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THE RITUAL METHODS OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY



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Whoever writes in blood and aphorisms does not want to be read, but rather to be learned by heart.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*¹

Here's what is necessary: one blow with a club, one scar; one slap on the face, a handful of blood. Your reading of what other people write should be just like this. Don't be lax!

Zhu Xi, "On Reading"²

In several recent articles, Leigh Kathryn Jenco questions the use of Eurocentric methodologies in conducting cross-cultural research within and about Chinese traditions.³ As she says, "postcolonial and 'non-Western' societies can be positioned as particularly challenging case studies, offering 'alternative' views of self, culture, and society. However, their rich traditions of historical, political, and literary scholarship can play no role in elaborating methodologies for inquiry or exchange."⁴ Comparative philosophers are well acquainted with the negative consequences of this vaguely defined yet influential "methodological/non-methodological" bifurcation, which plays a role in excluding many non-Western texts from the discipline of philosophy.⁵ When we are told that the *Daodejing* is not "making an argument," or that the *Analects* is just "a collection of aphorisms," we are being told (at least in part) that the texts do not provide scholarly methods that we might consider adopting. In other words, the ideas in the texts may be interesting as objects of study, but the texts themselves do not contribute to the field of philosophy *qua* philosophy.

As Jenco says, such exclusion implies that non-Western traditions lack the "capacity to conduct self-sufficient theoretical inquiry."⁶ She recommends a move toward a "methods-centered approach to cross-cultural engagement"⁷ that actively seeks to incorporate non-Western research methodologies. The present essay follows up on Jenco's recommendation, investigating the extent to which borrowing scholarly methods from Asian traditions might (or already does) transform the disciplinary and professional identity of comparative philosophy. In terms of content, the anti-Eurocentric position of comparative philosophy is easy to see: the texts that are read and the ideas that are discussed are drawn from non-Western sources. But the non-Western *methods* of comparative philosophy are less visible. While many common comparative philosophical methods can be named in Western terms (e.g., analysis, hermeneutics, the phenomenological method), scholarly practices from East Asian discourses can be difficult to classify on Western models and hence are not often explicitly called "methods."

In what follows, I begin with Jenco's claim that we might look to several scholars of the Ming and Qing dynasties for examples of research practices that could be adopted widely today. These include meditation routines meant to prepare the mind for scholarly research, and memorization techniques aimed at internalizing texts to catalyze philosophical insight and, ultimately, self-transformation. As I show, these methods are part of a general "ritual methodology" evident across all the *sanjiao* 三教⁸ traditions (i.e., the "three teachings" of Ruism,⁹ Daoism, and Buddhism) and informed by a certain conception of the mirror-like functioning of the mind. From within this context, I consider both the viability and desirability of such a ritualized approach to scholarship for contemporary professional philosophers.

1. Comparing Philosophical Methods

The philosophical methods mentioned above—analysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology—can be characterized as intellectual or mental activities. They are reason-based and interpretative strategies for engaging in philosophical thinking, usually while reading a text, speaking to other people, or reflecting on personal experience; they include, for example, identifying premises, defining terms, making arguments, evaluating evidence, and drawing out conclusions or implications. In contrast, strategies for philosophical study and research in East Asian traditions are rarely confined to intellectual activities; rather, they often involve ritualized or repetitive exercises that do not appeal directly to the intellect, or which explicitly seek to circumvent it.¹⁰ This may explain, at least in part, why these strategies do not register as scholarly "methods" in Western philosophical terms.¹¹ I will look at two such strategies—namely rote memorization and meditation—and the issues we encounter when thinking about adopting these methods in contemporary academia.

The practice of rote memorization figures prominently in Jenco's article on the Ruist scholars Wang Yangming (1472–1529) and Kang Youwei (1858–1927). Of note, for Jenco, is Wang's conviction that reading, repeating, and memorizing the classics is a practice of self-cultivation and, moreover, one that is efficacious no matter who engages in it. In other words, the texts will execute their transformative function upon the self, so long as a given reader takes the time to allow the process to work.¹² This, says Jenco, constitutes Wang's methodological approach to scholarly research, and she suggests it is an approach that might be employed by academics today.

To fully appreciate this claim, consider in concrete detail the prevalent study and research methods that would have informed Wang's scholarly practices. On the one hand, the academies of the Song dynasty provide us a glimpse of many Ruist techniques that appear easily appropriable today, with hardly any modification. For example, students kept notebooks to record their interpretations of daily reading assignments, which they later discussed with teachers in weekly, one-on-one tutorials; they kept running lists of their doubts and questions over the readings, which they discussed with peers in small study groups; and they practiced what we might call the "principle of charity" and the hermeneutic "suspension of prejudices" while

reading.¹³ Western students would need very little contextualization in terms of Ruist history to use such techniques today.

On the other hand, many Ruist scholarly techniques might seem out of place in contemporary academia. For example, Song dynasty scholars saw philosophical insight and moral self-cultivation as outgrowths of the seemingly rote memorization practices that occupied early childhood education. Barry Keenan notes that children between the ages of eight and fifteen would pursue a rigorous course of memorization, involving reading one small passage hundreds of times, and then reciting it hundreds of times, before moving on to the next passage, until all of the Five Classics and Four Books were committed to memory.¹⁴ Such strategies are not confined to the Ruist tradition. G. Victor Sōgen Hori discusses the educational role of rote memorization at Rinzai Zen monasteries today, where it is a central method in studying *sūtras* and *kōan*. In both the Buddhist and Ruist cases, such memorization techniques are assumed to bring about radical transformation in practitioners. In the case of Ruism, the goal is moral self-cultivation; in the case of Buddhism, the goal is, as Hori says, “mystical insight.”¹⁵ Hori likens the relation between rote memorization and mystical insight to a student’s sudden grasp of a puzzling logic problem in a philosophy class: the student memorizes rules and attempts to solve the same problem over and over again, until suddenly she “sees” the answer.¹⁶ Of course, in the case of *kōan* study, the explicit goal is to curtail intellectual rumination; the intellect is, if anything, a barrier to sudden insight.

