Chapter 4
Encoding the Way

The first part of our "critique" has examined the conditions under which the Chinese-Western philosophical encounter generally takes place under present circumstances. I have described its historical and conceptual formalization, the lexical operations authorized by the said formalization, and the thought systems emerging on the Chinese side, the nature of which is largely determined by the way the genesis and effects of past philosophical syntheses and confrontations are represented. The second part of this book will also be divided into three chapters. The present one offers a general understanding of Chinese thought (restricted here to the period anterior to the Eastern Han dynasty). It is meant to offer an alternative to the perspective that we dissected in our first two chapters, which was driven by conceptual oppositions. The approach that I pragmatically develop in the course of this chapter prepares the theoretical developments of Chapter 5, focused on a dialogic and experiential apprehension of the tasks proper to comparative philosophy. Chapter 6 illustrates the relevance of such tasks – and the potential fecundity attached to the dialogic/experiential approach – by sketching four ongoing debates concerned with topics having to do with social, political and moral philosophy.

As I will describe it throughout the course of this chapter, the "drive" that led to the development of ancient Chinese philosophy (a guiding force that also ensures its continued relevance) came, on the one hand, from a focus on the performative nature of both rituals and signs/graphs/texts, and, on the other hand, from a conviction that approaching the mystery of the Way helped to ensure the smooth continuation of the cosmic and social workings. The focus on *proper performance* was fostering *attentiveness* (attentive observation: *guan* 觀), a virtue required from readers as well as from ritual performers. Attentiveness was seen as constituting the most paradoxical and yet most basic of all "arts" (*shu* 術). Reading the *Classic of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Classic of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) according to the connections that unite them into a gnoseological tripod sheds light upon the *decoding and the subsequent re-encoding of the Way* that Chinese classics endeavored to operate.[103]

103 A first version of this chapter has appeared under the title: "Encoding the Way: Ritual Ethos and Textual Patterns in China" (Vermander 2022c). Several modifications have been introduced in the text after its first publication, notably in order to conform to the focus of the present book.

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Ritual, Language, and Text

Ancient Chinese thinkers had clearly recognized the performative nature of ritual. They had made the efficacy of ritual performances part of an overall understanding of both cosmic and social realities. Such understanding was in turn governing the one of the nature and function of *wen* 文 – a character referring both to *graphs* (of divinatory origin) and *texts* (organizing graphs into patterns, and put into motion during ritual occasions). One of the consequences of the linkage between ritual ethos and textual composition was that literary arrangements came to be crafted in such a fashion as to manifest the workings of the natural and/or human universes that rituals were sustaining. I do not focus on the "structural rhetoric" principles through which compositional patterns were aligned with cosmological and social motives.[104] I rather aim at ascertaining how the Way that governs all phenomena was evoked, celebrated, and, to some extent, activated throughout the modeling of a formal language – a code of which classics were offering the standard. At the same time, as they were pointing towards underlying patterns and processes to be scrutinized and somehow interiorized, classics were fostering *attentiveness*, the core faculty that readers and ritual practitioners needed to nurture and display.

Among other approaches and definitions, the term "rituals" refers to these collective behaviors that sustain a community's cohesiveness while sometimes challenging or reshaping power relationships within the same community, regardless the size of the latter.[105] Often, the social efficacy attached to rituals is related to the fact that they function as a language, a syntactic form.[106] Like linguistic interchange, ritual makes things, people and meaning circulate. It generates a circle of exchange and communication. Analyzing rituals on the model of a language has led researchers to consider their successive *sequences* (for instance: prepara-

104 In Vermander (2021a), I have attempted to detail how the formal composition of one specific Chinese Classic conforms to the political and cosmic patterns it unveils. I have expanded the analysis in the fifth and sixth chapters of Vermander (2022b). Pelkey's (2021) detailed reading of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* as a ring composition goes in the same direction.

105 How can ritual be both sustaining and challenging? Working on the Ndembu, a Bantu population, the anthropologist Victor Turner considered the rituals as dramas, which operate a "symbolic condensation", contributing to conflict resolution. Turner's studies were focusing on healing sessions and rites of passage. They were highlighting the role of divination, by which latent tensions appear in the open and the resolution process is set in motion. By reshaping the distinctions that organize daily life, the ritual allows for reworking the social bond, acting on a knot of difficulties. At the time of its publication, Turner's vision was contrasting with the view that considers the ritual simply as a force that preserves established order and tradition (Turner 1968).

106 See for instance Ferro-Luzzi (1977).

tions, invocations, the killing of an animal, the communal meal that follows) as the equivalence of *sentences.* These are not to be firstly approached in term of what they mean. Rather, analysts ponder over the "grammatical rules that generate and structure ritual as a form of communication" (Bell 1997, 68). Such a research trend has been reinforced by the parallel realization that some ritual sequences/sentences possess an efficacy of their own. For making use of the paradigmatic Austinian example, an "I do" (or another law-sanctioned formula) that is (twice) uttered in the context of a valid marriage ceremony and is answered in the proper way by the officiant receiving the vows creates legal, reciprocal obligations (Austin 1962, 5). Ritual is a *performance*, not only in the sense of a theatrical performance but also in that a state of affairs is changed by an action having been "performed". For taking another example: at the end of an atonement ceremony the culprit is effectively reintegrated into the community: the reconciliation has been both *acted out* and *effected.*

Ritual: The Chinese Paradigm

Xunzi 荀子 (c. 310/314 – c. 235/217 BCE) has brought to the extreme the Confucian stress on *li* 禮, considered as permeating all aspects of human interactions and making them sustainable. Such a claim is not as radical as it may sound to us today. Besides (or below) large-scale celebrations, "interaction rituals" (Erwing Goffman) permeate everyday life (Goffman 1967). Often overlooked, interaction rituals enable our daily social contacts, and their non-respect quickly turns out to be a major cause of deterioration of social ties. Ignoring the proper way of shaking hands or of bowing, of giving thanks, of letting someone go through the door can still be forgiven when coming from someone foreign to the group culture, but its infringement by an insider needs to be compensated by a restorative rite, of which the simple act of quickly apologizing is the most basic expression.

For Xunzi, ritual, when properly performed, not only expresses and fosters virtue, it also manifests social distinctions and redistributes resources accordingly. It nourishes human life, which it ornaments and refines. It progressively transforms humans mind and contributes to nurture vital breath. It leads one on the path to Sagehood. Additionally, by the mere fact of observing the attitude adopted by commensals during ceremonies, formal functions, the sovereign will discern who among them are most proper to higher offices.[107]

107 See the detailed summary of the overarching conception of Ritual developed by Xunzi in Sato (2010), 419 – 423.

Ritual also plays a cosmic function, as heavenly order and social harmony go hand in hand:

> Ritual serves Heaven above and Earth below, it honors forefathers and ancestors, and it exalts lords and teachers. [...]
> Ritual always starts with the release [of emotions], develops into proper form, and is accomplished in contentment. At its most perfect, [emotions and forms are both] completely fulfilled.
> 禮、上事天，下事地，尊先祖，而隆君師。 [...] 凡禮，始乎棁，成乎文，終乎悅校。故至備。
>
> (*Xunzi*, *On Ritual*. Translation Hutton 2014, 202 and 204, modified.)

