit power internally within the self, or communicate externally with a spirit world that lies beyond normal channels of sensory contact, while being physically anchored in and dependent on a material and physical world that constantly tempts their sensory desires? Or, put differently, how to distance oneself from indulging in the physical delights of commensality and conviviality while acknowledging that both processes are necessary conduits to generate higher forms of authority both in the human world and in one’s contact with higher powers?

Sacrificial religion, and the social and economic environment in which it was embedded, brought these questions into focus because, unlike prayer or liturgy, the consumption and presentation of offerings was essentially a highly material process aimed at achieving the largely immaterial goal of influencing a world of ephemeral spirits. A preoccupation with food, foodways, and sacrificial offering challenges the human agent in two intrinsically opposed ways: On the one hand, it ties the subject to a world of physical appreciation, aesthetic pleasure, and gustatory or sensory delight; yet on the other hand, a banquet or sacrificial feast harbored within itself the potential to cloud or obstruct a genuine or higher form of engagement with a world that transcends our immediate sensory stimuli and physical comforts.

Philosophers, ritualists, and men of authority in Warring States and Han China were acutely aware of this tension and, although no one consciously sought to resolve it, many narratives on food and sacrifice attempted to

INTRODUCTION

3

reconcile or explain the challenges posed by these sensory opposites. Ritual codes highlighted the various forms in which this tension manifested itself. When should one fast and when should one feast, eat or feed, and should one do so for pleasure or for sustenance? Should one nourish the body or nurture the spirit, engage in covert forms of spirit worship or overt ones? Should one be ostentatious and publicly generous in ceremony and sacrificial display or prudent and modest? Should one invariably expose humans and spirits to the rich amalgam of flavors and fragrances on display in sacrifice or instead shield them from such stimuli? How effective are the material paraphernalia used in sacrifice in securing a response from the spirit world, and at what point does economic expenditure on sacrificial cult become a sign of excess that repels rather than attracts the spirits?

These and similar questions were by no means limited to early China's ritual canon. They occurred across a wide variety of texts that, each in their own language, proposed strategies on how a ruler of virtue, an accomplished gentleman, or the sage was to address them. Furthermore, a tension of a similar kind to the one that faced the ritualist in sacrifice characterized Warring States and Han portrayals of the sage ruler: On the one hand, the bodies and senses of rulers and superiors were to be catered for in luxury and comfort, yet on the other hand, their sagacity and knack for governing were often thought to derive from their ability to dispense with the trappings of the material world. An accomplished ruler in early China could demonstrate his power by externalizing his virtue and piety through banquets, feasts, and sacrificial displays, yet he could also choose to display his advanced comprehension of the world by turning inward and nourishing the self through a regime of self-cultivation. On the one hand, virtue could be grounded in a physical and material basis and mediated through objects and materiality, yet on the other hand, the sage or virtuous ruler was to avoid being overly dependent on the material accouterments that expressed his authority to the outside world.¹ His body and mind were to be maintained in sensory comfort while at the same time he was to be sheltered from overexposure to the immediate physical world that sustained him in order to be able to comprehend the deeper patterns of society and the cosmos at large.

The following pages therefore do not offer a study of nutrition, or gastronomy, or the history and science of food production in China – topics that have

¹ On virtues in terms of their material, or quasi-material, properties in texts from the 4th through 2nd centuries BCE, see Csikszentmihalyi (2004). Csikszentmihalyi shows how the “Wu xing” 五行 texts from Mawangdui and Guodian have moral properties correspond to bodily states, and how ritual therefore can be conceived of as exerting a significant influence on the body itself. Acts of self-cultivation here are anchored in a physical substrate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

already inspired an extensive scholarly literature.² It is also not my ambition to offer a comprehensive survey of sacrificial cult in ancient China or to reexamine the social and political significance of the institution of sacrifice itself as it is reflected in early China's textual and archaeological landscape. Several studies have addressed the role of sacrificial cult in the creation of political authority during the period under discussion, when China transformed from a feudal constituency of contending states into the unified empires of Qin and Han (221 BCE–220 CE).³