In addition to memorization techniques, East Asian traditions employ meditative practices as methods for conducting scholarship. Returning to the Song dynasty academies, Ruist scholars were concerned with achieving an optimal state of mind before engaging in research. As Keenan describes: “If we can empty our minds of what we think it will say, and calm ourselves to be as placid as a serene pond, then we will have a reasonable chance to receive and reflect accurately the ideas in the text. . . . Zhu [Xi] advised sitting comfortably at a table and humming gently to truly clear one’s mind before opening a classic.”¹⁷ The practice of humming before reading is a methodological approach to textual study, based on the assumption that a calm mind is best prepared to engage in philosophical analysis and interpretation. The emphasis on mental placidity and receptivity recalls a long-standing Chinese metaphor about the mind being a still pond or clear mirror. Keenan explains: “Based on a common Neo-Confucian metaphor that had its origins in the Daoist thinker Zhuangzi, the idea was to polish and uncloud the mirror of the mind so that the meaning of the text could be accurately reflected.”¹⁸ These pervasive assumptions about the meditative mind’s mirror-like capabilities support the belief that memorization can radically transform scholarly understanding.

But would these meditation and memorization practices be considered “research methods” in contemporary professional academia? Hori contends that current educational models, on the whole, devalue rote memorization and focus instead on instructional methods that emphasize students’ rationality and autonomy.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the idea that philosophers today might seek instead to circumvent the intellect by memorizing texts important to their research is an intriguing proposition, especially

when we consider claims common in both the Ruist and Buddhist traditions that rote memorization leads to moral cultivation or, to borrow Hori's words again, "mystical insight."²⁰ In terms of Jenco's proposal, further exploring this idea might contribute concretely to the decolonizing of philosophical discourse, by providing a practice-level technique for challenging the Eurocentric structures that entrench rationality and theory at the heart of the discipline. To assess these claims, we turn next to the wider context in which such scholarly practices themselves operate, including (1) the ritualized approach to training and practice that appears across all the *sanjiao* traditions and (2) the understanding of the mirror-like mind that informs this ritualization.

II. Scholarly Methods as "Ritual Methods"

Robert Eno characterizes the scholarly methods of Ruism as "rituals" (*li* 禮), stating unequivocally that early Ruism "plac[ed] ritual practice at the center of philosophy."²¹ He explains: "Its central methodology involved the careful design of a syllabus of practice rather than in rigor of rational argument. The heart of Ruism lay outside its texts in a detailed training course of ritual, music, and gymnastics."²² Bringing Eno's thesis to bear on Jenco's account of Wang Yangming, we can say that the Ruist tradition would frame Wang's scholarly practices in terms of efficacious rituals (*li*). That is, Wang is not only studying texts while using a particular Ruist "methodology"—rather, he is practicing Ruist *li* in the very act of studying texts. In this sense, Ruist "rituals" overlap with scholarly "methods" in Wang's work. This ritual framework includes not only methods for scholarship, such as memorizing and reciting texts, but also the all-pervasive Ruist *li* that integrate seamlessly into daily life, involving everything from social etiquette, to ancestor veneration, to the "syllabus of practice" that Eno identifies above as Ruism's "central methodology."²³

Eno further explains: "Masters and disciples spent considerable time discussing these practices and elaborating theories that rationalized their value. Such discussion was an ancillary activity."²⁴ In other words, ritual is itself a type of knowing and learning, and although such knowledge may at first bypass the intellect, it is still available for later reflection and articulation. Zongjie Wu and Meixin Hu make a similar point regarding what they call "ritual hermeneutics" in Chinese educational contexts: "Education in the Chinese ritual culture means nothing of receiving knowledge and information. . . . [R]ather [students] encounter through ritual practice a deeply personal, experiential and transformative form of hermeneutical experience. . . . In this sense, the bodily understanding through ritual practice becomes [the] transformative power rather than propositional indoctrination."²⁵ Wu and Hu suggest that this ritual hermeneutic is a form of thinking that plays a role analogous to reason or rationality in Western history. They discuss a variety of historical and contemporary examples in which ritual—not spoken or written discourse—is the medium through which interpersonal relations are negotiated, ethical dilemmas are navigated, and questions of social order are settled. They conclude: "That explains why the essentials of Chinese knowledge on politics, ethics, morality, religion etc. are mostly recorded in the detailed description of ritual activities rather than

in the form of propositional arguments."²⁶ Given the dominance of propositional argumentation as a philosophical method in the Western tradition, it is not surprising that Western academics might not recognize the rituals of Ruism as scholarly methods.²⁷

This conceptual overlap between ritual, practice, and education is evident across all of the *sanjiao* traditions. For example, in the Buddhist context, T. Griffith Foulk expresses hesitation over importing a distinction between rituals and practices: "Westerners interested in Zen . . . are often attracted to the 'practices' of seated meditation (*zazen*), manual labor, and doctrinal study but uncomfortable with the 'rituals' of offerings, prayers, and prostrations made before images on altars."²⁸ But, he warns, "it is important to recognize that [these distinctions] are fundamentally alien to the East Asian Buddhist tradition of which Zen is a part. The East Asian Buddhist tradition itself has no words for discriminating what Westerners are apt to call 'ritual' as opposed to 'practice.'"²⁹ Indeed, East Asian traditions are home to a constellation of terms that might variously be translated as ritual, practice, or training, which together speak to a general "ritual methodology."