The step-by-step performance of ritual allows participants to symbolically perform a return to the One, asserts Xunzi: "By ritual, Heaven and Earth harmoniously combine" (*Xunzi*, *On Ritual*). Particularly solemn in its expression, the reverence shown by Xunzi towards ritual forms and observances is far from being an exception: Confucian thinkers always emphasized that rituals were a privileged way to educate both the personal and collective body, to institutionalize ethical care and the sharing of resources, to make human society coordinate with cosmic order, and to govern without relying first and foremost on law and punishment. To that effect, rituals were to be conducted according to strict rhythms and patterns. Rhythms had to do with seasonal observances and musical performance, and patterns were determined by the order of sequences in ceremonies as well as by conventions governing the chanting/reciting of formulas, songs and texts. Whatever the criticism that Daoist thinkers were aiming at such a perspective, both the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* show a deep knowledge of ritual practices.[108] In many cases, Zhuangzi's stories can be read as the representation of *counter-rituals:* Butcher Ding is an officer who fulfills the traditional role of preparing meat for sacrifice (*Zhuangzi* 3.2). His way of carving a beef without ever blunting his knife is both a celebration of freedom and a kind of ritual dance. Likewise, when Zhuangzi crouches down and sings, knocking on a pot, after the death of his wife (*Zhuangzi* 18.2), he releases emotions according to patterns not congruent with social norms, but this counter-ritual remains a rite, even if it calls to question the meaning of the performance.

If state power has been prone to instrumentalize Ritual (the alliance between the King [*wang* 王] and the Shaman [*wu* 巫], which marks a departure from a stateless society, based on hunting or at least on pastoralism, towards agriculture-based states, testifies to the trend), Chinese authors have tried to limit and to frame such instrumentalization by describing sacrifices and ceremonies as a

108 See for instance Boileau (2013).

channel of humanization: state rituals were supposed to exercise a function of regulation, appeasing and controlling appetites, operating spiritual transformation, and inserting people into an ever-widening horizon. They were based upon a conception of harmony (*he* 和) first based on cultural practices – musical or culinary – and later on enlarged into a cosmic vision: The *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) makes the exchange of energies (*qi* 氣) between Earth and Heaven an operation that is both musical and ritual. Since music is the "motor" of the cosmos,[109] ritual musical performance was seen as contributing to the proper functioning of the latter. Far from seeing its symbolic importance diminish over time, ritual performance and its musical dimension received an increasingly central place in Chinese thought.[110]

Mental, Ritual and Textual Threads

The above points towards a fact that is both manifest and elusive: in all societies, mental structures (which allow for ways of reasoning and specific representations), social patterns (such as hierarchies, decision-making processes, or yet procedures followed for exchanging things) and cultural end-products (rituals, texts, clothing or architectural designs) are intricately interrelated and – what is more – obey similar formal dispositions.

This may naturally lead one to study ancient texts as "patterns", the way we do for rituals: we can approach a classic as a *totality* – a self-sufficient, self-organized whole – the way Claude Levi-Strauss was doing when looking at the structure of a Latin-American indigenous villages. Maybe classics are structured as a Bororo village apparently is.[111] Or, for staying closer to our initial comparison, they could be organized like a group of ritual dancers.[112] Or yet, their patterns are possibly similar to geometrical designs adorning clothing. After all, at the time they were composed and edited, Chinese classics were being *woven* into patterns from a given

109 One finds also such conception in the chapter "On Music" of the *Xunzi*.

110 Brindley (2012) shows that, if the discourse on music seems first limited to its social function, it progressively stresses the cosmic dimension of musical performance. The *Guanzi* 管子 and the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, encyclopedic writings edited during the early Han period, both insist very much on this aspect.

111 Lévi-Strauss (2012 [1955]), Fig. 43. I write "apparently", for Lévi-Strauss insists on the fact that, behind this circular organization, a Bororo village is actually divided into three hierarchized subgroups, each of which intermarries within itself.

112 See in Amiot (1779) the various figures representing the arrangement of a group of dancers during an ancestor worship ceremony. Amiot's work is based on the work of Zhu Zaiyu 朱載堉 1536–1611 (see Lenoir, and Standaert 2005).

combination of threads, as one does with a loom.[113] The same imagery has been brought up by Nicolas Standaert when researching the transformation of Christian funerals in Late Ming/Early Qing China: at that time, Standaert writes, Christian and Confucian threads, were somehow woven together into new ritual expressions (cf. Standaert 2008).

In the same line, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas has unearthed in classics originating from different civilizations circular patterns that organize texts and mental schemes in similar fashion:

> A ring is a framing device. The linking up of starting point and end creates an envelope that contains everything between the opening phrases and the conclusion. [...] There has to be a well-marked point at which the ring turns, [...] and the whole series of stanzas going from the beginning to the middle should be in parallel with the other series going from the middle back to the start.
>
> (Douglas 2007, 1–2)

Such a description recalls ritual and social *figurations*, as Norbert Elias would have it,[114] while delineating mental schemes different from the ones fostered by linear reasoning and exposition.

There are of course other reasons that encourage the analyst to circulate between ritual patterns and textual ones. Among these reasons: stories and stipulations found in classics partially determine the way rites are performed (till now, Korean Confucian rituals of ancestor worship take the *Analects* and the *Book of Rites* as their normative and often practical reference). At the same time, rites do not merely *replicate* classics, they rather provide an *interpretation* of them; they deliver a living, embodied performance of the way the text has been passed on and is nowadays understood. In fact, the understanding of the classics proper to a civilization or another is prone to be deeply altered when rituals are not passed down alongside classics, when the two go separate ways. In the past, ancient classics were not textbook materials. Rather, they were lived and performed. The recitation of the classics, as was also the case for a ritual dance, was going through a series of sequences to be enacted in order. As long as they were read ritualistically, it was easier to consider their patterns as an unveiling of the social and/or cosmic order of which they were speaking. Probably, it was even felt that this overall order was subsiding partly thanks to their ritualized reading.

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113 Among recent contributions, see Zürn (2020).

114 Elias sees figurations or configurations as ever-evolving networks of relationships from which the individual grows and that concurrently she helps to shape. Among other comparisons Elias makes use of, he invites us to imagine a group of dancers, their gestures being meshed and synchronized with those of other dancers (Elias 1991, 19–20).

How Can the Way Be Decoded?

In classical China, both cosmic and social orders were seen as being triggered and sustained by the *dao* 道, a term now acclimatized in Western languages. As I argued in Chapter 2, translating *dao* simply by "the way" (or "the Way") is perfectly acceptable. The popularization of the term in the West has been accompanied by representations that are vague in their detail but coherent as a whole: *dao* would refer to an original and universally active principle that cannot be described either as "divine" or as "creator-like" but that does not absolutely preclude these significations. Dao is to be understood in reference to *de* (virtue, potency), but also to other concepts already discussed in Chapter 2.