Instead, the following chapters take the culture of food and sacrifice as a point of departure to help us understand Chinese attitudes to human virtue, personal salvation, self-cultivation, and conceptions of moral government. Through exploring dietary culture and sacrificial religion, this study is as much a reflection on ideals of human sagehood in early China as it is an account of religion in practice. Indeed the rich gustatory semantics on display in Warring States and Han texts do not fall short of Carolyn Korsmeyer's elegant assessment of the role of taste in literary narrative:

Eating can signal gross indulgence and moral laxity or lusty participation in life's offerings. Attention to taste may indicate refinement of perception or silly preoccupation with superficial pleasures. Ascetic refusal can betoken lofty moral ideas and fine character, timid withdrawal and aversion to bodily needs, or religious extremism. The preparation and offering of food in gestures of hospitality may be manipulative, reluctant, generous, careless, or dangerous. Narratives may detail how food nourishes, heals, and comforts or how it dupes, poisons and addicts. Food can be an offering to friends and an invitation to conviviality and conversation; or ... food and drink may be those elements that must be withheld from the body to keep the mind in higher tune.⁴

This book begins with a discussion of food as a physical entity, proceeds to cooking and eating as a symbolical craft, and then onto the feeding of the spirit world. It then pauses with the economics surrounding sacrificial culture and concludes with a chapter on the senses of sages. To set the scene, Chapter 1 starts with a survey of Chinese dietary culture and its logistics as reflected

² For a bibliographical survey, see Sterckx (2006b), notes 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6; see also Sterckx (2005), 1–8.

³ For a survey of official cults and the spirit world addressed therein from Western Zhou through Han, see Bilsky (1975) and Loewe (1986), 661–8. The best study of state-sanctioned festivals in the Han remains Bodde (1975). On the suburban sacrifice to Heaven, ritual music, and liturgies associated with state sacrifices, see Bujard (2000) and Kern (1997). Imperial tours of empire and their accompanying sacrificial rituals are discussed in He Pingli (2003), 118–254; Kern (2000a); and Lewis (1999b).

⁴ Korsmeyer (1999), 185.

INTRODUCTION

5

in textual sources from Zhou through Han. It identifies attested food taboos, discusses how diet was associated with human character, and examines the moral politics of food consumption. To do so, it focuses on the role of meat in sociopolitical life, ideas on abstinence from meat and other foodstuffs, and the intricate world of banqueting in early China. The chapter closes with a discussion of the ways in which early Chinese texts portray the Confucius figure in relation to dining and the food sacrifice.

Chapter 2 shows how the language of food and cooking was one of the main vehicles by means of which the early Chinese expressed sociopolitical values and ideas about virtue and human morality. Its title echoes Charles Malamoud's study of the concept of *lokapakti* in Vedic texts, yet any comparison should stop there, since a very distinctive concept of "cooking the world" emerges in early Chinese sources, namely the idea that butchering, cooking, and dining were forms of self-cultivation.⁵ The act of cooking itself often served to symbolize the broader ideal of social and cosmic harmony. The chapter starts with an analysis of narratives on butchering and cooking, showing how stewards and cooks emerged as sage-advisers to rulers in literary and historical narratives. Many of these ideas converge in Warring States and Han narratives on Yi Yin 伊尹, the legendary cook-advisor who was alleged to have gained political office by impressing the founding king of Shang with his cooking skills. The chapter concludes with a discussion of exemplary dining codes for rulers and their courts.

From feeding humans, we proceed to feeding the spirits in Chapter 3. Ritual texts show that food offerings were one of the main sensory conduits to the spirit world. The choice of offerings in sacrifice was guided by taxonomies of flavor. Central ingredients in the sacrificial cuisine of the time were the stew and alcoholic ale, and both sparked a great deal of debate. Whereas the tasteless stew was seen as a refined medium to influence the spirits, overindulgence in ale both at and away from the sacrificial altar became a stock image for political depravity and moral decay. The sacrificial procedure itself was a multimedia event that challenged ritual participants to search out their surroundings for spirit presence and forced them to find a moral mean between ostentation and restraint in ceremonial display. Sacrificial ceremony and commensality could offer its participants the comforts of collective commemoration and social togetherness, but it could also prove to be a highly alienating procedure when the search for a spirit response was not reciprocated.