Important words related to this methodology include: *li* 禮 (or 礼) (*ri* in Japanese) or the Ruist rites; *xing/gyō* 行, meaning actions, behaviors, or "doings," which is used to translate the Sanskrit *saṃskāra* (i.e., the conditioned habits that chain the self to delusion) and also *bhāvanā* (i.e., the liberating practices that cultivate enlightenment); and *xiu/shū* 修, often referring to disciplined practice or training. Although contemporary compounds related to these terms do not map well onto a distinction between so-called rituals and practices, we do see a distinction between formulaic rites performed only in certain contexts and pervasive ritualization that integrates organically into everyday life (and a preference for achieving the latter). For example, in his study of contemporary Rinzai Zen, Jørn Borup discusses *gyōji* 行持 as "a term used in an extended sense as 'sustained practice,' referring to the ideal of bringing Zen outside of defined ritual events to everyday life."³⁰ *Gyōji* as a category includes the closely related *gyōji* 行事, which refers to dharma rituals, temple ceremonies, and annual Buddhist festivals, as well as *shugyō* 修行, which means practices associated with monastic training such as *zazen* (seated meditation) and *samu* (work meditation).³¹

Commenting on the importance of this general category of rituals and practices, Borup notes somewhat wryly: "Japanese have been criticized and admired for their ability to turn all action into ceremony. It is quite significant that even the polite encouragement not to stand on ceremony (*goenryo naku*) itself is a ritualized expression indicating a ritualized relaxed atmosphere."³² Although his topic is Rinzai Zen, he associates this cultural practice with "the Confucian concept of '*li*' (礼), meaning both social and moral conduct as well as religious ritual."³³ Similarly, Peter Yih-Jiun Wong speaks inclusively of the *sanjiao* traditions when he describes the importance of rituals and practices across diverse strands of Chinese scholarship, even in cases of philosophical disagreement: "While Daoist criticisms of Confucianism are often directed at its preoccupation with matters ritualistic, nevertheless it shares with Confucianism a central concern: practice. That they disagree is precisely due to differing

philosophical positions regarding it.”³⁴ To capture this broad notion of ritual and practice that appears in all the *sanjiao* traditions, Hori uses the term “ritual formalism,” which encompasses a cluster of words related to rites, practices, habits, and types of training or apprenticeship including “repetition, rote memorization, [and] behaving according to traditional prescription.”³⁵ As he says, in both Buddhism and Ruism, “[t]here is . . . an educational use of ritual formalism: it trains consciousness.”³⁶ What I have called a “ritual methodology”—including practices of memorization and meditation employed in scholarly settings—would typify such “educational use.” As we will see next, beliefs regarding the effectiveness of this methodology for education and scholarship can be traced to assumptions about the mirror-like functioning of the mind.

IV. Ritual Transformation

Speaking broadly, the *sanjiao* traditions do not share Western philosophy’s preoccupation with a substantial self or an essential soul. The term “relational self” has been used in comparative philosophy to describe the social relations that constitute subjects in Chinese thought. In addition, the Buddhist tradition explicitly denies the existence of an enduring self and brings from India to China hundreds of years of scholarly argumentation against substance ontology and metaphysical essentialism. Between the “relational self” and “no-self,” we might say that the self “is” more or less what it “does,” according to many East Asian discourses. This is one important feature of the conceptual landscape in which ritual methods are here being discussed—the efficacy of repetitive actions makes sense when we are working under the assumption that actions constitute entities. As Roger Ames and David Hall comment: “It is only if the world is truly processive and changing in character that acquired dispositions may become a constitutive ground of the way things are.”³⁷

In a world “truly processive and changing in character,” the efficacy of ritual acts does not need to be proven; it is taken as a premise. Grounded on this premise, two issues (at least) demarcate major areas of inquiry: how does diligent training lead to a kind of spontaneous naturalness (*ziran/jinen* 自然), and how does rote learning lead to insight or awakening (*jianxing/kenshō* 見性 or *wu/satori* 悟)? These are related discourses that both presume an understanding of the mind-mirror metaphor. Although they take this metaphor in different directions, they still converge on a central problem: what is the relation of ritualistic practice to radical transformation? Only by taking a stance vis-à-vis *this* problem can we begin to assess the claim that Wang Yangming might provide efficacious scholarly methods useful to philosophers today.

Ziran

Discourses on *ziran* have a long history in East Asia: some of the earliest references appear in the *Daodejing* as descriptions of sagely behaviors associated with the so-called *wu* forms (e.g., *wuwei* 無為), and as late as 1933 the philosopher Kuki Shūzō names it as one of the three characteristic features of Japanese culture.³⁸ The term can

be translated as nature or naturalness, spontaneity, or that which is “self-so,” that is, that which arises or happens of its own accord. Discourses on *ziran* look into how rote or repetitive practices enable uncontrived spontaneity, improvisation, and the seeming impulsiveness of the sage. The relation between practice, mastery, and improvisational spontaneity is certainly not foreign to the Western tradition, where we are familiar with the anecdotal advice, “You have to know the rules before you break them.” Within the *sanjiao* sphere of influence, this connection between training and improvisation attracts sustained philosophical attention. It is an important clue to understanding why ritual methods might be seen as efficacious strategies for critical and creative scholarly inquiry.