A code, as all dictionaries tell us, is a system of signals or symbols for communication. Such a system is sometimes designed so as to convey secret meanings. A "coded language" plays on the ambiguity between the explicit and the implicit, using a word or expression in place of another so as to communicate a message without stating it explicitly. Additionally, the genetic code is the biochemical basis of heredity, and its sequences appear to be uniform for nearly all known forms of life. Nowadays, "code" also refers to a system of instructions given to a computer, which should not make us forget that, in more ancient usages, "code" is a body of law, or yet a system of principles or rules (moral, ethical code). This constitutes a useful reminder since it draws our attention towards the Latin *codex:* a writing tablet; hence: a piece of writing – and then: a systematized set of writings, the legal corpus constituting the model of the latter in Rome. Let us note in passing that the word *codex* suggests the idea of a certain "efficacy" in the very act of writing since the genre first covered by the term is, behind the juridical corpus, the one of the Last Will, of dispositions that one's death will make effective.

Considered as the source, the movement or yet the influx from which life arises and decays, the Way is its own code and pattern (*fa* 法), on which everything is in turn modeled ("the Way is patterned on itself [*dao fa ziran* 道法自然]", *Daodejing* 25). As we have seen, observing water – its nature, its way of proceeding – already allows the observer to "decode" the rules that determine the emergence and succession of all phenomena. More broadly, the potency of the Way – its manifestations, similar to the surge and growth of the plants alongside the river – furthers the decoding operation. Processes of divination, progressively mathematized, constitute a further stage of the decoding of the Way. However, there is no decoding that does not require an encoding operation, namely the writing down of the rules deciphered through a specific language and support. What the Sage decodes, the Text will encode.

Three Characteristics of Early Chinese *Wen*

In oracular and bronze inscriptions, *wen* 文 means "distinguished", "enlightened", with special reference to the person of a king, and then of deceased family members or of ancestors more distant in time. In the *Classic of Documents* it forms a pair with the character *wu* 武, *wen* referring to everything that is civil, civilized, soft, accomplished (related texts associate this notion to the one of variegated clothing, or yet, of tattoos), while *wu* speaks of physical strength and of military matters. The *Analects* associate *wen* with civility and refinement and also with texts and written documents, the one seemingly indissociable from the other. Yan Hui 顏回, the favorite disciple of Confucius reflecting on the latter's educational strategy, exclaims: "He enlarges me by the Letters, and he restrains me by the Rites [*bo wo yi wen, yue wo yi li*博我以文, 約我以禮]" (*Analects* 9.11). Note the polarity/complementarity of Ritual and Letters in the training process through which potentialities contained into one's nature are brought into fruition.

Texts and documents are made of *signs*, and this last notion determines the use of the character *wen* in the *Zuozhuan* as well as in the *Classic of Changes:* birthmark, ideogram, written style, heavenly manifestation, symbolic figure or drawing.... Stars and cosmic manifestations are "heavenly signs" (*tianwen* 天文). Applied to literacy, *wen* will take two different meanings: on the one hand, it designates the sinograms composed of a single graph (as opposed to *zi* 字, made of an association of elements, semantic and/or phonetic); on the other hand, it refers to all written compositions. The above should help us to better grasp the three following characteristics of the notion:

– *Wen* was a privileged channel of communication between Heaven and Earth.
– *Wen* was performative: what it was speaking about, at the same time it was making it happen.
– *Wen* was thought of as a matrix, a source-code, rather than as what we call today a "text".

A Privileged Channel of Communication between Heaven and Earth

The written sources that precede and shape the formation of our classics are not as ancient as in the case for other civilizations. The system of signs that grounds Chinese writing appears only towards 1250 BCE, much later than the writing systems conceived in the Near and Middle East. (Writing – or, at least, a system of signs that can be described as writing – appears for the first time in human history around 3400 BCE, in Sumer.) Initially, this system fulfills two functions: accounting (counting the king's properties); and notations of astronomical observations, which are

the basis of the Sumerian divinatory system. From there, the graphic systems of the Near and Middle East, then the West, will develop into scripts, either alphabetic or syllabic. These systems were primarily based on a way of "recording" speech, which Chinese writing most probably was not.[115]

The Chinese writing system was developed to record the procedures and results of divinations performed on the shoulder blades of oxen and the shells of large turtles. A burning wooden rod was applied to the recesses, one part of which was tangential to the other. On the other side, the resulting cracking took a 卜 (*bu*) shape. The result of divination was considered auspicious when the latitudinal part was ascending, negative when it descended, doubtful when it formed a right angle with the longitudinal part. The divinatory documents thus obtained (on which inscriptions, engraved next to the result of the divination, specify the date of the operation, the name of the person who carried out it and the prediction to be validated such as "the king must not go hunting") were archived, and it is this archiving process that led to the development of a system of signs correlating to cracks. It is worth noting that the statements that the diviners were submitting to divination were not exactly framed as questions. We are dealing here with predictions of assertive value (Djamouri 1999). Divination in ancient China first seeks confirmation of a planned action. Unfavorable prognoses could lead to sacrifices intended to alter the predicted outcome.

If the Mediterranean civilizations also practiced divination on a large scale, the material used (observation of the flight of birds, examination of the viscera of animals) obviously made it impossible to constitute divinatory archives. The *wen* is perceived from the start as being a *double sign:* the sign inscribed in Heaven, and that inscribed on the divinatory document. This jointly celestial and terrestrial character of the *wen* then gives it a *third value:* that of being the sign of the alliance between the one and the other. We have met already with a foundational assertion of *Xici* 繫辭 commentary: "[The Sage] looking up, contemplates the heavenly signs [*tianwen* 天文], and, looking down, scrutinizes the earthly patterns [*dili*

115 Vandermeersch (2013, 87) describes Chinese writing as a "semantic grid". He notes the paucity of results obtained by approaches that, shaped by European linguistic, focus on oral etymologies, such as the one systematized by Wang Li (Wang 1982). Debates on this subject can be acrimonious (Hansen 1993; Unger and Hansen 1993), mainly because, behind them, opposite theories bearing upon the nature of perception and language are at stake. One may want to approach the topic in a more pragmatic and evolutionist fashion, taking as a given that the Chinese writing system took shape in the collation of data obtained through divinatory practice, while its development complexified its structure, its resources and the way readers related to it. In other words, the origins of the Chinese language may have very little influence, if any, on the way a reader, today, approaches and assimilates a text written in Chinese characters.

地理]" (*Xici* I.4). The *wen* then occupies a position identical to that which the *Classic of Documents* gives to the Son of Heaven (*Tianzi*天子). His position, both privileged and solitary between Heaven and Earth is what allows him to sustain the "moral standard [*zhong* 衷]":

> The King said: "All of you, from every region of the land, listen carefully to what I [a straightforward man], am about to say. The Emperor above all Emperors has endowed every person with a moral sense [*zhong*], and this is their essential, original nature. However, to ensure that they stay true to this essential nature, it is necessary to have rulers."
>
> (*Book of Documents*, "The Declaration of Tang" 湯誥)

A displacement thus takes place: initially, its divinatory nature allows the *wen* to connect the Earth with the Sky. Without losing this character, later on the stress shifts towards its ability to preserve and transmit the moral standard. More generally, the thought process that takes place can be described as follows: originally, the divination process leads to the discernment of the *forms* (*xing* 形) taken by observable phenomena. What is revealed of the order of the cosmos through the process of divination will gradually be brought closer to the form of the body (*xingti* 形體),[116] then to the principle that animates any living body, and then to the moral order which governs beings and events. On the basis of the graphic language, an analogical thought will gradually take shape: elaborate ramifications (between the main viscera of the human body and climatic states − hot, cold, dry, humid − emotions, musical notes, colors, seasons, all this transcribed in a "base five" arithmetic) allow the ones who master the *wen* to observe pragmatically a set of correspondences. At the same time, these analogies become morally significant (in Chinese medicine, the state of the body is associated with a combination of emotions about which a moral judgment as to their balance and intensity is enacted.). An evolution has occurred, which leads from the divinatory to the ethico-political dimension.

