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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Ruin, H. (2018)

Death, Sacrifice, and the Problem of Tradition in the Confucian *Analects*

Comparative and Continental Philosophy, 10(2): 140-150

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2018.1488353>

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To cite this article: Hans Ruin (2018) Death, Sacrifice, and the Problem of Tradition in the Confucian *Analects*, *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 10:2, 140-150, DOI: [10.1080/17570638.2018.1488353](https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2018.1488353)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2018.1488353>



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Published online: 18 Jun 2018.



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Death, Sacrifice, and the Problem of Tradition in the Confucian *Analects*

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ABSTRACT

Taking its point of departure in an enigmatic passage from the *Analects*, in which the interlocutor is likened by the master to a sacrificial vase, the essay explores how this teaching can be read as a indirect commentary on the proper way of inhabiting and communicating tradition. The relation to the ancestors and the proper way of handling the rites for the dead is shown to reveal a more basic hermeneutic argument in Confucian thinking, opening the text to its own future transformation.

KEYWORDS

Confucius; sacrifice; the dead; tradition; history; hermeneutics

In one of the conversations between Zigong (Tzu-Kung) and the Master in the *Analects*, the former asks (in Waley's translation): "What do you think of me?" to which the Master replies: "You are a vessel." Tzu-kung then replies: "What kind of vessel?" And to this the Master responds: "A sacrificial vase of jade" (Waley 1989, V:3, 107).¹ Oftentimes this remark has been interpreted as somewhat derogatory, along the lines of another remark from *Analects* II:12, that "a gentleman is not a tool" (Waley 1989, 90).² But the fact that the Master qualifies his statement as a "sacrificial vessel of jade" also invites us to read it as, in fact, a compliment. But what could it mean more specifically to liken a person to a sacrificial vessel, in particular the kind of vessel used in cults for the dead and the ancestral spirits? What is the Master implying here? Is he suggesting that the very being of Zigong is somehow connected to the rituals for the dead? Is it implying that sacrifice is something we are not only expected to *perform*, but also something that we can also *be*, indeed that our being could somehow be of a sacrificial nature? What is the relation here – perhaps hidden – among sacrifice, subjectivity, and the ancestral, and also, indirectly, ethics and learning?

These are the questions that will occupy me here in a tentative reading of this passage. More specifically, I want to show how the *Analects*, through this and some related passages, can be read as a text concerned with its own transmission and with the problem

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¹Waley's (1989) translation of the *Analects* is referred to throughout this article.

²Waley translates this passage as "a gentleman is not an implement" and in a note adds: that is, "a specialist, a tool used for a special purpose (Waley 1989, 90). The word translated here as "gentleman" is *junzi*, which can also be translated as "consummate person" or exemplary person" to show that much more is entailed in this accomplished status than just etiquette, even though this is also an aspect of the *junzi's* being in the world.

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of cultural transmission as such, and that it thus marks a passage from what could be called a *sacrificial* sense of self to a *hermeneutic* sense of self. The paper is comparative, in that it seeks to make sense of certain quotations from the *Analects* by means of theoretical concerns elicited from Hegel and from philosophical hermeneutics. Yet it is not comparative in the sense that it seeks only to compare distinct traditions. Instead it is an attempt to read the ancient sources from the viewpoint of a general and contemporary question, which – as I will argue – the text itself has already begun to ask in its own way, namely the question of the traditionality of tradition as such.