The term *ziran* figures largely in Daoist critiques of Ruist ritualism. Several well-known passages in the *Daodejing* assert that *dao* 道 cares not for *li* 禮, *ren* 仁, *yi* 義, or any of the other central Ruist values.³⁹ Such prescribed rituals and roles only appear through a failure of *ziran*, that is, when naturalness is lost and human contrivances take over. The Daoist sage practices not to become an exemplary human—rather we might say that the sage aims at the superhuman or even the supernatural, where we understand “supernatural” as a superlative mode of the natural. Consider the sage’s superhuman skills described in the *Zhuangzi* where, for example, the famous cook Ding, after years of practice, can cut up an ox without ever dulling his blade, or where a man with physical disabilities gains the admiration of Kongzi after having concentrated his awareness to perfect the skill of catching cicadas.⁴⁰ The text explains that what accounts for such astonishing skill is the ability to forget oneself and one’s learning. For example, in chapter 19, a carpenter carves an exquisite bell-stand after fasting for seven days so as to forget himself entirely; and the artist Shui can make perfect circles and squares because his hands move like a force of nature, without allowing his intellect to get in the way.⁴¹

The notion of forgetting oneself is associated with the ability to reflect accurately one’s surroundings and respond accordingly. As Keenan stated above, the idea that the mind might be like a calm, clear mirror first appears in the *Zhuangzi* and continues to influence research practices at Song dynasty academies. Erin M. Cline notes that the metaphor is rooted in the ceremonial use of mirrors as potent sites of transformation:

When placed outside, concave mirrors focused sunlight to produce fire, while bronze mirrors gathered condensation in the light of the moon. But it was not simply the fact that mirrors had the power to *gather* or *produce* that made them objects of religious significance in ancient China; it was *what* they produced. Water and fire were thought to be the pure essences of *yin* and *yang*, respectively, and the fact that mirrors appeared to *draw* these substances from the sun and moon reinforced the cosmological power that was already associated with them.⁴²

The mind that is like such a ceremonial mirror is not passively reflective but is a crucible where cosmological powers are concentrated and transformed.

How might a person acquire such a calm but potent state of mind? Some of the earliest descriptions of techniques are found in the pre-Han text *Guanzi* 管子, which

describes a sage-prince whose leadership skills border on the magical, with his ability to foresee future events, manipulate situations, and cultivate harmonious outcomes while seeming to do nothing at all. The *Guanzi's* chapter on “inner workings” (*nei ye* 內業) reveals that the sage’s apparently spontaneous actions are, in fact, the products of long-term, disciplined practice. The text describes various techniques that cultivate a state of “quiescence” (*jing* 靜) in the heart-mind (*xin* 心), which is the source of the sage’s astonishing perspicacity. Such techniques include breathing meditations for calming and clearing the mind, physical exercises, and the activities of reading poetry and listening to music as well.⁴³ The *Guanzi* assures its readers that they may have confidence in the efficacy of these practices: “That the Way will naturally come / Is something you can count on and plan for. / If you are quiescent, you will obtain it.”⁴⁴ The phrase “naturally come” or *zilai* 自來 means to come of its (or one’s) own accord and is part of a family of *zi* compounds related to *ziran*. In other words, according to the *Guanzi*, techniques for balancing the heart-mind have certain natural outcomes, and we will enjoy the sage’s amazing abilities so long as we give the process time to work.

At least two terms—*qi* 氣 and *de* 德—are relevant to interpreting the *Guanzi's* claims. *Qi* can refer to the breath, to the energy associated with all living things (from the heart-mind of humans, to the sentience of animals, to the growth of plants), as well as to physical matter itself.⁴⁵ The techniques for balancing the heart-mind are efficacious because they allow the sage to modulate the state of his or her *qi*—these changes will be evident, the *Guanzi* says, in the sage’s mental state as well as demeanor and physical appearance.⁴⁶ The *Guanzi* further explains that a potent but invisible “spiritual Power”⁴⁷ or *de* is what accounts for the sage’s ability to manipulate *qi*. *De*, translated variously as virtue, excellence, integrity, and moral force, is closely associated with the power of *dao* to shape the world and the power of the sage to influence others around her. In sum, both the activity of *de* and the efficacy of *qi* cultivation are central to understanding the *Guanzi's* techniques for settling the mind, including, as mentioned, meditation, physical exercise, reading poetry, and listening to music.

We might include among these techniques Ruist strategies for humming to clear the mind before reading a text. As Keenan said earlier, such practices are rooted in the metaphor of the mind-mirror, and we can now see that this metaphor is related to long-standing beliefs surrounding *qi* cosmology, the workings of *de*, and the extraordinary potency of a well-regulated, quiescent heart-mind. Ruist scholars who use such techniques for education and research are employing methods meant to harness this potency. Their research methods cannot be divorced from this overarching conceptual framework in which powers such as *qi* and *de* can play an efficacious role.

We can also consider Ruist methods of rote memorization within this same worldview. Just as the *Guanzi* recommends reading poetry to achieve the quiescent heart-mind that makes sagely skill possible, so, too, Ruist scholars committed the Classics to memory in order to transform themselves. As Jenco comments: “We understand the Classics by practicing them, and practice them to respect them,

but in practicing them we also become them.”⁴⁸ It is in this sense of radical self-transformation that Jenco interprets the pithy saying of Wang’s intellectual mentor Lu Jiuyuan, “I do not annotate the Classics; the Classics annotate me.”⁴⁹ Again, the ritual method of memorization cannot be divorced from the larger Ruist project of moral self-cultivation, which itself reflects pervasive assumptions about *qi*, *de*, ritualized practices, and radical transformation.

Wu/Satori

The assumption that repetitive activities such as rote memorization and ritualized practice can radically transform the self is equally influential in Buddhist discourses. The “spontaneous arising” associated with *ziran* has influenced Buddhist debates over so-called spontaneous or sudden enlightenment (*dunwu/tongo* 頓悟).⁵⁰ These debates in turn influenced later “Neo-Confucian” discourses and Song dynasty practices,⁵¹ and hence the idea of sudden awakening is another key component to understanding the efficacy of *sanjiao* ritual methods for scholarship.