The Performativity of *Wen*

Let us further the previous analysis through some considerations on the *Classic of Odes.* I will start with a statement of Confucius that is much more significant, at least in my view, than is generally thought:

116 This expression appears in the *Xunzi*, but the concept it refers to precedes this work.

> The Odes number three hundred. One expression may summarize them: "No perversity in his thoughts."
> 詩三百，一言以蔽之，曰「思無邪」。
>
> (*Analects* 2.2)

The verse quoted by Confucius comes from Ode 297 (*Jiong* 駉), which features a prince whose thought is rightly directed towards the breeding of his horses. It is the inflexible direction of the prince's thoughts that leads the horses to – literally – walk straight.

> These carriage horses are robust. / In the thoughts [of the prince], no perversity. / He thinks of his horses, and thus they go forward.
> 以車祛祛。思無邪、思馬斯徂。
>
> (*Classic of Odes*, Ode 297)

The thread chosen by Confucius speaks of rectitude aimed at a goal. The connection that the poem establishes between the disciplined gallop of the horses and the rectitude of the prince's thoughts expresses the ideal of *performativity* detected by Marcel Granet in the *Odes*, as we will see below. If so, the interpretive key suggested by Confucius says more about the *Odes* than is usually recognized; it establishes a firm relationship between the rectitude of a desire put into motion (exemplified by the course of thought of the prince) and the progress of social and cosmic affairs (illustrated by the conduct of the horses). What is more, it implies that performativity arises from analogy – the one between the single-mindedness of the Prince and the straightness of the horses' gallop in this case.

We must handle this hypothesis with caution: other passages from the *Analects* approach the *Odes* in terms of moral teaching reduced to a few elementary principles (*Analects* 1.15; 3.8; 13.5). Such an interpretive moral thread was of course systematized by the commented edition that Mao Heng毛亨 and Mao Chang毛萇 edited during the Western Han dynasty, from which the *Odes* has been studied and understood for a very long time. Marcel Granet gave an explanation of the operation by which literate officials have moralized to the extreme the popular songs that were sung at the two annual gatherings of peasant communities which, for most of the year, were living dispersed from one another: these gatherings had quite naturally a ritual character, and, therefore, the latter-day moralization of the *Odes* was part of the moralization of the ritual as a whole (Granet 1919, 6–7). For his part, Granet chooses to treat the *Odes* as "a document specific to the study of the beliefs which inspired the ancient Chinese seasonal ritual" (Granet

1919, 7).[117] In the spring, through the joust between the sexes, the alliance which united different local groups into a traditional community was restored. A close reading of these poems shows that the participants were seeing the rites of which the chanting of the *Odes* were a part as being endowed with effectiveness. "[These gatherings] possess the entire efficiency and the ever-reborn youth of games and rituals. [...] It is the dance and it is the singing which, making the partridges mate and the seasonal flood swell to its appropriate level, will succeed in making all the signs of spring appear" (Granet 1999 [1934]), 57–58). To make use of a vocabulary that was not the one of Granet, the ritual, by what it does and what it sings, is *performative.*

In examining the terminology and the images displayed by poems that sinologists read too quickly like sketches of mere drunkenness, Granet was able to rediscover the momentum and the sequences of the sacred game: turning over the vases and the pots is part of the liturgical feasts offered to the ancestors; the wild dancing evoked in certain poems as well as in the *Book of Rites* describes exactly the behavior expected from people preparing for the arrival of the spirits; the fall of the official bonnets prepares the obligatory swirling of the hair let loose when these same spirits have arrived; and the portrayal of an endless whirlwind dance evokes the movements of the dancer as he mimics the fact of being driven away by the wind. Drunkenness, here, is, by essence, ritual acting. These poetic formulas offer the reduced model of that other reduced model which the festive rite constitutes: as with Russian dolls, *the poem is the reduced model of the celebration, which itself is a reduced model of the social and natural reality.* The community conforms to the laws that govern society and the cosmos. At the same time, it must put into motion these same laws through the performativity of the ritual, and this performativity presupposes the one contained in the poem. (The mere recitation of the poem is not performative, and becomes so only within a ritual context, the same way the Austinian "I do" has no performative effect if the marriage ceremony is not properly conducted.)

In the description offered by Granet, it is in the nature of reality to call upon itself human intervention. And indeed, ancient texts hint at the fact that without the rites the stars could not turn nor the harvests reach maturity. This is made explicit in the "On Ritual" chapter of the *Xunzi*, which distinguishes the *general role* of "cosmic regulator" played by the rite from its (very dubious) effectiveness in a *particular circumstance*, such as persistent drought for example. For Xunzi, ritual

117 We should not confuse this thesis with that of an essentially oral transmission of the *Odes.* Shaughnessy (2015) rightly emphasizes the importance of the writing in the process by which the Odes have come down to us.

performance constitutes the human task *par excellence*, the one that defines humankind's status and role vis-à-vis nature.

A Source-Code

For a very long period, the *Classic of Changes* constituted less a text properly speaking than the formatting of a system of divination that was based on the count of yarrow stems drawn by lot (the choice of yarrow explained by the structure of the plant, unfolding its many ramifications from a single stem, as the One gives birth to the multitude of phenomena). Derivatives of trigrams, the hexagrams constructed by drawing lots were fulfilling the role previously played by divinatory cracks. Both methods were meant to reflect the play of the cosmic forces that bring about the advent of such and such a situation. However, in contrast to the use of divinatory cracks, basing predictions upon hexagrams meant to proceed through a kind of algebra whose theoretical principles were developed in the "Ten Wings" (*Shiyi*十翼) Commentary. This algebra reduced the base numbers used in divination to the binary of even and odd numbers, itself equated to the polarity of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. (Note that the *Yijng* itself, as merely composed of hexagrams and short explanations, does not yet mention the terms *yin* and *yang*, which appear in latter-day commentaries.)