It is an often-recognized fact – even a cliché – that traditional Chinese thought is deeply concerned with the role and importance of *ancestral piety*. Yet, this ancestry, it seems, is rarely made into a speculative philosophical theme in itself and in its own right. Mostly it is simply taken for granted as having a self-same essence, a kind of transparent – if yet questionable – ethos and comportment, often equated simply with “traditionalism.”³ As such, it was often considered as being among the more outdated and least interesting aspects of Confucianism for those who today are trying to revitalize this legacy as an ethical and political doctrine in the present.⁴ In his widely used *Introduction to Confucianism*, Xinzhong Yao states that ghosts and spirits are minor themes for Confucius, who should be seen more as a “religious humanist” (Yao 2003, 26).⁵

This may be the case. But my approach to this matter comes from another angle. I do not see religious humanism, also in its Western context, as devoid of a preoccupation with spirits and ghosts – on the contrary. Following Derrida’s re-introduction in *Specters of Marx* of the topoi of *spectrality*, *haunting*, and the *revenant* as figures by means of which to think history, we are also in a different position when it comes to thinking the meaning and relevance of more traditional concerns previously confined to folklore and superstition.⁶ My focus here is on what it means to stand within the historical space of attentiveness and responsibility that we normally refer to as *tradition*, which is also a name for being always already *addressed by* and called to *respond* to the past, and thus to the voices and claims of the dead.⁷

We are familiar with the philosophical problem of tradition, or *Überlieferung*, from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics, in which it is designated as the “conversation

³See, for example, William Lakos’s *Chinese Ancestor Worship: A Practice and Ritual Oriented Approach to Understanding Chinese Culture* (2010). The premise for his argument is the extraordinary length and tenacity of Chinese culture, which he ascribes precisely to the social force of ancestral rites. His emphasis is not so much on specific *beliefs*, but on *practices* and ritual forms. At the center is the idea of “ritual communication” and how it generates “socially significant meaning,” manifested in values such as order, benevolence, harmony, and reciprocity. These give rise to “an ontological reality which supported both the now and the then,” which in turn could serve as a basis for “the most enduring social system in the world.” As the quotations show, Lakos tends to idealize and essentialize this system and to make it too much into something culturally specific, which is misguided. The study also lacks connection to more contemporary theoretical-sociological thought. Yet, it is worth noting for how it puts focus on the social significance of a phenomenon and a concept that has long been reserved for more pejorative cultural purposes to capture the supposed specificity of Chinese culture.

⁴Compare this for example to the many discussions in the recently published *Renaissance of Confucianism* (Fan 2012) concerning the extent to which Confucianism is universal or susceptible to a universal critical discourse, or the extent to which it is compatible with various ethical and political doctrines in the European intellectual tradition.

⁵In *An Introduction to Confucianism* (2000, 26), Yao notes that “Confucius kept a distance from serving spirits and ghosts.” Yao is also the editor of the monumental two volume *Routledge Encyclopedia on Confucianism* (2003).

⁶Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (1994). For an analysis of how its concepts enable a deeper exploration of the inner dynamics of tradition and ancestry, see also Ruin 2015a.

⁷On this point, also see Ruin 2015a.

that we are.”⁸ But in Gadamer’s version, tradition is something highly cultivated – a meaningful, mostly text-based, mediated interaction between educated subjects over time. Before this particular space is constituted, however, there has to have been an existential space where such an educated interaction can be experienced and articulated as a task. One of the many important contributions of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is how it describes the *historicity* of human existence as not necessarily dependent on the *writing* of history, or of historical *interpretation*, but as grounded in the temporality of human Dasein itself, as situated within the stretch of birth and death, and as being called to respond to those having been there before it.⁹ When exploring the structure of the historical nature of existence, Heidegger describes a structure of “repetition” of possibilities from the past, made possible by an inherent pastness of Dasein itself, its peculiar nature of *having-been* (*Da-gewesen*). Thereby he indicates that an original space of historical and temporal awareness has to do with the relation to past Dasein. In order to pursue this question, I have taken a particular interest in a theme Heidegger touches upon only very briefly, namely the phenomenological problem of being-with-the-dead in general and also more specifically the question of burial, and the relation between burial culture, memory, and subjectivity. In the present context I will elaborate on some of these questions from the viewpoint of the Confucian *Analects*.¹⁰

In *Analects* I:9 it is written: “When a proper respect towards the dead is shown at the End and continued after they are far away, the moral force [*de*] of a people has reached its highest point.” A similar ethos is expressed in II:5, where it says about parents: “While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual and sacrifice to them according to ritual” (Waley 1989, 89). Ritual, and in particular ritual concerning the deceased, is a duty often repeated throughout the *Analects*. Another quotation along this line is the laudatory remark on King Wu in XX:1, who is described as follows: “What he cared for most was that the people should have food, and that the rites of mourning and sacrifice should be fulfilled” (Waley 1989, 232).