Reflecting on his years spent training at Japanese monasteries from 1977 to 1990, Hori says: “my overall conclusion is that the Rinzai Zen monastery in Japan employs a unique style of teaching and learning in which ritual formalism leads to mystical insight.”⁵² But how does doing the same thing over and over, in a ritually formalized manner, lead to the sudden insight termed *kenshō* or *satori* in the Zen tradition? The question is compounded by the *Tathāgatarbha* teachings and later Chinese notions of “Buddha-nature” (*foxing* 佛性).⁵³ Such teachings tend to deny any need to transition from *saṃsāra* to *nirvāṇa*, given that enlightenment is already pervasive in all beings and hence no practices can effectively facilitate such a transition.

This issue receives particularly close scrutiny in debates associated with the Northern and Southern Chan schools. In these debates, the notion of the mind-mirror figures prominently, attesting to the persistent influence of this metaphor across the *sanjiao* traditions. When Tang-dynasty Chan patriarch Huineng (638–713) hears his rival Shenxui speak of the need to polish the mind’s mirror (i.e., to practice to attain enlightenment), Huineng retorts that, given that Buddha-nature is already pure and complete, how could the mind’s mirror be anything other than already clear?⁵⁴ Under the influence of the Buddha-nature teachings, the relation of repetition to transformation becomes somewhat paradoxical—the mirror of the mind is naturally clear, so the practices that “catalyze” or “trigger” awakening remain mysterious. But, as in the case of *ziran*, the basic association of repetition with transformation attracts sustained philosophical attention.

The scholar Zongmi (780–841), trying to summarize the ongoing disagreements, identified five possible relations between practice (*xiu*) and enlightenment (*wu*).⁵⁵ In all cases, Zongmi indicates that formal practices are somehow related to the sea change of enlightenment—although it may not be a relation of simple cause and effect, it is not a severable relation, either. Other figures, however, such as Mazu (709–788) and Linji (d. 866), do seem to teach the complete severance of practice from enlightenment. Linji (Jpn. Rinzai) in particular is well known for rejecting ritual formalism altogether: “Buddhism requires no special efforts. You have only to lead

your everyday life without seeking anything more—piss and shit, get dressed, eat your rice, and lie down when you are tired.”⁵⁶

Robert Buswell points out that teachers associated with Linji Chan give readers almost no practical guidance in terms of *what to do* to trigger sudden awakening. The most Mazu advises is that students seek fortuitous encounters with enlightened masters.⁵⁷ But, as Buswell explains, the records of these encounters become Chan’s route to reintegrating figures such as Mazu and Linji within a ritual framework; that is, the anti-ritualistic antics of various Chan teachers lay the foundation for the development of the *gongan/kōan* tradition.⁵⁸ The *gongan* stories, coupled with the highly ritualized practices associated with studying them, show Buddhism disavowing ritual at one moment while adhering to a strict ritual code at the next. As Bernard Faure comments, “Chan antiritualism remains essentially a ritual move.”⁵⁹

Like Hori, Buswell sees Chan’s overall focus on ritual formalism as a pedagogical strategy and a method for studying and learning. This is especially evident in techniques for *gongan* study. Commenting on the rote repetition of the *gongan*, Buswell characterizes “suddenness” not quantitatively—that is, as the quickness of enlightenment that arises with no preceding conditions—but as the qualitative suddenness by which conditioning becomes mastery:

One common simile for sudden cultivation . . . is that of an archer shooting arrows at a target: even though it may take thousands of attempts before his aim is accurate and he is able to hit the bull’s eye consistently, it is the same act of shooting that is repeated time and again. The repeated observation of the *hua-t’ou* [a short phrase related to *gongan/kōan* practice] (shooting the arrows) will catalyze awakening (hitting the target consistently), but that result does not occur after progressive development through a series of stages. It is worth noting that much of traditional Chinese apprenticeship took place in the same way. . . .⁶⁰

In this characterization of ritual formalism, rote repetition leads to radical transformation, but not in developmental stages. The issue of *what is happening at the moment of change* is an open question—it cuts across many Western philosophical categories, including metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, involving matters of identity, agency, causality, and perception, to name just a few. As Hori comments, “Nothing is more mysterious than the way in which rote repetition of the *kōan* triggers the mystical insight called awakening or enlightenment.”⁶¹

This issue is best parsed not in the terms of Western philosophy, but in light of the *sanjiao* philosophical concepts we have seen, which are not easily captured in Western categories. Long-standing beliefs surrounding *qi* 氣, *de* 德, and *ziran* 自然 shape the conceptual framework in which the mind-mirror metaphor initially arose, and help to explain the efficacy of rote repetition. Although the Buddhist tradition may view the relation of repetition to transformation as “mysterious,” it shares with the *Guanzi* (and with the Song dynasty Ruist academies) the basic conviction that repetitive practice generates amazing power. Some measure of belief in the potency of a mirror-like mind, or in the possibility of sudden awakening, seems necessary if a

scholar is to dedicate time and effort to using ritual methods from the *sanjiao* traditions.

Indeed, Jenco suggests that a “conversion” to new beliefs is not only possible but desirable for those involved in cross-cultural scholarship: “Some forms of understanding require us to consider the possibility that we may have to abandon our current beliefs completely and *become* something we now are not, committed to a new Way.”⁶² Such “conversion” to a “new Way” would involve, in East Asian contexts at least, not only being open to the idea that memorizing texts might be an effective strategy for learning, but also being open to beliefs about how to manipulate *qi*, exercise the “spiritual power” of *de*, and settle the mind into a potent, mirror-like state.