Such device implies that the *Yijing* had to be read with reference to a diagram structure, and not as a linear text. In fact, the evolution that the *Yijing* underwent until it was canonized under the Han remains controversial though it may probably be summarized as follows: for a long time, as illustrated by several anecdotes from the *Zuozhuan*, the way of referring to the *Yijing* (to draw "knowledge" from it) was an object of competition between diviners (*wu* 巫) and scholars (*shi* 士). The *Xunzi* does not yet make the *Yijing* a "Classic" (*jing*). Towards the end of the Warring States period, the *Yijing* is still considered as a mere manual of divination, a practical guide so to speak. The commentaries deployed around the *Yijing* will eventually make it a "textual object". Grouped into the "Ten Wings", these commentaries organize a system of interpretation by which each hexagram (*gua* 卦) calls for a weighing (*tuan* 彖) and a figurative reading as an image (*xiang* 象), any hexagram being taken successively in its entirety and in its components. The *Xici* Commentary in particular presents a cosmological interpretation of the whole.

At the same time, reading the *Yijing* through the "Ten Wings" (especially through their last three parts) ensures that each hexagram is considered within the process of transformation that alone gives meaning to it. If the *Yijng* delivers the images (*xiang*) upon which the forms (*xing*) are modeled, a dynamic of contin-

uous transformation perpetually erases these manifestations. I have already quoted the initial statement of the *Xici:* "Images take shape in Heaven. Forms take shape on Earth. Thus, transformations and evolutions are made visible" (*Xici* 1.1).

In this worldview, individuals as well as communities need to ensure both vital growth and social balance. This entails that they must strive to recognize (through the consultation of the *Yijing*) the opportunities offered at a given moment of time (and solely at this moment). This is why the *Yijing* is less a text than a *source-code*, the knowledge of which is essential for anyone who wants to decipher the game of incessant phenomenal transformations in order to find one's (constantly evolving) setting into it. Additionally, the idea of a *correspondence* between macrocosm and microcosm present in the *Yijng* has made the Chinese tradition inclined to recognize in it *less and more than a text: the matrix of all texts.*[118]

Mutations of the *Wen*

The characteristics described above constitute the premises of the conception which, from the Warring States period (453–221 BCE) onwards (or maybe even earlier), animates the production of the written text: the latter needs to be the *form*, the *recipient* or the *body* through which the movement of constant transformation of the images that make up the universe manifests itself. The characters (*zi* 字) derive from the trigrams (themselves born from the traces – *ji* 跡 or *ji* 迹 – left by birds and game), affirms Xu Shen 許慎 (58–147) in the preface to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字. "To write is to create a simile[書者, 如也]", asserts the same preface.[119]

Mark E. Lewis expresses with force – but with some systematism – the political extensions of such ambition:

> The culminating role of writing in the period, and the key to its importance in imperial China, was the creation of parallel realities within texts that claimed to depict the entire world. Such worlds created in writing provided models for the unprecedented enterprise of founding a world empire, and they underwrote the claims of authority of those who composed, sponsored, or interpreted them. One version of these texts ultimately became the first state canon of imperial China, and in this capacity it served to perpetuate the dream and the reality of the imperial system across the centuries.
>
> (Lewis 1999, 4)

118 Besides the *Yijing*, another seminal text opens up perspectives on how the *wen* was approached as a source-code, and therefore read within a diagram structure. I am speaking here of the *Hongfan* 洪範 chapter of the *Classic of Documents*, already evoked in the course of Chapter 1.
119 A similar formulation can be found in *Mozi* 40.32.

A more cautious reading would spare ancient classics the reproach of being engulfed into the dream of *mastery*, be it virtual or real, which Lewis intends to denounce. The classics' gnoseological premises could also work secretly against the systematization of the imperial enterprise – in other words: their textual principles could also prevent these "parallel worlds" from entirely closing in on themselves: "The great perfection has something of a flaw [*da cheng ruo que* 大成若缺]", asserts *Laozi* 45, and the axiom can be applied to the text itself. Still, Lewis' position furthers the understanding of the principles we have just unearthed.

The divinatory "text" standardizes the predictive procedures to the point of producing hexagrams, it then passes from hexagrams to numbers (*shu* 數), and, through the latter, organizes into coherent propositions the multiple realities of the world, the images of which are suggested by characters – as already indicated, these characters can be simple, expressing primordial realities (and are in this case called *wen*文) or they can be compounds, and are then called *zi* 字. Deciphering a text (and a "text" at its most general level is composed of figures and/or numbers), we are made able to perceive the incessant transformation of things, the passage from one phenomenal and numerical state to another. So, divinatory knowledge reveals to us the "Constant" (*heng* 恆or *chang* 常), precisely because it makes us perceive a constant flow, the continuous transformation and return of all things. Any text *is* what it speaks of, and, at the same time, constitutes its parallel: it provides the model by which to see the interior of the phenomenon it describes, and, therefore, it is a tool by which to get a grasp on reality – a grasp that comes from an internalization of the laws discovered when reading the text.

Summing up, the fact of reading synoptically *Documents*, *Odes* and *Change* leads us to draw three conclusions:

a) Humankind was tasked with the mission of ensuring the perpetuation of the natural and social order by binding language (*yan*言), Ritual (*li* 禮) and knowledge (*zhi* 知) into a unified system of principles and duties.
b) Knowledge (be it mantic, moral, historical or experiential) was expressed and organized in texts (*wen*) loaded with some kind of performative efficacy, at least when associated with ritual utterances/performances. Image of the Way (*dao*), bearer of its Virtue (or Potency [*de*]), the *wen* unfolds the mystery of cosmic workings to the point that it eventually merges into it. I am tempted here to go further than Mark Lewis does: not only is the text a "parallel world", but also it ends up underpinning and carrying the "real world".
c) Knowledge, however, does not stand alone: one enlarges the mind by the text, and one restrains behavior by the rites (*Analects* 9.11). One makes assessment through mantic principles, and one ultimately takes decisions according to the

Word (*yan*) that unveils the moral principle (*zhong*) implanted in each one by Heaven. Of course, perfect knowledge easily discerns that mantic teaching and moral prescription ultimately coincide.

From "Texts" to "Classics"

At the time here considered (5th to 1st centuries BCE), texts could be written on wooden tablets (*du* 牘) or slats of wood or bamboo (*ce* 冊, *ce* 策, or *pian* 篇). In its original script, the character *ce* 冊 represents two tablets connected by two cords. The homonymous *ce* 策 describes bamboo tablets that were strung and gathered into a "file". *Pian* refers to a writing tablet, to the divisions of a work, or even to any literary composition. The character *du* is less frequent than the others. Later on, the use of silk made it possible to collect these relatively short units of text into longer scrolls (*juan* 卷).[120] Personal or state collections organized the same material in different orders. Possibly, a specific order of composition tended to stabilize when silk rolls were preferentially used. However, as noted by Sarah Allan, there were texts of appreciable length already in circulation during the Warring States period, even if most of the pre-Qin transmitted texts did not reach their final form until they were rewritten on long rolls of silk in the Han dynasty (Allan 2015, 321). In any event, the *physical fragmentation* of the material induced by the original supports does not imply that this same material could not have been the subject of an *ideal grouping* into continuous "texts" – even more so in the hypothesis of an essentially combinatorial textual structure, on the model opened up by the *Yijing*. As to the term *jing* 經 that, later on, will refer to texts that the state has canonized as "Classics" and made the subjects of state-sponsored examinations, James Legge is arguably the first to note (in 1883) that both the Latin term *textum /textus* (let us think here of "textile" and "texture") and the character *jing* contain the image of "thoughts woven into writing" (Girardot 1999, 1110). At the same time,

120 "The increasing use of silk as a writing surface in the third and second centuries BCE contributed to the parallel construction of writing and weaving. During the pre-Han period, writers began to utilize silk fabrics to produce texts. However, it seems as if the production of silk was still so expensive up until the late Warring States period that fabrics were reserved for sacred image-texts. […] This rare use of silk for texts, however, might have changed during the late Warring States period in the third and second centuries BCE when the Middle Kingdoms possibly developed advanced weaving technologies such as complex looms. […] These developments might have led to a wider dissemination of silk as a medium for writings. […] Texts from the Warring States and early imperial period clearly construed writing and weaving as homological processes beyond their shared utilization as writing materials and vertical orientation" (Zürn 2020, 378–380).

jing will always evoke more than a textual, state-sponsored selection: a standard, a model that applies virtually to any writing.

