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Ritual Hermeneutics as the Source of Meaning: Interpreting the Fabric of Chinese Culture

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Abstract: Ritual hermeneutics as the epistemological foundation of Chinese culture, analogous to the Western notion of reason or rationality, by which the whole fabric of Chinese culture could be made sensible. This paper explores the source of meaning in terms of bodily intelligibility beyond propositional representation, attempting to frame an alternative approach to the interpretation of Chinese culture, and develop a way of ritual thinking for the intercultural communication in the Chinese cultural context. Ritual descriptions recorded in *Book of Rites* (Liji, 礼记) two thousand years ago and the lived ritual activities in a modern Chinese village are investigated and analyzed to bring into view how the hermeneutic tradition of Chinese ritual discourse is still alive as a way of ordinary Chinese people's life, which may be misrepresented as religion or the superstitious within the rational framework of propositional assumption. We argued that *Li* (ritual, 礼) is the texture of all spheres of Chinese culture, and should be regarded as the source of meaning and presumptions. Its origin could be traced back to *I Ching*. [China Media Research. 2010; 6(2):104-113]

Keywords: rites activities, ritual hermeneutics, source of meaning, intercultural interpretation

The Chinese word of *Li* (礼) has no simple English equivalent, and is usually translated by terms such as 'ritual, rites, ceremonial, etiquette, manners, rules of behaviour, propriety.' (Chard, 2009). *Li* for many modern people is regarded as prescriptive rules or norms which govern society, and submit people to the order of control. Ritual texts are thus interpreted in some commentaries, to ensure hierarchical power relationship since they usually contain strict description of who should do what in a certain context. In Confucian texts, *Li* embodies the entire spectrum of cultural phenomena concerning with humans, nature, and material world. Xunzi, cites "songs and laughter, weeping and lamentation...rice and millet, fish and meat...the wearing of ceremonial caps, embroidered robes, and patterned silks, or of fasting clothes and mourning clothes...spacious rooms and secluded halls, soft mats, couches and benches" (Watson 1963) as vital parts of the fabric of *Li*. Confucius also includes in his discussions of *Li* as learning and education, indicating its epistemological foundation. He explains that,

someone who does not understand the observance of ritual propriety has no way of knowing where to stand (不学礼, 无以立). (The Analects, translated by Ames & Rosemont, 1998: 229)

In China, concerns relevant to the western thought of politics, philosophy and ethics would be included in the description of *Li*. Hall & Ames (1998:269) state, *Li* is "the determinate fabric of Chinese culture, and further, defines socialpolitical order. It is the language through which the culture is expressed." In this paper, we want to explore the epistemological foundation of *Li*,

analogous to the Western notion of reason or rationality, by which the whole fabric of Chinese culture could be made sensible. We believe that such an investigation is important and necessary for the Chinese culture, both traditional and contemporary to be properly interpreted and represented in the arena of cross-cultural communication. For intercultural dialogue, we borrow the terms of "Ritual Hermeneutics" (Gentz, 2005: 125; Kern, 2005: X) to conceptualize our understanding of *Li*. Kern (2005:vii) use this terms to conceptualize the interactive interpretation of "text" and "ritual" by looking at ritual structure of textual composition and the textuality of ritual practice. He further explains that the entire body of Chinese classics, including oracle bone, bronze inscriptions, architecture and so on, is defined and shaped by the idea of ritual order, and could be interpreted in ritual hermeneutical horizon. What we use the term ritual hermeneutics for is more fundamental, attempting to frame an alternative approach to the interpretation of Chinese culture, and develop a way of thinking through ritual for the intercultural understanding of Chinese communication.