V. Annotating the Philosopher

This last point returns us to Jenco’s original suggestion that scholars today might adopt ritual methods such as those used by Wang Yangming. As she says: “For Confucians like Wang and Kang, the words of sages recorded in the Classics are assumed to be ultimately accessible by anyone, even if the process of attaining this wisdom takes a lifetime of practice and study. Its borders are made permeable not by means of prior intellectual or ethnic background, but by means of the very hard work to which Wang and Kang exhort us.”⁶³ This exhortation, as we have seen, is rooted in a much larger framework of ritual formalism in East Asia. Reviewing this framework has been necessary to understand the rationale behind Ruist memorization techniques and recitation practices. If we are to take various East Asian traditions at their word, then the practices we have discussed are not only subject matters that we might study theoretically; they are also processes in which we can trust, and powers (*de* 德) that we may ourselves cultivate. They are, as Jenco argues, available for use by scholars today. But, adopting such ritualized research methods raises further questions concerning the coloniality of cultural appropriation and assimilation.

On the one hand, I do not suggest that philosophers presume to appropriate *isolated* Ruist or Buddhist scholarly methods. The idea that practices from various traditions are available piecemeal for cross-cultural appropriation is part of the problem; that is, it is a feature of coloniality, not a strategy for decolonization. To pick and choose which Ruist practices are suitably “philosophical,” for example, is analogous to the issue that Foulk raised earlier of Westerners who separate Buddhist “practices” from “rituals.”⁶⁴ Such a distinction relies on a host of dichotomies—philosophical/religious, rational/irrational, scientific/superstitious—that do not have straightforward counterparts in the *sanjiao* traditions. In suggesting that we take Jenco’s proposal seriously, I do not mean that we carve up *sanjiao* practices along the lines of such dichotomies.

But, on the other hand, a more holistic approach to her proposal raises the question of how fully a philosopher today would need to be assimilated within a Buddhist or Ruist tradition to employ Buddhist or Ruist ritual methods. For example, Robert

Eno suggests that those who wish to study Ruism should take up dancing, his point being that Ruist scholarly practices cannot be divorced from other forms of embodied training.⁶⁵ In other words, I might indeed use Ruist reading techniques, or methods for clearing the mirror of my mind, but such techniques cannot be isolated from other practices in what Eno called earlier the Ruist “training course of ritual, music, and gymnastics.” To the extent that I might wish to use Ruist ritual methods in my own scholarly research, I would need to consider how many other body-mind cultivation practices (like perhaps dancing) are relevant to the success of such an endeavor. This makes Jenco’s proposal an issue not simply of adopting new scholarly methods but of adopting a much larger set of mutually reinforcing rituals and practices, which are all part of an encompassing project of self-cultivation (or, in the case of Buddhism, liberation). Here we encounter a (possibly problematic) overlap between adopting Ruist research methods and becoming ritual practitioners in the lineage of the *ru* 儒.

That said, the situation is more complicated than either simple appropriation or assimilation. Western philosophy, I suggest, is already a confusing mix of profession, practice, and “way of life.” The lines between philosophy, religion, and science in the history of the West have not always been clear, and the practice of philosophy as a form of meaningful human inquiry is certainly not confined to the relatively compartmentalized world of academia we inhabit today. In short, if *sanjiao* scholarly methods are relevant to philosophizing, then so, too, are the larger *sanjiao* projects of self-cultivation and liberation relevant to philosophy as a field. The latter claim only poses a challenge to the disciplinary identity of a “philosophy” narrowly defined. In comparative philosophy, at least, there already tends to be considerable overlap between the philosophical, the religious, the professional, and the personal. Recall that Hori writes his essay on Rinzai pedagogies after living for years at a monastery, and he is not alone among Asian and comparative philosophers who are ordained or otherwise formally certified within Buddhist institutions.

For example, Kyoto School philosophers including Nishida Kitarō, Nishitani Keiji, and Ueda Shizuteru were all Buddhist practitioners.⁶⁶ More recently, the Seattle-based CoZen (禪緣), founded by four comparative philosophers, describes itself as “a group of academics with active Buddha Dharma practices who are engaged in exploring, articulating, and performing the non-duality of practice and study.”⁶⁷ As Bret Davis, one of the CoZen founders, says, the confluence of Buddhist practice and philosophical research in the Kyoto School reflects long-standing Buddhist teachings that certain types of understanding are not accessible via the intellectual mind alone: “Even while the idea of *sunyata*, for example, can be understood and argued for conceptually, only by way of an embodied meditative practice of concentration can one attain to the existential insight into *sunyata* necessary for liberation.”⁶⁸ Hence, at least in some corners of comparative philosophy, the overlap between so-called religious practices and scholarly methods is already an active site of inquiry.

This last point invites us to consider at least three conclusions: (1) the existence of various “scholar-practitioners” in the field of comparative philosophy is merely

incidental and reflects the lifestyle choices of a few academics; (2) the phenomenon of the “scholar-practitioner” is not incidental but is part of the disciplinary identity of comparative philosophy; and (3) being a scholar-practitioner is a necessary condition for being a comparative philosopher. The last, stronger claim asserts that comparative philosophy cannot effectively be practiced without being integrated within an encompassing ritual tradition (such as Buddhism or Ruism). Jenco seems to make this strong claim, at least in the context of postcolonial studies, when she says that scholars in that field must go beyond theoretical cross-cultural comparisons: “Instead, when formulating methodologies of comparison, we should see comparing methodologies as a necessary first step. . . . Other experiences—immersion, participation in ritual, and daily practices—can also come to have a recognized, if not more dominant, role to play.”⁶⁹ I leave for future discussion the question of the strongest claim, and I conclude here instead by highlighting the middle claim (i.e., that the phenomenon of the “scholar-practitioner” is at least one part of the disciplinary identity of comparative philosophy) and the connection between this claim and larger questions of coloniality and Eurocentrism in academia.