The religious economy on which the performance of sacrifice and the availability of sacrificial offerings and ritual personnel depended is the subject

⁵ Malamoud (1996), esp. chapter 2.

of Chapter 4. Sustaining sacrificial cult was a complex process that required careful planning and complex logistics. Sacrificial demands also impinged significantly on the economics of everyday life. Calendars, legal texts, and ritual codices offered detailed guidelines on how to sustain a vibrant culture of sacrificial offering and ritual gift exchange. Most Warring States philosophers shared views on the generation and distribution of resources for the purpose of cult. Several commentators raised concerns about the often conflicting demands posed by sacrificial obligation and the need to sustain the economic welfare of society. Although few sought to articulate the demands of ritual as radically distinct from secular life, the question of how and when to invest material resources for spiritual ends runs as a leitmotiv through narratives on sacrifice in Warring States and Han China.

Chapter 5 returns to the world of flavor, fragrance, and scent and its association with the spirit world, and shows that the sensory world expressed in narratives on cooking and sacrifice was echoed in descriptions of sages as agents possessing extraordinary faculties of sensation. Just as olfaction was a standard medium to communicate with higher powers through ritual or sacrifice, so scent was associated with moral judgment and sagehood. Likewise, just as many of the spirits addressed in sacrifice, or indeed the spiritual energies sought through regimens of self-cultivation and diet, responded to superior forms of sensation, so the sage ruler was advised to secure advanced forms of aural acuity and vision. Whereas ritualists debated the virtues of under- or overexposing the spirit world to sacrificial display, Warring States thinkers explored to what extent rulers and sages were to expose their senses to the stimuli produced by the world that surrounded them. Several sages and cultural heroes were portrayed as possessing extraordinary sense organs. At the same time, several texts insisted that to achieve a superior degree of insight into the workings of society and the cosmos at large, a ruler's senses were to be protected from the distractions generated by sensory desire. This model, according to which political knack and virtue resulted from the inversion of ordinary human sensation, was symbolized in ritual paraphernalia and clothing, and in personnel such as the blind musician who, like the cook-advisor, operated as counsel and confidant to rulers and men in power.

The subjects of food and sacrifice – as ideological or theological concepts, as tropes in literature or myth, or as historical or living practices – are vast, and my own reading of Chinese dietary and sacrificial culture is only one among many other fruitful approaches that could be taken. The initial impetus that prompted me to put this narrative together was twofold. On the one hand, it struck me that, for all its sophistication and detail, much of the

INTRODUCTION

7

sinological scholarship on Chinese food culture remained mostly descriptive and only rarely sought to link dietary and sacrificial practice to the world of ideas. On the other hand, there has been no shortage of anthropological and historical theory on sacrifice since the nineteenth century. Yet this scholarship draws mostly on Greco-Roman antiquity, the Bible, the Vedic tradition, or on anthropological fieldwork. Even though theory has inspired the analysis of some sinologists, only rarely have data from early China been drawn on in earnest by theorists. Sacrifice has been explained within the paradigm of the gift, with sacrificial offerings conferring on the devotee controlling powers over the spirits.⁶ Some have stressed the idea of communion and see in the sacrificial meal, and in the shared consumption of a (totemic) animal victim, a mechanism to forge a bond between humans and the spirit world. Here the consumption of tabooed offerings generates expiatory or propitiatory powers over the spirits.⁷ One influential theory, proposed by Hubert and Mauss, conceived of sacrifice as a graded process of communication between two, purportedly separate, realms: that of the sacred and that of the secular or profane. In this model, sacrificial offerings and ritual participants are transformed through a process of sacralization and desacralization. At the heart of sacrifice, then, lies the destruction or consumption of the medium of communication with the divine – the offering itself.⁸ The sacrificial offering has also been seen as substitutory or redemptory in that it replaces the sacrificer or ritual agent, or serves as an expiatory killing.⁹ Historians have interpreted sacrifice as an extension of the primitive hunt that foments a community against outsiders, or have analyzed sacrificial killing as a mimetic enactment of violence.¹⁰ Structuralists, for their part, have focused on nonviolence and see in meat eating, ritualized banqueting, and sacrificial conviviality a way to deny or cope with guilt through killing.¹¹