Yet at the same time, the more precise role and enactment of the rituals is also a problem toward which the text constantly gravitates. We can look at passage III:11, where someone asks the master to explain ancestral sacrifice, and he responds: “I do not know. Anyone who knew the explanation could deal with all things under Heaven as easily as I lay this here; and he laid his finger upon the palm of his hand” (Waley 1989, 96). In other words, the true knowledge of the practice of ancestral rites comprises the whole. How to live in relation to the dead at this point seems to cover the entire range of human endeavor. How could this be the case?

A tentative response to this question would be as follows: The ancestral rites have, by the time of Confucius, become metonymic for the question of the relation to tradition and to the past as such. The man of learning, the educated subject, is someone capable of living in a balanced relation to time and to history. It is someone who has made him- or herself into a receptacle of the forces of the past, so as to live with and towards them in a way that permits one to act in the present. In short, it is a temporally defined subjectivity.

⁸Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1993). See in particular the section “Language as the medium of hermeneutic experience,” 383–389, on how language encompasses our being.

⁹For the description of human existence as a stretch between birth and death, see in particular Heidegger 2010, 372–377.

¹⁰Also see Ruin 2015b.

But in saying this I am already moving ahead toward my conclusion. Let us first stop for a moment and think more specifically about what is involved in ancestral sacrifice and in rituals for the dead.¹¹

In the *Book of Songs*, to which Confucius often refers, some of the verses deal explicitly with ancestral sacrifice, and with the importance of performing them correctly. In one of these Songs we read (again in Waley's translations): "Very hallowed was this service of offering; Very mighty the forefathers. The spirits and protectors have accepted; The pious descendant shall have happiness, They will reward him with great blessings" (Waley 1937, 209 and following pages). It is important here that the spirits are content, that they have enjoyed what was offered to them. Also the idea is expressed repeatedly that one should enjoy a feast together with the dead, that one should get drunk together with the dead. What is depicted here is a staged communication with the deceased, administered with the help of alcohol or spirits. In one verse we read: "The ducal Dead reposes and is at peace. Your wine is clear, your food smells good. The dead one quietly drinks; blessings are in the making ..." (Waley 1937, 249). We give to the dead in sacrifice, and thus we take part in the same element, and reciprocally, they give to us. To perform these rituals correctly is a fundamental element in the wellbeing of the community, according to practices that go back and disappear in non-documented historical times, in the long tradition of *ru* and its intricate rituals.

In the sacrificial ritual the dead become alive again, they become present and take part in the life of the living. This is the heart of the ancestral sacrifice, to maintain the bond, transgress the border between life and death, but also to thereby protect the living from the potential threat of the dead. For the dead in many ancient and so-called "primitive" societies were surrounded by a sense of fear and awe. To live well in relation to them, and in particular to make sure that their passage into the underworld is administered correctly, is therefore more important than any other ritual. For, a society that does not live well in relation to the dead could become a cursed society.

The rituals surrounding the dead and the concerns of the living about how to comport oneself toward the spirits of the deceased ancestors constitute a fundamental cultural apriori. Among earlier generations of European anthropologists, the interest in these practices was immense, as can be seen by the large body of literature on the topic from the later part of the nineteenth century and into the mid-war period. An important example of this anthropological fascination was James Frazer's book *The Fear of the Dead* from 1933, which gathers a massive body of transcultural empirical observations on the multitude of ways in which humans have comported themselves in relation to their dead, through different forms of burial, preservation, reactivation, reanimation, and sacrifice. The empirical material covers such practices as burying dead children under one's floor, carrying the dead skulls of one's parents as protective shields, and keeping their mummified corpses in the house. In the preface to this study, Frazer makes the general remark – in the typical unabashed colonial discourse of his time – that among the "savages" and "uncivilized" people this relation to the dead is mostly one of *fear*, whereas among the more civilized cultures it is instead one of reverence,