Topics such as ritual, somatic practice, embodied knowing, and mind-body non-duality are frequent themes for philosophical inquiry in comparative philosophy, and the relatively common occurrence of the “scholar-practitioner” is a predictable outgrowth of the field’s engagement with such themes and its historical connection to the *sanjiao* traditions. Given all this, Jenco’s “methods-centered approach to cross-cultural engagement” seems well at home within comparative philosophy. Drawing explicit attention to this aspect of comparative philosophy’s disciplinary identity not only contributes to the theoretical discussion of coloniality but provides practice-level techniques for resisting those Eurocentric methodologies that too often shape philosophical discourse. As Jenco says, decolonizing our scholarship will involve reassessing our “criteria for both evidence and theoretical sophistication.”⁷⁰ Comparative philosophers need not cite only those standards for so-called philosophical rigor that are handed down by the European and Anglo-American schools. To the contrary, some professionals within comparative philosophy, perhaps especially the scholar-practitioners, are well prepared to demonstrate other models for scholarly sophistication.

Notes

- 1 – Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, p. 35.
- 2 – Chu Hsi, *Learning to Be a Sage*, p. 130.
- 3 – In particular, see Jenco, “How Meaning Moves: Tan Sitong on Borrowing across Cultures,” pp. 92–113, and “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’ A Methods-centered Approach to Cross-cultural Engagement,” pp. 741–755.
- 4 – Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’,” p. 745.

- 5 – Although my focus here is on comparative philosophy, more commentary on and approaches to this problematic divide can be found in fields such as post-colonial studies, decolonial theory, and indigenous studies. For example, see Linda Tuhiwahi Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, and see also Kuan-Hsing Chen's *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization*.
- 6 – Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?," p. 745.
- 7 – Ibid., p. 741. The phrase is from her title.
- 8 – *Sanjiao* or the "three teachings" is a term that goes back to at least the Sui dynasty; I use it here to emphasize certain methodological similarities that underlie these various East Asian traditions.
- 9 – Following Robert Eno in *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, I use "Ruism" in place of "Confucianism" to better approximate the Chinese term *rujia* 儒家 or "scholarly lineage."
- 10 – I do not mean to suggest that intellectual or reason-based strategies for interpretation and argumentation play no role in Chinese scholarly methods, but only that such strategies do not exhaust the methodological possibilities. As Vincent Shen argues, methods of conceptual analysis and argumentation are, of course, not absent from Chinese scholarly traditions. But, he says, these methods must always be understood alongside what he refers to as the "metaphorical/narrative approach" (Shen, "Antonio Cua's Conceptual Analysis of Confucian Ethics," p. 58). Also, as Alexis McLeod points out, methods for argumentation in Chinese traditions are done a disservice when read through the lens of contemporary analytic philosophy, but this is not to say that conceptual analysis is absent from the Chinese tradition (see McLeod's detailed study of Wang Chong in "A Reappraisal of Wang Chong's Critical Method through the *Wen-kong* Chapter").
- 11 – For example, when discussing early Greek philosophical practices, Pierre Hadot writes: "Unlike the Buddhist meditation practices of the Far East, Greco-Roman philosophical meditation is not linked to a corporeal attitude but is a purely rational, imaginative, or intuitive exercise." See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 59. In contrast, Graham Parkes comments on the somatic nature of many scholarly practices in East Asian traditions, linking philosophical differences between Western and Asian traditions to differences in method:

It has often been remarked that a major difference between the Western and East-Asian philosophical traditions is exemplified in the contrast between their primary guiding questions. . . . It is less often remarked that this difference derives in large part from a difference in methods: whereas the Platonic-Christian tradition in the West favours an 'ascent to theory' and abstract reasoning, East-Asian philosophy tends to be rooted in somatic . . . practice. (See Parkes, "Awe and Humility in the Face of Things," p. 70.)

This somatic dimension underscores my point above, regarding strategies designed explicitly to circumvent the intellect while learning and studying. See also Bret Davis' "Psychosomatic Practice and Kyoto School Philosophies of Zen."

- 12 – Jenco, "What Does Heaven Ever Say?," pp. 747–748.
- 13 – Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation*; see especially the second chapter, "Neo-Confucian Education," pp. 21–29.
- 14 – *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 15 – Hori, "Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery," p. 5.
- 16 – *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.
- 17 – Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation*, p. 27.
- 18 – *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 19 – Hori, "Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery," p. 8.
- 20 – *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 21 – Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, p. 2.
- 22 – *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 23 – *Ibid.*
- 24 – *Ibid.*
- 25 – Wu, Zongjie, and Meixin Hu, "Ritual Hermeneutics as the Source of Meaning," p. 108.
- 26 – *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 27 – As Kevin Schillbrack says, the lack of philosophical interest in ritual indicates the "assumption that ritual activities are thoughtless. . . . This assumption reflects a dichotomy between beliefs and practices and, ultimately, a general dualism between mind and body." See Schillbrack, "Introduction: On the Use of Philosophy in the Study of Rituals," p. 1. Schillbrack's comment reminds us that Jenco's "methodological/non-methodological" distinction can be mapped onto corresponding distinctions between the rational and the irrational or the scientific and the superstitious. In other words, such distinctions refer to a colonial divide between the philosophical, scientific West and the (presumably) irrational, superstitious "non-West"—whose texts therefore contribute no methodologies we would adopt.
- 28 – Foulk, "Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism," p. 23.
- 29 – *Ibid.*
- 30 – Borup, *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism*, p. 131.
- 31 – *Ibid.*, p. 130.