How does one proceed from *wen* to *jing?* In order to understand what *jing* eventually refers to, it is necessary to track its evolving meanings throughout early writings. The *Classic of Documents* designates by the term a rule, a constant law or phenomenon, or yet, when treating it as a verb, refers to the act of drawing the blueprint of a city. The *Classic of Odes* similarly implies that *jing* refers to the action of measuring and drawing a map. The *Classic of Changes* sees it mainly as a noun that designates a direction, and specifically the roads that go from north to south. The *Mencius* attributes to it a verbal value ("to take as a rule"). Later on, a variety of texts gives to *jing* an array of related meanings: the meridians recognized by Chinese medicine; monthly periods; the warp of a fabric; or yet texts or prayers that are ritualistically recited. As to the *Shuowen jiezi*, it simply indicates: "*jing:* weaving [*jing: zhi ye* 經：織也]".

The above helps us to make sense of the first appearance of the character in its meaning as "reference writings". This happens in the *Xunzi*, probably around 250 BCE or slightly later:

> Where does learning begin? Where does learning end? I say: Its order begins with reciting the classics (*jing*), and ends with studying ritual.
> 學惡乎始？惡乎終？曰：其數則始乎誦經，終乎讀禮。
>
> (*Xunzi*, "Exhortation to Learning" 勸學. Translation Hutton 2014, 5)

The rest of this fragment makes clear that, when speaking of *jing*, Xunzi is referring to the *Classic of Documents*, the *Classic of Odes*, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) and probably the lost *Classic of Music* (*Yuejing* 樂經). Still, the *Xunzi* continues to give preferentially to *jing* the meaning of "a rule, to rule, constant law". Probably around the same time or a bit later, the semi-comical character that the *Zhuangzi* names "Confucius" enumerates a slightly longer list of classics (*jing*). Marc Lewis has rightly noted that this passage associates "classics" and "footprints/traces/vestiges" (*ji* 跡). It reads as follows:

> Confucius said to Laozi, "I have studied the six classics – the Odes, the Documents, the Rites, the Music, the Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals – for what seems to me to be a long time. I thoroughly know their contents. With them I have confronted seventy-two rulers. I have discussed the Ways of the Former Kings and made clear the path [*ji*, literally "footprints", "traces"] of the Duke of Zhou and Duke Shao. Yet not one of them has ever employed me. How difficult it is to persuade people! How difficult it is to make clear the Way!"
> 孔子謂老聃曰：「丘治《詩》、《書》、《禮》、《樂》、《易》、《春秋》六經，自以為久矣，孰知其故矣，以奸者七十二君，論先王之道而明周、召之跡，一君無所鉤用。甚矣夫！人之難說也，道之難明邪！」
>
> (*Zhuangzi* 14, "The Turnings of Heaven" 天運. Translation Lewis 1999, 276)

In his answer to "Confucius", the similarly theatrical "Laozi" describes indeed the six classics as the vestiges of the ancient kings, but immediately contrasts them with the way some birds supposedly operate fertilization by simple eye contact. "Laozi", notes Lewis, "uses [the term 'vestige'] specifically to suggest the lifeless remains of what was once vital and moving. [...] The natural generation of living things [...] contrasts with the dead Confucian texts, which singularly fail to do so" (Lewis 1999, 277). If the *jing* is a further elaboration from the traces of the cosmos already found in the footpaths of birds and tigers (these footpaths that have inspired the graphs of the *wen*), such process can be seen as testifying either to a moral and civilizational journey or to growing alienation from original spontaneity.

The character *ji* (trace) thus starts the long career it will undergo throughout the developments of Daoist thought, a career that is far from being affected by mere negative connotations: the *jishen* (迹身 or 跡身), usually translated as "trace-body", corresponds to the appearance taken by the Ultimate in function of the characteristics and specific situation of the mind that receives it. Though each trace is particular, it still speaks of an over-encompassing reality. Traces take on added significance as other traces appear along the way, as other layers are discerned over the surface of reality, combining into a symphony of meanings.[121]

The primary notion associated to *jing* remains the one of regularity, constant rule, unchangeable patterns. It applies to a far larger array of operations and domains. In other words, weaving is only one expression of the way the universe – cosmic, social and material – is designed and is kept constant. If a Classic is indeed *woven*, it does not always present itself as a *weaving*. A whole range of metaphors speaks of the way a text may embody what it is discoursing about, and, ultimately, organic metaphors prove more pregnant than mechanical ones.

Summing up, the *wen* testifies to the process through which humankind decodes the cosmos and its source, and it points towards its underlying principles. It also attempts to formalize insights and findings through the creation of a language that expresses such principles to human ears and makes them applicable within the social, educational or political realms – the *wen* starts to operate an encoding. However, not every *wen* can translate the code of the Way (should we say "the Code that is the Way"?) into a consistent, complete and user-friendly language. This is the privilege in theory attached to *jing*. To put it otherwise: *wen* are elements, section, trial versions of a code, while a *jing* comes up with a fully complet-

121 For illustrations of this trend of thought in contemporary settings, notably in discourses on Chinese painting, see Vermander (2021b).

ed version. The models privileged by different *jing* may diverge, leading them to organize and represent the "writing body" that they constitute under varying metaphors.

Attentiveness: The Reader as Ritual Practitioner

In *Small World*, David Lodge's campus novel (Lodge 1985),[122] Morris Zapp is a prominent American professor who, as he goes from one academic conference to another, keeps repeating that "every decoding is another encoding". The comical nature of Zapp's appearances does not hide the mixture of complicity and distance felt by Lodge (himself a foremost literary critic) towards the views that the character he created holds so dear. "So dear", indeed, since Zapp knows the craft of converting academic brilliance into (substantial) financial rewards. Zapp's theorizing will compete with others – structuralism, reception theory, feminist Marxism, traditional humanism… – in a forum that should decide upon the name of the luminary who will obtain a richly endowed UNESCO Chair of Literary Criticism. However, the young Persse McGarrigle (the Percival of the academic romance that *Small World* endeavors to be) will put Zapp and his competitors off balance by asking the simple question: "What follows if everyone agrees with you?" A question that the Patriarch of literary criticism, Arthur Kingfisher, interprets in his own fashion by concluding that "to win is to lose the game".