To be sure, one could creatively subject data from early China to several of these theories, and my own analysis is bound to show traces of this rich

⁶ The main proponent of the gift theory was Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) in his *Primitive Culture* (1871). Van Baal (1976) takes a more performative view of sacrificial gifts as ritualized coded messages.

⁷ The main advocate of the concept of the communal sacrifice was William Robertson Smith (1864–1894) in his *The Religion of the Semites* (1889).

⁸ The classic text is Henri Hubert (1872–1927) and Marcel Mauss (1872–1950), “Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice” (*L’Année Sociologique*, 1899).

⁹ Edward E. Evans-Pritchard (1902–1973), *Nuer Religion* (1956).

¹⁰ For the former, the locus classicus is Walter Burkert’s *Homo Necans* (1972); for the latter, René Girard’s *La violence et le sacré* (1972). See also Maurice Bloch, *Prey into Hunter* (1992). Lewis (1990) applies these concepts of sanctioned violence to early China.

¹¹ The key essays appear in Detienne and Vernant (eds.) (1979; tr. 1989); see also Detienne (1977) and Durand (1986).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

body of historical and anthropological scholarship. Yet my conversation in this book takes a different tack. Rather than seeking to deconstruct existing cross-cultural theories on sacrifice by inputting Chinese data (or indeed propose yet another theoretical or essentialist model), my ambition here is more modest. I try to present a picture of Chinese sacrificial religion “from within” by describing the mechanics that surrounded sacrificial procedure and by identifying the conceptual schemes on which the selection, presentation, and consumption of food and food offerings were based. In doing so, I hope to show first and foremost that portrayals of cooking and food preparation, or discussions on who eats what with whom, or who feeds what to whom and when, are a useful platform to help us understand early Chinese ideas about the senses and sagehood.

My reading of sacrificial food culture also touches on a larger question in scholarship on early Chinese thought. It has become a truism in most scholarly treatments of Chinese thought that the masters of philosophy in Warring States China do not make rigid distinctions between the sacred and the profane, or between categories such as the transcendent and the immanent. Few scholars have sought to break down claims to continuity between the human and the divine in early China. In a stimulating study, Michael Puett has brought out the pivotal importance of nuance.¹² A dialectical juxtaposition of sources allows Puett to construct a linear narrative that incisively questions attempts by previous scholars to gloss over the human-spirit divide in early Chinese textual sources. This book does not set out to formulate a new hypothesis on the large and broadly theoretical question of human-divine continuity in early China, but some of its data are directly relevant to it. It is my contention that we are as yet unable to dismiss the notion that the early Chinese conceived of significant continuities between the human world and the realm of the spirits. This is evident within the limited remit of textual sources available, even if one concentrates mainly on discursive or philosophical texts. Some continuities, as Michael Puett’s analysis shows, were clearly put to the test. Yet in my view, the nature of our sources, as well as their complexity, does not allow us to adequately test many of the theoretical and rhetorical claims made in the philosophical literature of the time until we gain a better understanding of how ideas relate to religious, economic, and social practice. The selection of sources I have brought to bear in this exercise lead me to believe that the permeability of the human and the spiritual is abundantly manifest in early Chinese texts.