¹¹For another general discussion of this topic, with particular focus on the early Christian context, see Ruin 2016.

piety, and affection. Still, the overriding premise for the study is that in all cultures, on whatever level of so called “civilization,” caring for the dead and for the appropriate relation to the dead appears as a common denominator. Rephrasing Aristotle, we could say that what characterizes humans is not just being rational, a *zoon logon echon*, and living a political life, as a *zoon politikon*, but also being a *zoon thanatois*, having a life-with-the-dead.¹²

Perhaps the most profound speculative explication of this predicament is that formulated by Hegel in the famous interpretation of Sophocles’s *Antigone* in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. It describes how the human spirit over the course of its historical realization falls apart in two separate ethical substances, *human law* and *divine law* (Hegel 1977, §445). Human law is embodied in the state, whereas Divine law is concretely manifested in the family. In the state the individual recognizes him- or herself as a universal being under universal obligations, whereas the system of the family binds the individual to an inner and, as Hegel says, “unconscious” ethical order.

The central obligation of the family members toward one another is described as concentrated in one particular ritual act, namely the *burial* of family members. When a citizen dies, he or she comes to a universal fulfillment as a member of the community. But from the viewpoint of the family, death makes him an “unreal impotent shadow” (Hegel 1977, §451). The universality that we reach in death is from the viewpoint of the one deceased a non-action, something only undergone and suffered passively by unconscious nature. It is in relation to this passive undergoing of nature’s course that the specific obligation of the family manifests itself, or as Hegel writes:

The duty of the member of a family is on that account to add this aspect, in order that the individual’s ultimate being, too, shall not belong solely to nature and remain something irrational, but shall be something done, and the right of consciousness asserted in it. (1977, §452)

By providing a proper burial, the family is thus seen as carrying out – unconsciously – the work of the rational universalization of spirit in and through death. What nature takes away from the individual in death, namely activity and initiative, the surviving family members restore through a proper burial. By laying the corpse to rest in the ground, and by covering it with earth, the family restores the humanity of the human in the face of blind nature. For Hegel the element of the *earth* is crucial, that the body is ritually placed in the medium with which it will eventually become one. But the argument could carry over to most known burial practices, whether it be by burning, cutting, crushing, drying or dissolving, or even by ritually devouring the corpse.¹³

In Hegel’s account, Human Law is connected to light and sky, whereas the Divine Law speaks from the earth and the netherworld. In being bound by the Divine law, the members of a family are somehow also bound to and by the dead, in relation to whom their obligations are articulated. Since these obligations are generally not articulated as such, but rather work as forces in relation to which the individual family members experience and perform their actions, they have the character of a *call* from the underworld, and thus form a kind of unconscious *pact* between the dead and the living.

¹²For an extended elaboration of this description of human existence as a being with the dead, see my (forthcoming) book *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*, Ruin (2019).

¹³The same point is made in an article by David Ciavatta (2007).

Confronted by the brute fact of death, by the demise and destruction of the living body of one's own kin, the human being responds by a rite of burial, taking upon itself the work of the dead other. Whatever superstitious beliefs may accompany this rite, its essence is "rational" and in line with the teleology of the human spirit. In response to the inevitable facticity of death, human beings take upon themselves the ritual work of death, making as it were death their own. For George Bataille, an acute reader of Hegel, this confrontation with mortality was also at the heart of the very act of *sacrifice*. For in sacrifice, the human animal responds to death by making death and destruction its own act, in a kind of unconscious pact with the forces of destruction operating on itself. The thanatological human animal is thus also the sacrificial and sacrificing animal, whose dialogue with the dead takes on – universally – the form of ritual sacrifice, of goods and of life itself.¹⁴