- 32 – Ibid., p. 131.
- 33 – Ibid.
- 34 – Wong, “Editorial,” p. 151.
- 35 – Hori, “Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery,” p. 5.
- 36 – Ibid., p. 28. Kuki discusses different Japanese readings of *ziran*, including *jinen* and the more contemporary *shizen*, which is used to translate the English “nature.”
- 37 – Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 50.
- 38 – Kuki Shuzō, “Nihonteki seikaku ni tsuite,” p. 379.
- 39 – See, for example, chapters 18 and 19, in Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, pp. 103–105.
- 40 – See Graham, trans., *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, pp. 63–64.
- 41 – Ibid., pp. 135, 138.
- 42 – Cline, “Mirrors, Minds, and Metaphors,” p. 338.
- 43 – Rickett, trans., *Guanzi*, pp. 52–53.
- 44 – Ibid., p. 54.
- 45 – The difficulty in translation stems from the inability to define *qi* along assumed binaries such as matter and energy, body and mind, or material and spiritual. See Graham Parkes, “The Awareness of Rocks: East Asian Understandings and Implications,” for a discussion of how practices surrounding *qi* and the regulation of *qi* challenge the basic assumptions of scientific materialism and Western metaphysics.
- 46 – Rickett, *Guanzi*, p. 47.
- 47 – Ibid., p. 39.
- 48 – Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’,” p. 747.
- 49 – Ibid.
- 50 – See, for example, Paul Demiéville’s discussion of Daoist influences on Buddhist discourses on suddenness, in “The Mirror of the Mind.”
- 51 – Douglas Berger provides an excellent overview of Indian influences on Chinese Buddhism, especially on this understanding of the mind, in *Encounters of Mind: Luminosity and Personhood in Indian and Chinese Thought*. See also Philip Ivanhoe’s *Readings from the Lu-Wang School of Neo-Confucianism*, which includes his translation of Huineng’s *Platform Sūtra* alongside selections from Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming. Ivanhoe selects this particular combination of Buddhist and Ruist texts to underscore the influence of Buddhist sudden-enlightenment debates on Song dynasty Ruism.

- 52 – Hori, “Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery,” p. 35.
- 53 – *Tathāgatagarbha*, the “womb” of the *Tathāgata*, that is, the “embryonic” capacity for enlightenment in all beings.
- 54 – Huineng, “Platform Sutra,” pp. 23–25.
- 55 – These include gradual cultivation followed by sudden enlightenment, sudden cultivation followed by gradual enlightenment, gradual cultivation and gradual enlightenment, sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation, and sudden cultivation and sudden enlightenment. See Gregory, “Sudden Enlightenment followed by Gradual Cultivation,” pp. 282–284. See also Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way*, p. 197.
- 56 – Lin-chi, “Lin-chi Record,” p. 48.
- 57 – Buswell, “The ‘Short-Cut’ Approach,” p. 341.
- 58 – *Ibid.*, p. 344. The material in brackets is mine.
- 59 – Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, p. 297. Outside Rinzai, Sōtō Zen teachings such as *shushō* 修證—that is, “practice-realization”—also speak to this pervasive ritual formalism, where the focus is on sustained practice and correct form (e.g., good posture), often to the exclusion of other goals. This term, associated with Kamakura-period Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), is a counterpoint to Linji/Rinzai-style, anti-ritualistic Zen, especially to the idea that Buddhism requires no “special efforts.” In the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen denounces those who celebrate seemingly nonsensical *jinen*, and in other writings he warns against students who wish to avoid strenuous practice (see Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, vol. 2, p. 59, and Dōgen, “Gakudō yōjinshū,” p. 10). Although, like Linji, Dōgen upholds the non-duality of practice and enlightenment, he does not therefore downplay the need for regular, formal, disciplined training—to the contrary, he describes practice as an unending and all-encompassing activity (*sōgyō* 操行) performed with no thought of gain (Dōgen, “Gakudō yōjinshū,” pp. 5–6).
- 60 – Buswell, “The ‘Short-Cut’ Approach of *K’an-hua* Meditation,” pp. 348–349.
- 61 – Hori, “Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery,” p. 30.
- 62 – Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’,” p. 753.
- 63 – *Ibid.*, p. 752.
- 64 – Foulk, “Ritual in Japanese Zen Buddhism,” p. 23.
- 65 – Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven*, p. 180.
- 66 – Davis, “Psychosomatic Practice and Kyoto School Philosophies of Zen,” p. 26.
- 67 – The group was founded by Bret Davis, Erin McCarthy, Brian Schroeder, and Jason Wirth (see <http://patacara.org/who-we-are/> for a paragraph on Wirth and CoZen). Davis is an associate professor of philosophy at Loyola University Maryland and also holds the title of *docho-sensei* (teacher and Zen center leader) in

the Rinzai lineage of Zen (<http://www.loyola.edu/club/zen.aspx>). McCarthy (St. Lawrence University) is certified to teach contemplative education methods through Naropa University (http://www.stlawu.edu/newsarchive/erinmccarthy_naropa.html). Schroeder, a professor of philosophy at the Rochester Institute of Technology and current executive co-director of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, is ordained in the Sōtō Zen tradition and serves as the Buddhist Chaplain for the RIT campus (<http://www.rit.edu/studentaffairs/religion/zenbuddhism.php>). And Wirth (Seattle University) is ordained in the Sōtō tradition and runs a variety of Zen meditation and study groups in the Seattle area (<http://www.ecosangha.net> and <http://www.nwzencommunity.org/about.html>).

68 – Davis, “Psychosomatic Practice and Kyoto School Philosophies of Zen,” p. 28.

69 – Jenco, “‘What Does Heaven Ever Say?’,” p. 753.

70 – Ibid.

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