The Problem of Representing Chinese Culture

A vast body of studies on Chinese culture has been conducted in the field of intercultural communication. Some concepts have been established as the common knowledge when it comes to features of Chinese culture. For example, "face" (*mianzi*) has drawn much attention from researchers as a claimed feature of Chinese culture, and many scholars have probed into this subject (Cheng, 1986; Hwang, 1987; Jia, 1997-98; Jia, 2001; Jia, 2006;). "Collectivism" is another term well addressed in cultural studies about China (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-

Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1995; Cai, 2005; Lum, 1998 Scollon & Scollon, 2000). "Guanxi" (relationship) is also believed to be an important aspect for outsiders to understand Chinese communication culture (Ma, 2004; Gao, 2007; Hwang, 1997-8; Hong and Engeström, 2004; Jia, 2006;). Some other terms commonly picked up in the studies on Chinese communication include "Harmony" (Hexie) (Chen, 2001; Chen, 2002), "Harmony as performance" (Chang, 2001) and "indeterminacy" (Chang, 1999). The theoretical generalizations on Chinese language and culture are done with the terms borrowed from the Western-derived propositional categories, which might not reach the original hue of Chinese communication culture. Though the terms like "mianzi" and "guanxi" are native to Chinese language, but it is when they travel back from the western discourse that they become recognized features of Chinese communication and language use (Liu, 1995). Therefore, they are, to some extent, used in the western perspective. Though perspectives from and sensitivities of "others" help spot culture characteristics taken for granted by "self", representation and explication of cultural particularities might need to be addressed from within without propositional assumption drawn from culturally different discourse system. Many studies examining the language use in modern China reveal some features of Chinese communication using presumed western linguistic lens, which might distort the authenticities of Chinese culture. Very recently scholars like Xiao Xiaosui (2006) has looked into the linguistic features of the discourse in *Yijing (I Ching)* to explain why it could become spiritually and intellectually influential in China. Liu (2007) has examined the cultural factors and rhetoric patterns in classical Chinese argumentation. Similar studies addressing cultural features of traditional Chinese discourse and communication usually operate in the Western way of reasoning and thinking instead of seeking Chinese framework of hermeneutic presumptions to address the fundamental value in the discourse.

Gadamer states that hermeneutics is not a method for understanding but an attempt "to clarify the conditions in which understanding takes place" (Gadamer 1975: 263). Inasmuch as our history and tradition is constitutive of our hermeneutic conditions, Gadamer argued that people have a "historically effected consciousness" and that they are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them. Thus interpreting a cultural text involves a fusion of horizons where the scholar finds the ways that the text's history articulates with their own background. In this study, we will combine ethnographic methods and historical textual analysis (Vaughan, 2004) to understand how the past is linked to the present. Specifically we will combine a historical analysis of a classic text and an

ethnographic description of modern ritual activities in the life of today's Chinese people. Our attempt is to show ritual hermeneutics as the bodiliness of understanding in terms of interpretation organized with the emptiness of symbolic meanings. The hermeneutical analysis of the ancient ritual text is elucidated by an ethnographic investigation of a lived funeral ritual practice in a modern village in China, which brings into view that ritual hermeneutics is still part of cultural being in China. It operates within the social and epistemological framework equivalent to the western notion of social structure and rationality, which formulates an intercultural investigation of the foundation of the two civilizations. We will also discuss the origin of this hermeneutic tradition and why the ritual hermeneutics have to be understood as an alternative way of thinking to the Western way of reasoning.

Hermeneutics in Ritual performances: a textual analysis of *Book of Rites*

Major concern of representational language is to conceptualize cultural phenomenon, which is not a tradition in the Chinese culture. Chinese civilization has not developed a system of discourse using concepts like politics, ethics, knowledge or education. This, however, does not mean that these issues were not concerned in ancient China. On the contrary, they are of vital significance in traditional Chinese culture, but are not articulated with the conceptual language. Instead, they are often interwoven into the narrative accounts, of which thick description of *Li* performances forms a special part, and through which people interpret their concern and act out their situated understanding. The situated interpretation gives rise to hermeneutic understanding in terms of ineffable concerns relevant to the Western interest in politics, ethics, knowledge, education, and so forth. Hence the hermeneutic tradition of Chinese discourse which avoids using representational language creates a space for interpretation through ritual accounts. Ritual texts written two thousand years ago like *Book of Rites* (Liji, 礼记) can help illustrate this point.