Persse's challenge is a reminder that the coding metaphor needs to be taken with a grain of salt: the decoding/encoding operation is not an endless game that would be pursued for itself. For the one who endeavors to approach Ultimate Reality through the study of its *vestigia* (*vestigium:* footprint [as Augustine chose to express it, with an image almost identical to the one attached to the character *ji* 跡]),[123] these *vestigia*, once discovered, need to be translated into a language that a community is able to appropriate. While the encoding operation is necessitated by humankind's inscription into nature as by its distance from its origins, it is ultimately directed towards fellow-human beings.

In this regard, the language or the code used by Chinese classics is only a medium through which to foster an art of living and studying, an existential attitude:

122 The readers of *Small World* will remember that speaking of it as of a "campus novel" is rather paradoxical since the novel takes place at the time of the nascent "global campus", and its protagonists unceasingly move from one location to another.

123 In *De Trinitate*, Augustine's quest for the *vestigia Trinitatis* focuses both on external objects in their multidimensionality (water as source, stream and lake) and on human inner constitution (memory, understanding and will).

the way of perceiving and describing reality they develop is characterized by the *attentiveness* that they require and display. The attentiveness towards the inner and the phenomenal world shown by our classics is meant to become our own *attentiveness* towards them.

Observing for Being Transformed

Often, Chinese classics break up into tiny paragraphs that connect with each other through cross-references and resonances rather than through linear expansions. And, just as often, these paragraphs revolve around extremely condensed formulas. Let us stop on an example taken from the Mencius, which I already briefly made use of in the Introduction. For the clarity of what will follow I divide it into three parts:

a) Confucius climbed the Eastern Mountain, and [the State of] Lu became small; he climbed Taishan, and the world became small. Thus, for those who have contemplated the sea, it is difficult to make case of rivers; for those who have traveled to study under a Sage, it is difficult to give importance to speeches.
b) There is an art [*shu* 術] in observing water; we must observe its undulations: when the sun and the moon shine, the rays that [these undulations] necessarily receive penetrate them.
c) When flowing, water is made in such a way that it cannot move forward without first filling the pits. As for the path [the way] on which a gentleman has set his mind, if it is not fulfilled at each stage, it cannot attain completion.

a) 子登東山而小魯，登太山而小天下。故觀於海者難為水，遊於聖人之門者難為言。
b) 觀水有術，必觀其瀾。日月有明，容光必照焉。
c) 流水之為物也，不盈科不行；君子之志於道也，不成章不達。

(*Mencius* 7 A.24[124])

There are three propositions in this paragraph: (a) the one who has had access to an "eminence" (a high mountain or an eminent Sage) no longer cares about what is of lesser height; (b) one can "see" and probe water only by paying attention to its movement; (c) in the movement of their progression, the water and the Way fill all things.

124 The division of this paragraph in three sections is of course introduced by me.

Before even asking ourselves what logically links these propositions, let us note the images and pairs of opposites that make the paragraph a whole. (1) Metaphors related to water link together the successive statements. (2) The height of the mountains and the depth of the sea trenches respond to each other. (3) Each part of the whole deals with phenomena that are difficult to observe, either because, usually hidden, they have to come to light, or because, usually visible, they disappear from a distance. (4) Finally, in the first and third clauses the focus is on the person who is immersed into study – and we will see that the intermediate clause is not unrelated to this topic.

It is indeed in this second, central proposition that the enigma lies. Let us first notice the nature of the link between the first and the third assertions: in the first one, the fact of embarking on the path of study leads the student to travel, to climb, and thus to learn to appreciate true greatness, judging the rest from the broadest possible viewpoint. In the final proposition, it is said that entering into the path of study means to engage into underground work, a work that leaves nothing behind, that pays attention to each step rather than trying to advance too quickly, a work that enters into the depths – and then, when everything has been filled and probed, the Way arises for each to see. In the process, a transformation has taken place. To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be specified that the work here described is not about trying to make one's knowledge universal but rather about entering more deeply into what one chooses to study. Mencius notes that, for knowledge as for anything else, it is necessary to respond to priorities without seeking exhaustivity for itself: "Though a learned man may know everything, he applies himself to what is of first concern [*zhizhe wu bu zhi ye, dang wu zhi wei ji* 知者無不知也，當務之為急]" (*Mencius* 7 A.46).

At the center of our paragraph: the art of observing water. Water reveals itself to us through its manifestations, its movements. The commentaries specify that, in this context, "to observe water" means first to gauge its depth (gauging water's depth may be useful for irrigation work, crossing over, or yet navigation…). Mencius' idea appears to be that the play of ripples and rays stealthily reveals the objects that water conceals, thus allowing the observer to gauge the bottom, while still water remains impenetrable. One may infer that studying under a Sage is akin to interact with him and that the Sage's inner depth will be revealed from his reactions, his moves, the sudden glimpses he offers. The third proposition then explains both how water proceeds, and why the person who engages fully in study resembles the one who observes water. One learns how to gauge depth – that which, in essence, is barely discernible, imperceptible (*wei* 微) – through the play of transformations. One learns from water the way one learns from the Sage: one learns to "dive" as deep as it is possible. The "height" referred to in the first proposition is literally reversed: it is none other than that of the pit

where one has to descend, rather than spreading oneself over the surface. Considered in this light – considered in its undulations – the paragraph is admirably coherent by the way in which, through the interplay of three propositions (the one located in its middle functioning both as a key and as a principle of reversal), it introduces us to *a way of seeing*, *an art of scrutinizing*.

Located at the center of Mencius' paragraph, the character *guan* 觀 is defined by the *Shuowen jiezi* as "looking attentively" (*dishi* 諦視). Though accurate, the translation I give of *dishi* remains weak: as the graph of the character *di* 諦 suggests (it evokes the words proffered by the Supreme God), *guan* 觀 has a ritual origin: it corresponds to the twentieth hexagram of the *Yijing*, representing the attitude of the celebrant at a precise moment in the ritual process: "*Guan:* he has washed his hands, but not yet presented the offering, [he shows] sincerity and a serious demeanor [*Guan: guan er bu jian, you fu yong ruo* 觀：盥而不薦，有孚顒若]" (*Yijing*, *Guan* 1). The moment in question is the one when the officiant, having completed the preparations, is going to perform the sacrifice. His concentration, focused on the coming of the spirits, corresponds to the decisive moment of the ritual: it is when the celebrant does nothing, when he is simply attentive, that the essential happens. "From below, all observe him and are transformed [by this] [*xia guan er hua ye* 下觀而化也]", says the synthetic explanation (*tuan* 彖) of the hexagram (*Yijing*, *Guan* 1). The ones looking at the officiant are transformed by his way of behaving as well as by the very fact of observing him. The transformation happening in the participants shows that the attitude displayed by the officiant is already performative.

Performativity goes even further: attentiveness provokes not only the transformation of the participants but also the advent of the divine beings for whom the sacrifice is offered.