In more recent work on the history of religion, a different line of inquiry in relation to the topic of sacrifice has emerged that is also significant for our attempt to read the *Analects* anew. I am thinking of the work of Guy Stroumsa, and his book *The End of Sacrifice* from 2006. During the centuries around the beginning of the Christian era, there is a movement away from public sacrifices. From that point onward, the long institution of animal sacrifice comes under increasing criticism, while at the same time a new figure of thought emerges, namely that of an "inner sacrifice," under whose name we can identify various ascetic practices. This way of thinking about sacrifice, as a gradual inversion of exterior practices into internalized, individual self-mastery follows in the wake of Michel Foucault and Pierre Hadot, both of whom taught us to be more attentive to the nature and significance of the spiritual transformation taking place during late Antiquity, toward new and different modes of "subjectivation." In Foucault it was epitomized in the expression "care of the self," and in Hadot in the "inner citadel."¹⁵ They were both particularly interested in the different "techniques" whereby people at this stage and time of human history sought to control and shape themselves, resulting in various ascetic practices.

It is a time that saw the invention of new forms of subjectivities, the emergence of a new level of "interiority," culminating in the writings of Augustine, in which the combination of asceticism, personal piety, remorse, and autobiographical writing forges a synthesis of Jewish-Christian spirituality and Greek and Roman philosophy. By defining the transformations taking place during this time in terms of "the end of sacrifice," Stroumsa brings out in a more complex way than before the interrelated web of beliefs and practices that constitute the emergence of this new form of spirituality, sensibility or "subjectivation." Under this label he identifies not just a culture of caring for the self, but also a technical transformation in the practices of reading, from the scroll to the codex, and from reading aloud to reading silently, and most importantly in the abandonment of public sacrifices in favor of cults centered upon reading, speaking, and prayer, and thus the formation of new religious communities.¹⁶ This way of looking at transformed practices of sacrifices as synchronic with the emergence of a culture of learning and interpretation and of ascetic intellectual life-forms is clearly also relevant when interpreting the Confucian texts, since they emerge within a similarly transitional cultural period.

¹⁴See Bataille 1990.

¹⁵See Foucault 1988; and Hadot 1998 and 2002.

¹⁶See summary of argument in Stroumsa 2006, 130.

With these remarks and with the general reflections on the culture of burial and ancestral ritual piety, we can now return to a reading of the *Analects*. It is a common conception of the Confucian writings, echoed already by Hegel himself in his *Lectures on Religion*, that the Master was first and foremost a moral-religious teacher. But in the guise of an eternal, or at least trans-historical, doctrine of human conduct, it is easy to miss what I would call its inner historicity, in other words the way in which these texts reflect on the the problem of tradition and traditionality as such. The reason this theme has been under-theorized – this is at least my interpretative hypothesis – is that it surfaces primarily in relation to remarks on ritual and ancestral piety, which from a supposedly more modern and enlightened perspective would seem to mark the most arcane and least relevant levels of the text. But contrary to this conventional conception, I believe that what we can read between these lines is in fact a sophisticated reflection on what tradition is and how it can and should be lived in a free and responsible way. This is true in particular of the passages that comment on mortuary and ancestral rituals. For, when commenting on these practices, the text can in fact be read as exploring the nature of the traditional as such and the inner logic of transmission.

In the sacrificial rites as they are commented upon in the *Book of Songs* quoted earlier, it is clear that they are concerned with establishing a bond between the living and the dead. If they are performed correctly, the living can live on in harmony with the dead. By communicating ritually with the departed spirits, in sharing one's goods with them, the latter become again living, enjoying the company of the living, and they begin to live again through them. The feast described above, with food and alcohol, in which the living and the dead party together, could therefore also be described as a “hermeneutic bacchanale.” Hermes is the mythic messenger between the Gods and men. But Hermes is also the patron saint of historical communication and mediation. When we engage in historical interpretation, we are also – always – engaging in an act of historical re-actualization and re-application. This is the central point stated clearly by Gadamer in his philosophical hermeneutics; that historical interpretation is a making use of and thus a making present of tradition. To read the ancient texts is to make them readable, and thus to make them – as it were – *happen* in the present. The skilled hermeneut is someone who can perform this event of making the past strike the present, so as to become living again, not by conjuring up the past for idiosyncratic purposes, but by really making it come alive. But this fundamental practice of hermeneutics can also be seen as the core of the ritual whose purpose it is to make the dead come alive, to make them happen in the present. In this way it can be seen as a hermeneutic feast, where the living join ranks with the souls of the departed.