A textual analysis of *Hunyi (Rites of Marriage)*

We will first look into an excerpt from the classic *Book of Rites* (with the version edited by Dai Sheng in West Han Dynasty (202 B.C- 9 A.D) to show how ritual performance is making rather than regulating the society that involves deep interpretation of self, others and the environment. The text is a description of *Hunyi (Rites of Marriage)*, about a newly-wed daughter-in-law paying her respect to the parents-in-law the day right after the wedding ceremony. We will explore the epistemological foundation embedded in the ritual activities, and show how ritual performances nurture situated understanding

relevant to our understanding. Rites of marriage were believed to be the root of other rites in the Book of Rites, and the ritual texts concerning marriage ceremony are recorded in the Classic as follows:

Rising early, the young wife washed her head and bathed her person, and waited to be presented (to her husband's parents) by the master of the ceremony. As soon as it was bright day, she appeared before them, bearing a basket with dates, chestnuts, and slices of dried spiced meat. The master set before her a cup of sweet liquor, and she offered in sacrifice some of the dried meat and also of the liquor, thus performing the ceremony which declared her their son's wife.

The father and mother-in-law then entered their apartment, where she set before them a single dressed pig,—thus showing the obedient duty of (their son's) wife.

Next day, the parents united in entertaining the young wife, and when the ceremonies of their severally pledging her in a single cup, and her pledging them in return, had been performed, they descended by the steps on the west, and she by those on the east,—thus showing that she would take the mother's place in the family. (Hunyi, From Book of Rites translated by Legge)

In the above excerpt, details of ritual performance are described, such as what fruits to be presented and how, in what direction and manner the participants move, and where they should descend after the ceremony. Dates (zao, 枣) has the same pronunciation with “early in the morning” (zao, 早), indicating that the young lady has attached great importance to this meeting as she gets up very early in the morning to get ready for it. Chestnut (li, 栗), means in Chinese “thrilled” (chan li, 颤栗) symbolizing the awe for the parents-in-law. Dried spiced (duan xiu, 脍修) means “high spirits”.

With the connotation of all these things as the cultural background, she is to interpret how she should act as a daughter-in-law in the new family: She will get up early to make preparation for the life of the whole family because she is no longer a maid to be taken care of, but a lady to take care of the life of others, the extended big family including at least her husband's grandparents, her husband's parents, her husband's brothers and their families, her husband's sisters before they are married. She will show respect her parents-in-law, who in that ceremony are the representative of the big family, and other family members; she will keep a cheerful and optimistic mood, which can help keep the family in a relaxing and harmonious atmosphere. After the parents-in-law, as the host and the hostess, pledges

to the young wife, as a guest, to show her the right respect and the young lady pledge them in return, the new wife descended by the steps on the east, which symbolizes the path for the hostess, and the parents by those on the west, the path for the guests. This very act means, as shared understanding for all those involved, that from that moment on, the new wife plays the role of hostess of the family, and will take over from her mother-in-law the responsibilities in charge of the domestic affairs. With rites of paying awe to the parents-in-law and the parents-in-law showing respect to the young lady previously performed, a relationship full of mutual respect and trust has been established and the “taking-over” acts therefore brings about no tension between the former and the new hostesses of the family.

So the young lady is reflecting on her new identity as a daughter-in-law and as a sister-in-law, which means she will learn to cope with more responsibilities and multiple roles brought about by her marriage. This reflection directs the young lady to the proper way of “becoming” and therefore to her self-cultivation towards Junzi who would always act properly according to her surroundings.

The key element in this ritual activity is not the symbolic meanings of the materials that shape the young lady's understanding of her role in the new family, rather it is the reliance on ritual activities over language as a means for understanding and transformation. The dialogic process of meaning making in the whole procedure of preparing these materials, and presenting herself in the ritualized way to her parents-in-law leads to what we have termed ritual hermeneutics.