> He was sacrificing [to the *manes*] as if they were there; he was sacrificing to the spirits as if the spirits were there. Confucius was saying: "If I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as I am not sacrificing".
> 祭如在，祭神如神在。子曰：「吾不與祭，如不祭。」
>
> (*Analects* 3.12)

It is not a skepticism about the existence of *manes* and spirits (*guishen* 鬼神) that the sentence signals, but rather the conviction that their actual presence depends upon the participants. As already noted in Chapters 1 and 3, "feeling" the presence of *manes* and spirits (*gan guishen* 感鬼神) in the course of the ritual is a dominant feature of ancient Chinese religion, still perceptible today in the ethos of popular religion (see Li 2017, 163–180 and 517–521). However, the process of religious normalization undertaken by the literati, especially from the period of the Song dynas-

ty onwards, has tended to make ritual observance a path favoring "interior transcendence" at the expense of any sensitive manifestation.

The Art beyond All Arts

The ritual origin of the term *guan* does not exhaust its meaning. The character occurs in the first chapter of the canonical version of the *Laozi:* "Rooted in the absence of desire, one contemplates (*guan*) the mystery of the Constant; rooted in desire, one contemplates its manifestations [*chang wu yu yi guan qi miao chang you yu yi guan qi jiao* 常無欲, 以觀其妙; 常有欲, 以觀其徼]." Whatever the difficulties raised by the conciseness of the expression (my translation is tentative), it hints at the fact that *guan* applies just as well to what is deep, subtle, hidden (*miao* 妙) as it does to things manifest, located at the outermost (*jiao*徼). Said otherwise: the art of contemplation can focus both on the center and on the borders. One contemplates the same mystery by one or the other of its faces: the marvel of the "there is not" which gives birth to the "there is", the latter manifested by the multiplicity of beings, all of them being animated by desire (*yu* 欲) and all of them eventually returning to their origin.

This return to the origin is the subject of the second significant appearance of the *guan* character in the *Laozi:*

> Reaching the extreme of vacuity, I firmly hold quietness. All beings are activated, and I contemplate their return. Every living being flourishes, each of them returns to its roots. Returning to one's roots, this is called quietness, which means turning towards one's fate. Turning towards one's fate is called Constancy. Knowing Constancy is called Illumination.
> 致虛極，守靜篤。萬物並作，吾以觀復。夫物芸芸，各復歸其根。歸根曰靜，是謂復命。復命曰常，知常曰明。
>
> (Daodejing 16)

Contemplating an *object* (or even the absence of it) is not the spiritual practice undertaken by Laozi. The paragraph focuses on a *cycle* and, specifically, on the return (*fu* 復). This may indicate an additional degree of interiorization compared to Mencius' contemplation of water.[125] The character *fu* speaks of the movement specific to the Way, manifested by the cycle of water, or yet the cycle of the seasons, the return of the leaves to the soil and the roots, forming the humus. It is through this contemplative observation that a "light" (*ming* 明) breaks through, illuminating from within not only the laws that govern all phenomena but also their source.

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125 The point is debatable: after all, Mencius says that we observe water *by looking at its waves.*

The way classics nurture in us the art (*shu* 術) of contemplation (*guan*) does not apply only to our way of looking at the world, but also at our way of reading these same classics. It notably invites us to look beyond the apparent meaning so as to pay more attention to the hidden dynamic that allows for the deployment of the meaning throughout the text.

Attentive observation (contemplation) is an *art.* Let us note two other occurrences of the character *shu* 術 in the *Mencius:*

> Is the arrow-maker less humane than the breastplate-maker? The arrow maker only fears that arrows won't hurt; the other only fears that they will hurt. The same goes for the healer and the coffin maker. Thus, one could not be too careful in the choice of one's art [profession] [*shu*].
> 矢人豈不仁於函人哉？矢人唯恐不傷人，函人唯恐傷人。巫匠亦然，故術不可不慎也。
>
> (*Mencius* 2 A.7)

> There are many techniques [*shu*] in teaching. [So,] he whom I do not deign to teach, that is how I teach him – and that is all.
> 教亦多術矣，予不屑之教誨也者，是亦教誨之而已矣。
>
> (*Mencius* 6B.16)

Shu 術 is both what constitutes your livelihood and a way of proceeding that you have incorporated. It defines who you are – how you see yourself, how others see you. But the way you relate to what you are and what you know can differ greatly from individual to individual, and it is this difference that the last chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (*Tianxia*) will thematize and systematize:

> How many are the experts at governing the world! And all of them think that nothing is lacking [with respect to their expertise]. What was called of old the Art of the Way [*daoshu*], where can it be found? Let us respond; 'No place where it would not be there!'
> 天下之治方術者多矣，皆以其有為不可加矣。古之所謂道術者，果惡乎在？曰：「無乎不在」。
>
> (Zhuangzi 33.1)

The prince's advisers, like the makers of arrows or coffins, are merely the bearers of a given method. Simply, less modest than the craftsmen, they believe that their method has universal application and value. However, in this passage, the *shu* that they master is qualified by the character *fang* 方. *Fang* originally refers to a tillage implement; then, to a territory – probably initially to the farming plot, but, little by little, *fang* will designate large and small territories, and even the directions towards which the territories are ordered. It is probably the fact that the character designates both an *anchoring* and a *direction* that confers to it the meaning of "method". The art of government – any art – is therefore a *local* method, but the myopia of all those who are rooted in a territory, in a "field" or a "discipline"

prevents them from perceiving how restricted is the field of application of the technique they master.

In contrast, the Art of the Way (*daoshu* 道術) has no fixed place – it is found everywhere and nowhere – because it is rooted neither in a domain nor in a technique. The other chapter of the *Zhuangzi* where the term *daoshu* occurs features a pond that sustains a colony of fish:

> The appearance of fish is shaped in water, and the human appearance is shaped in the Dao. Whatever takes shape in water knows all about the pond [in which it resides] and takes its subsistence from it. Whoever takes shape in the Dao does not worry about how to ensure one's living. Thus, it is said: the appearance of fish disappears in lakes and rivers, and the human appearance disappears in the Art of the Way [*daoshu*].
> 魚相造乎水，人相造乎道。相造乎水者，穿池而養給；相造乎道者，無事而生定。故曰：魚相忘乎江湖，人相忘乎道術。
>
> (Zhuangzi 6.6)

In other words: in due time, one no longer distinguishes a person who has melted into her vital environment from her environment itself. The way in which the Dao proceeds becomes the motion that propels those who live in its "atmosphere". The vital environment which gives us a specific shape ends up innervating us into its own form. And it so happens that the process of the Dao is that of a "formless form": "The great [i. e., perfect] image has no shape" (*Daodejing* 41). The *Tianxia* chapter of the *Zhuangzi* quotes the words of Guan Yin 關尹, whom it makes the contemporary or close disciple of Laozi:

> [For the one] who lets nothing settle within herself [who lets nothing take possession of her innermost], the forms of all things are made manifest. Her motions are like water, her stillness like a mirror, her responses like an echo.
> 在己無居，形物自著，其動若水，其靜若鏡，其應若響。
>
> (Zhuangzi 33.5)

Ultimately, the observance of ritual ethos and the deciphering of textual dispositions will lead both readers and practitioners beyond figures, motives and codes. In stillness as well as in motion, followers of the Way enter its innermost: the province of the Formless, out of which all forms and all patterns originate.