¹² Puett (2002), 5–26, surveys the main loci in Western secondary scholarship where these models of continuity are highlighted.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

Naturally, my own reading of sacrificial culture likewise remains, by definition, partial because I draw mostly on textual sources. A few preliminary remarks on the sources that inform this study and the time period it covers are therefore in order. The majority of the sources I draw on are written records, including both transmitted and archaeologically recovered texts. It goes without saying that a thorough examination of material culture and the archaeological record would complement some of the themes and questions raised in this book, and might well produce different or more nuanced interpretations. Such an exercise, however, would require one or more separate studies, and it is a task best left to experts in material culture. If my reading of the textual record succeeds in inspiring others to (re)interrogate the material record, or indeed, if it encourages archaeologists and art historians to question my own conclusions, it will have served its purpose.

A great deal of information on food and sacrifice is preserved in early China's ritual canon. One major caveat that should be noted upfront is that the ritual canon is highly prescriptive, as are indeed most Warring States and Han narratives on sacrifice. These texts systematize, idealize, and imagine what might have been in times long past and, in their elaboration, provide an implicit commentary on practices and ideas that often predate them by centuries. Even liturgy and descriptions of performance that, *prima facie*, appear anecdotal or historically bound can, to some extent, be read as idealized constructs. As Martin Kern points out, sacrificial hymns, such as those preserved in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes), should be considered as "aesthetic objects, elaborate and complex in terms both linguistic and material, where aesthetic form and propositional meaning cannot be imagined separate from each other."¹³ Historians seeking to understand early Chinese ritual practice through layers of highly complex transmitted and archaeologically recovered sources should probably acknowledge that, inevitably, this requires some degree of cut-and-paste, or at least a redaction of more or less implicit or explicit ideas. In this, however, the contemporary scholar is not original because most of the texts she or he deals with engage in the dynamics of inter- and intratextual quotation, borrowing, and paraphrasing. Furthermore, as both archaeologists and textual scholars are continuously discovering in China today, the transmission of early Chinese texts also depends significantly on material conditions and the texts themselves were often subject to philological experimentation by scribes and commentators. This is not unimportant when we are dealing with technical vocabulary or ritual nomenclature, the origins and context of which sometimes escape us.

¹³ Kern (2009), 145, 150, 155 (quote).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-00171-8 - Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China

Roel Sterckx

Excerpt

[More information](#)

However, to avoid presenting a picture that is solely based on prescriptive sources, I have tried to draw on as wide a variety of textual genres available for the period under discussion as possible, keeping in mind that a historical analysis of structures suffers from the same constraints as a structural analysis of history. We must acknowledge that the ideas and ideologies contained in our texts are not easily linked to actual behavior, let alone to practices that can be dated to particular times and places. Warring States and Han texts may not enable us to trace each and every constituent event that make up the practices and ideas described here, but I hope that, by drawing on at times fragmentary narratives or by juxtaposing information preserved across a wide range of texts beyond the ritual canon, the reader will be able to reconstruct elements of process and gain a better insight into the conceptual world that inspired it.

For many of the same reasons spelled out previously, the following pages do not offer a strictly linear or chronological treatment of the subject. I draw on texts stretching from the Spring and Autumn period (8th–5th centuries BCE) through Eastern Han (2nd century CE), supplemented occasionally with references to earlier and later materials. Even though it is possible, as Lester Bilsky has shown in a study in the 1970s, to chart some religious changes based on textual references to sacrifice and evolving terminology, such attempts remain highly speculative, and the statistics underlying them become more tenuous when new text discoveries continuously redefine our corpus.¹⁴ Sacrifice as a political institution might lend itself well to a tighter chronological approach, but the mechanics of sacrifice in practice, or the picture of food culture “from within” and the metaphors it supplies, appear more continuous and are hard to date consistently to time and place.

Indeed one might argue that many of the practices described in the following pages survive in China today in the form of sacrificial devotion, a language peppered with references to dietary culture, and the complex etiquette and rituals that surround banqueting and hosting. Whereas we must assume that different actors across different locations in Warring States and Han China at times had different views on what would please the palate of humans and spirits, the oxen slaughtered with tinkling bell-knives in the Book of Odes would have found little solace in the prospect that a few centuries later they could have been butchered by Zhuangzi’s enlightened Cook Ding.

¹⁴ Bilsky (1975), 23–29.