The Grand Horizon embedded in the ritual narrative

What can be seen from the description in the excerpt from *Hunyi* are procedures of certain daily activities. But this ancient Chinese text goes far beyond activity documentation to set up rules for people to act properly on the wedding ceremony, and it extends to convey philosophical, ethnical and political meanings concerning the harmony of the world.

According to the explanation of the marriage rites in *Book of Rites*, these activities are primarily to seek a harmony between the male and the female within the family, which is to bring about the family harmony, and in turn to lead to the welfare of the whole society.

Thus the ceremony establishing the young wife in her position; (followed by) that showing her obedient service; and both succeeded by that showing how she now occupied the position of continuing the family line—all served to impress her with a sense of the deferential duty proper to her. When she was thus deferential, she was obedient to her parents-in-law, and harmonious with all the

occupants of the women's apartments; she was the fitting partner of her husband, and could carry on all the work in silk and linen, making cloth and silken fabrics, and maintaining a watchful care over the various stores and depositories (of the household). In this way when the deferential obedience of the wife was complete, the internal harmony was secured. (Hunyi from Book of Rites, translated by Legge)

From the explanation, the rites of marriage could be interpreted to help new wife become a fitting partner to her husband, and make the family members understand their changing roles after the new wife enters the family. Such "power shifting" in the family might cause tensions and misunderstandings, however the ritual activities help declare the change without any language, but only through the different paths of retreating for the parents and the daughter-in-law to retreat from the site of the ceremony. This emptiness of language tactfully dissolves the possible tensions so as to secure a harmonious relationship among the members involved. The ritual practice help develop a bodily understanding of proper human relation

The new hostess, at the same time, is given various duties in charge of the domestic works within the family including silkworm raising, silk weaving, cloth making, family store and barn accounting and so on, which are to secure the well-being of the family. Besides, the new hostess is also expected to live on well with other female members in the family, who would help take care of the family work under her management. In this way, the family would live in harmony and men would not have to worry about the family things while being busy with their work outside. Thus the ritual activities establish a family ethics that could maintain the family harmony.

The significance of the wedding ceremonies goes beyond establishing the family harmony to securing the order of the whole society, which includes the relationship between husband and wife, between father and son, and that between the emperor and his ministers. Further explanation from *Book of Rites* shows how the wedding ceremony is related to the family harmony in an ethical sense and related, politically, to the harmony of the whole society. The distinction between men and women through the ritual practice is the starting point of building up this harmony:

From the distinction between man and women came the righteousness between husband and wife. From that righteousness came the affection between father and son, and that affection, the rectitude between ruler and minister. Whence it is said, "The ceremony of marriage is the root of the other ceremonial observances." (Hunyi from Book of Rites, translated by Legge)

This "deferential duty" stresses the "different" identities of males and females in a family, it, however, indicates nothing of hierarchical oppression in a family (and in the society as a whole). Male and female represents different parts of the nature complementary to each other:

The son of Heaven is to the queen what the sun is to the moon, or the masculine energy of nature to the feminine. They are necessary to each other, and by their interdependence they fulfill their functions. ...From the son of Heaven there were learned the lessons for men; and from the queen, the obedience proper to women. The son of Heaven directed the course to be pursued by the masculine energies, and the queen regulated the virtues to be cultivated by the feminine receptivities. The son of Heaven guided in all that affected the external administration (of affairs); and the queen, in all that concerned the internal regulation (of the family)... (And as a result) abroad and at home harmony and natural order prevailed; the states and the families were ruled according to their requirements:--this was what is called the condition of complete virtue. (Hunyi from Book of Rites, translated by Legge)