We know also that this passage from present to past and from past to present, is never guaranteed from the start. On the contrary, the present can become closed off to the past, ignorant of its claims, disrespectful of its pursuits and its wisdom. Also the present can be so enraptured by the sense of the weight of tradition that it collapses under it, and becomes only a feeble vehicle of ritual without content or inner purpose. In his so-called “Second untimely meditation,” *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche (1980) describes how a culture can succumb to the *antiquarian* impulse to simply make itself into the self-effacing caretaker of what has been, just as it can inflate itself with an boisterous *monumentalism*, blindly celebrating the endeavors of the past. To find a balance in relation to the past and to tradition then appears as the difficult task of the thinker. Stated in

more traditional terms, this would mean to carry on the rites and rituals in relation to the dead with a sense of purpose and timeliness.

It is a remarkable aspect of the *Analects* the extent to which this problem of the proper comportment in regard to tradition occupies its author. Unlike the Hegelian caricature of Confucius as a timeless moral teacher, the writer(s) of the *Analects* appear to be constantly reflecting on what we could call the ethos of cultural inheritance.¹⁷ And what it says about “learning” can often be translated precisely into such an ethics. We can listen, for example, to the remark: “He who by reanimating the Old can gain knowledge of the New is fit to be a teacher” (Waley 1989, II:11, 90). The Chinese word for “reanimate” is the same as that of “warming up,” and thus also related to ancestral rituals, in short, of bringing to life. Thus in one dense passage we have both a reference to ancestral ritual and a reflection on the hermeneutical task. To understand the past is to make use of the past; it is to make it happen in and for a future. This is why it is also said: “He who learns but does not think, is lost” (Waley 1989, II:15, 91). This is not a doctrine that teaches a passive succumbing to tradition. Instead it is a thinking that seems to make a core challenge of thinking what tradition is and how it should be lived. Unless it is “warmed” or “reanimated,” it is dead and will remain so.

At the same time there is always a risk of coming too close to the dead and being engulfed by them. We need to keep a proper and balanced distance from the ancestral spirits. In one passage it is said of the good ruler that “He who devotes himself to securing for his subjects what it is right they should have, who by respect for the Spirits keeps them at a distance, may be termed wise” (Waley 1989, VI:20, 120). And perhaps the most drastic expression of this warning comes out in one of the conversations with Zilu (Tzu-lu):

Tzu-lu asked how one should serve ghosts and spirits. The Master said, Till you have learnt to serve men, how can you serve ghosts? Tzu-lu then ventured upon a question about the dead. The Master said, Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead? (Waley 1989, XI:11,155)

In other words, if the living do not look toward the living, they will not master the past, rather it will confuse them or make no sense to them, or they will fail in their pursuits. The living must care for the bond to the dead, and they must do so in the form of ritual. But the genuine performance of ritual is never guaranteed. Ritual can become an empty shell and tradition can become a death in life, instead of a way for life to remain living.

The author(s) of the *Analects* can be read as thinking and operating within a period when the transition from a culture of sacrifice to a culture of learning is taking place, when they blend into one another, and when they intermingle at times almost seamlessly. The right performance of ritual serves as model for a culture of learning, thus making learning, too, into a ritual activity. And the worry and concern for the proper handling of ritual is partly equivalent with the concern for a proper and balanced culture of learning. The transmittal of intellectual sources follows and blends with the ritual practices of ancestral piety.