Therefore, the differentiation of the duties for men and women in the family is to ensure that husbands and wives could act following their proper ways towards a harmonious relation. And the differentiation is not drawn up in propositional language, instead it is acted out in a ritual performance. No verbal description about the proper roles or duties of a wife and a daughter-in-law is declared in this ritual activity, but an interpretation is developed clear to all the parties with the new wife gaining an understanding of her new identities as a woman to be "the fitting partner of her husband", to be "respectful to her parents-in-law", and to be "harmonious with all the occupants of the women's apartments". This is to secure the internal harmony in the family and long continuance of the family, which in turn will leads to a good life for the whole society, a Grand course shared by any society all over the world:

When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that

they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes.... This was (the period of) what we call the Grand Union. (Liyun from Book of Rites, translated by Legge)

Hall and Ames (1998: 270-271) point out that the notion of *Li* is very broad, embracing everything from manners to media of communication to social and political institutions. In the aforementioned ritual texts, modern concepts like politics, community, ethics do not appear, but this does not imply an absence of such concern. The ritual activities in reproducing social and political structure function not by exercising power, but by “the cultivation of personal, familial, and communal life through ritual practice (Hall & Ames, 1998: 269). This leads to our discussion of the educational function of ritual practice, which in tradition is termed as “ritual education”(li jiao, 礼教).

Education in the Chinese ritual culture means nothing of receiving knowledge and information. The participants do not necessarily have a conscious knowledge of their developing social roles, rather they encounter through ritual practice a deeply personal, experiential and transformative form of hermeneutical experience. As a result, they embodied a situated action-oriented understanding without knowing it consciously. In this sense, the bodily understanding through ritual practice becomes as transformative power rather than propositional indoctrination. This can be understood from the ritual text concerning how the new daughter-in-law is presented to her parents-in-law in the sense that the social world is to be interpreted hermeneutically and bodily in the action, and interpretation is made as the power towards individual cultivation and communal-social transformation.

The narrative accounts of the ritual process in the Classic define no fixed meaning for any party, but it offers a vast “ocean of interpretation” (Clark, 2006:109) for the readers. Linguistic meaning arises when the participants reflect on his/her own identity and relationship with his/her circumstances through a dialogue with the situation. Therefore, meaning arises as situated understanding which is, and has to be, based on reflection on the dialogic relationship between individuals, between individual and the community (society).

The interpretation is diverse as the meaning is always relative to local, historical and social, and personal context, and one may make different meaning at different stage of one’s life with one’s evolving cultural identity. This horizon of diversity in Chinese ritual discourse provides depth to a ritual hermeneutics, creating layers of meaning or multiple possibilities of interpretations. As people inquire into both themselves as meaning makers and into the text itself, they engage

in an ongoing transformative process. Ritual activities, though not expressed with any conceptualization for the establishment of objectified subjects like ethics, politics, or education, are in fact capsulizing knowledge in these modern terms without abstraction. However, can this ritual text be understood by the modern people? Is the ritual culture still part of Chinese life, and inhabits in the space of being of common people. To probe into the questions, our inquiry has to reach out into the life of today’s Chinese people to examine the texture of lived ritual practice. In the section that follows, we will present an ethnographic inquiry in a Chinese village to see the happening of the ritual traditions as the lived fabric of Chinese people’s lives. We attempt to present the ritual activities in the genre as recorded in *Book of Rites*, and meanwhile a modern theoretical explanation is offered to balance our intercultural perspectives.

Ritual practice in modern China: an inquiry in the village of Dongwushan

From the March to July, 2009, we were invited as a group of researchers into a village called Dongwushan, close to the provincial capital city Hangzhou, to investigate the cultural heritage of the village, including the surrounding mountains. The purpose of the research is to prepare the village for tourism development. In our fieldwork, we came across various accounts of ritual activities similar to the style of the activities recorded in *Book of Rites*. We interviewed the local people and took down all the fragmented stories from them. Then we find in these stories many lived ritual activities, among which the ritual performances related to a little shabby earthen house named as East Temple (Dongmiao, 东庙) drew out attention. Next we will present our narrative account about the Bidding Farewell Ceremony to the soul of the deceased hosted in East Temple (Dongmiao song hun, 东庙送魂). The ritual performances related to this ceremony and to the Temple surprisingly reveal how the ancient tradition inherited down from at least 2 thousand years ago are still alive in spite of different explanations about the meaning of the details. Ritual in terms of activities is sometimes covered by discourses hybridized from different epochs of history, mostly in Buddhism language. The narrative account of the East Temple is included in our report submitted to the villagers upon their request.

The accounts of East Temple and its ritual activities

Not far away from the entrance to Dongwushan, East Temple stands among the thriving bamboos, facing Lion Mountains believed to be the guarder of the village. Though called a temple, it is no more than a shabby small earthen house. Inside we only found some ashes and residues of incense in the incense burner, but no Buddha or God enshrined in the house called “temple”. Right close to the temple is a reservoir, at the bottom of

which, the villagers say, lies the site of the former true East Temple. The destroyed temple is said to be grand with the local Earth God taking care of Dongwushan area and his wife enshrined in the middle of the main hall. The elders told us in front of the God were two Judges of Hell and their goblin followers and a table for the Judges in Hell, where the soul of a newly passed person are judged, and at the two wings of the shrine the 18 arhats. Opposite the main shrine building stood a wooden-structured theatre with enclosing two-storeyed corridors at the two sides to seat the audience—female on the second floor and male the first as a ritual to be strictly observed while the most revered ones in the village seated in the front part of the main hall.

Zhou Jincan, a 47-year-old villager, informed us that even today East Temple is closely related to the funeral ceremony in the village. When someone passed away in Dongwushan, his family members wash the body with clean water, and dress him/her with new clothes. Three straw shoes should be placed at the bed side for the two Judges of Hell who would come to take away the soul of the newly deceased one. The villagers explained to us that as only three shoes were provided, the hell judges would have to slow down their speed when going back to the Hell since one of them was walking with a bare foot. No matter what time it is, as soon as the dying one stopped breathing, his family members like his sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, should accompany the soul to the East Temple with burning incense, burning candles and golden paper ingots (as money in the other world). The female members should, before leaving home for the temple, untie their hair, crying or weeping all the way to and from the temple. Upon arriving at home from the temple, they must do up their hair.

The family members, then, send a messenger to give the obituary notice to their relatives. When the messenger sets out from the home of the dead, he wears an umbrella with its top pointing outside no matter what the weather is like. The relatives who receive the news boil three eggs for the messenger. And the messenger, after giving the notice, should neither go back home directly nor head for anyone else's home, but has to return, before going anywhere else, to the home of the dead.

The second day is for shrouding and encoffinning. After burning the sheets used by the dead the night before, people carry the body to the coffin, announcing in a loud voice "Encoffinning! Encoffinning!" The neighbors hang a mirror and a pair of scissors over their door during the whole funeral ceremony. At the second night, the relatives who have been notified would come over to eat rice with Doufu, and accompany the dead for the whole night. The family of the married daughter of the dead must be notified of the death by the messenger even when the daughter herself accompanied the father

at the moment when he passed away. After the funeral ceremony, a dummy figure would be formally dressed in the clothes of the dead and be burned in a place far away from the crowd.

The whole ceremony is, in most cases, presided over by a Daoist or a monk. If not, it can be chaired by the coffin carrier in the clan, whose career usually comes down from his forefathers from generation to generation.

East Temple, therefore, is held as a place closely to harbor the soul in the funeral activities. However, all the sculptures of the gods, the judges and the goblins in the temple were destroyed by the Red Guards during Cultural Revolution because they were condemned as "superstitious matters". In the years of Great Leap, the theatre and the corridor, the temple as a whole actually, were erased to give place to a reservoir for the purpose of irrigation. In 1990s, some elderly women collected a sum of money to rebuild the shrine to offer incense to Gods, which was, however, dismantled again in 2004 as a "superstition building" in a national intangible heritage survey. The small building of the temple we see today was financed by a mine owner from outside who had come to exploit the fluorite deposit in the village. A shabby small house it is now, the temple still serves as a site for ritual performances to bid farewell to the deceased in the village.