In another remarkable passage, which again can be read as bringing out this hermeneutical logic of sacrifice, we read:

¹⁷This image of the timeless moral teacher, cast in the form of a kind of personal saint, also animates the most recent scholarly attempts to capture the life and learning of Confucius, as in Anping Chin’s (2006) biography *Confucius*.

Of the saying, “the word *sacrifice* is like the word *present*; one should sacrifice to a spirit as though that spirit was present,” the Master said, If I am not present at the sacrifice, it is as though there were no sacrifice. (Waley 1989, III:12, 96)

Here again we see how the fusion between an older ideal of ancestral sacrifice is gradually internalized as a practice of reading and learning, and made into the demand that somehow the sacrificer is himself responsible for the event of the past taking place, and thereby coming into its own. The *Analects* here operate from within a precarious temporality, in which the very pastness of the past is at stake, and in which the present is no longer just the repetition of the old, but a living responsibility to care for the intersection between them, and thus to exist in this transitory moment, as a moment of caring for how the Old can become alive in and for the New.

We can thus read the *Analects* as much more than simply the caretaker of ancient traditions, wisdom, and stable hierarchies; it can also be seen as a work written from within a situation in which the very traditionality of tradition is constantly in question, indeed, in which this very concern is at the heart of its message. Its underlying topic would then be the very happening of tradition, and thus the shaping of an ethics on the basis of a precarious responsibility for the past in the present. In one of the most beautiful and often quoted passages, the text speaks of how the love of goodness, wisdom, uprightness, and courage all degenerate into their opposites if they are not cultivated by *learning*, in other words by living attentively in relation to the past. But doing so does not imply fleeing back into tradition and resting content with its teachings as a stable foundation; rather it is a matter of proving oneself capable of letting it speak to the present, and capable of listening to and conversing with the dead.

In another conversation with the Master, Zigong (Tzu-Kung) recalls one of the *Songs* and brings it into their dialogue, letting an old, enigmatic passage resound in order to support what they have just said. The Master takes delight in this ability, and says to him: “Now I can really begin to talk to you about the *Songs*, for when I allude to sayings of the past, you see what bearing they have on what was to come after” (Waley 1989, II:15, 87). Zigong has thereby proven himself to be a genuine hermeneut or, in other words, someone who is not only able to repeat the old, but also able to make it address the present in a relevant way.

It is at this point that we can now return to, and hopefully also understand from a more reflected position, the enigmatic comment from the Master to Zigong (Tzu-kung) in Book V, with which we started our investigation. When he says of Zigong that he is “a sacrificial vessel of jade,” he is saying that he is someone in whom the memory of the spirits of the past is preserved, so as to be enacted in the present. By understanding how to perform the rituals for the dead, he has shown himself to be a precious carrier of tradition, in the sense of being someone who can bring the dead and the living together. This is his ethos, this is his learning. Thus he has transformed himself into a beautiful sacrificial vessel.

By bringing forth how we find, at the core of the *Analects*, not just the concern for the old and established forms of tradition, as various forms of fidelity and hierarchical relations of power, but instead the very experience of tradition as a problem in itself, we can also hope to shift the focus of the readings and applications of these texts. Unlike the standard reading, which takes the tradition of Confucianism itself for granted, and that then perhaps asks the question of how this ancient tradition can be

applied in the present, we can now approach the texts as partly a body of hermeneutic literature, for which the very nature and implication of tradition was itself in question, and indeed from the very start.¹⁸

Only by turning our gaze toward what on the surface may appear to be the most arcane and even irrelevant dimensions of the text, namely its reflections on the proper ways of performing sacrifices for ancestral spirits, does it begin to disclose this hidden domain of its message, namely concern for how to live well with the voices of the dead, as another word for what it means to occupy a hermeneutic space, and thus to live in critical responsibility toward the past in the service of a future.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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¹⁸For an example of recent collection of articles with this perspective, see Ames and Herschock (2006).

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