The mother of Zhou Jincan, one of the narrators of the activities, said,

I am 82 now. I go to East Temple to incense the Buddha very often. The old Buddhas have been destroyed. I go there twice a month, the first day of a lunar month and the fifteenth.

When talking about how her soul would be directed to East Temple when she passes away, the old lady laughed cheerfully:

I had two very big birthday celebrations. The first (for my 70th birthday) received 18 or 19 tables of guests¹, and the second (for my 80th birthday), more than 20 tables of guests! And at that time (when I pass away), there will be more than 30 tables of guests (attending my funeral ceremony)!

From the narrative accounts of the ritual activities in East temple and the follow-up funeral ceremonies, it can be seen that the ritual texture of the lived activities is similar to that in the "wedding ceremony" documented in *Liji* two thousand years ago with ritual details receiving sufficient care from the villagers to make sure everything is done in the right way according to the ritual understanding of the local people. The

¹ Baxianzhuo (Eight Fairy Table), a kind of square table, are used in Dongwushan for banquets, which could dine 8 persons each.

location of the temple is emphasized by the local people as being close to the guarding Lion Mountains, which gives people a sense of security. The three straw shoes put at the bed side, according to the villagers, express a strong wish for the family members to stay spiritually with the passed one as long as possible because the straw shoes are hoped to slow down the pace of the judges taking away his soul from the home. The female members of the family have to pull down their hair, which is seen as their willingness to appear like ghosts, though not beautiful at all for the ladies, in order to be together with the deceased one. An untidy appearance seems more like ghosts and can seem more appropriate for the activities related to the Hell. Their doing up their hair when returning home from the temple is explained by the villagers as their respect to other villagers as now they are coming back to the village community, and messy long hair is not held as the right manner for women in public. The pointing direction of the umbrella hold by the messenger and the route he takes are interpreted in different versions by different villagers, or even in contradiction: some villagers firmly believe it is to show respect to the deceased one, but others believe it is to avoid bad luck for the relatives. The second night instead of the first chosen for the relatives to accompany the deceased is to show both the consideration for the relatives so that they don't have to hurry over, and the consideration of the different levels of intimacy between the deceased one and the living as the first night is for the family members to be with the dead. "Encoffining" is uttered loudly so that all those who hear it could get out of the way to avoid any possible bad luck. The mirror and the scissors hung over the door of the neighbors are also to avoid any ominous consequence as the mirrors can shine away the dark things and the scissors with their metal nature can keep any evil things away from the guarded home. Some details like eating rice with Doufu is just narrated as a necessary part of the activity but has not been explained clearly why it is done this way.

With the details thus emphasized and done in the exactly prescribed manner, an inquiry will be made for understanding meanings of these lived ritual texts.

Ritual hermeneutic understanding in lived rites

From the funeral ceremony and those related to the East Temple, we can find that in the village of Dongwushan, the Chinese modern village, ritual activities survived though they have been under influences of various discourses of religion, politics, and science. These ritual activities create a space of ritual interpretation in terms of personal cultivation and community harmony so as reach educational transformation of the local people and culture.

This hermeneutic understanding is situated in

bodily interpretation beyond representation. Concerns in terms of modern concepts such as ethics, moral education or community, communication are blended into the ritual acts as an unconscious process of being and becoming, but they are not specified with any theoretical claims. The building of East Temple itself also shows the same feature. It is a place to enshrine the local God of Earth, a place where the judgment of soul would be done preliminarily, a site for the villagers to watch dramas. Therefore, it is a place for people to reflect on life, and a public space for social communication, and a religious site for respecting the power of nature and environment. However, its function is not conceptualized in any abstraction. Thus the lived ritual practice in Dongwushan textualizes a vast space of meaning going beyond the linguistic boundaries of the modern knowledge system.

In both the ritual performances recorded in *Liji* and the lived ritual activities in Dongwushan, meaning is not expressed through propositional statements, but embedded in the bodily interpretation emerging from the actions. When one is present in a ritual activity, s/he is in a reflective dialogue in the space structured by "self", with "others", and with Heaven and Earth as the nature. As this dialogue is an ongoing interpretation of what one is experiencing in a family or a community, it becomes part of the socialization which transforms a person without linguistic articulation. In the Confucian tradition, pedagogic meanings are situated in the ritual activities. For thousand years of Chinese education or ritual tradition, it is not the grasping of propositional meanings or rational mode of judgment that are regarded as the attainment of knowledge, rather it is the ritual practices that are proposed as the embodiment of knowledge and enlightenment. Such a worldview on language and knowledge could be traced back to *I Ching*.

Source of meaning beyond human-made values:

I Ching as origin of ritual hermeneutics

Meaning making in a situated activity through a dialogue between human and the environment, and between Heaven and Earth (天地), can be traced to *I Ching* as its origin, in which source of meanings are derived from Nature, and thus goes beyond the human-made value.

Therefore Heaven produced numinous things, and the sages regarded these as the holding of meanings. Heaven and Earth changed and transformed, and the sages regarded these as models. Heaven hung images in the sky and revealed good fortune and bad, and the sages regarded these as meaningful signs. The Yellow River brought forth a diagram, and the Luo River brought for the writing, and the sages regarded these things also as ruling principles. (Wang, 1994:66)

Language in the Chinese tradition is no more than an image imitating the nature since they are what the Saint has copied from the continuing changes of the Heaven (天). Thus language was believed to be of limit for conveying meaning as the xizi of I Ching explains:

The words are generated by the images, thus one can ponder the words and so observe what the images are. The images are generated by ideas, thus one can ponder the images and so observe what the ideas are. The ideas are yielded up completely by the images, and the images are made explicit by the words. Thus, since the words are the means to explain the images, once one gets the images, he forgets the words, and since the images are the means to allow us concentrate on the ideas, once one gets the ideas, he forgets the images. (Wang, 1994:31)

Therefore, language is not believed to be holders of fixed meanings, rather it is only a means to represent the images which in turn are to convey ideas shown to us by Heaven and Earth. To understand the idea from words, one needs to ponder and interpret hermeneutically in a dialogic relationship between himself, and the language and the Heaven. We can take a look at *The Analects* for an example:

Learn as if [you] were following [someone/something you] could not catch up to, as though [it were someone/something you] were afraid of losing. (*The Analects*, 8:17)

In this part, Confucius does not tell explicit what it is that one is afraid of losing, but one has to interpret it in a situation when one needs to learn it very eagerly. Another typical example from *The Analects* is the beginning of this classic text:

To learn and to practise what is learned time and again is pleasure, is it not? To have friends come from afar is happiness, is it not? To be unperturbed when not appreciated by others is gentlemanly is it not?" (*The Analects*, 1:1)

Clark (2006) has asked the following questions regarding its interpretation:

Of course, I thought, it is good to study and then to put into practice what one has learned, and it is good to have friends, and it is good to be anonymous [not appreciated] without resentment. But why was this considered a classic? ... The Analects raised far more questions than they gave answers. ... The belief that such an important book

had meaning beyond what I imagined plunged me into the sea of interpretation. (Clark, 2006:109)

So, in the classic text, where the words creates a space of interpretation. The language itself always carries value judgment, as Heidegger (1962) puts it, all valuing, even where it values positively, is a kind of subjectifying.

Conclusion

So, what does this source of meaning offer to the modern world as far as the scientific language dilemma is concerned? Postmodernism has sparked a thorough critique of Reason as the foundation of modern western civilization, and proposed a need to re-consider the necessity to structure a multiplicity of thinking paradigms for the possibility of understanding beyond representational and propositional language for scientific reasoning.

The ritual way of thinking, which calls for a situated understanding for both the individual and the community, offers an alternative to the modern way of reasoning, where meaning is generated out of activities rather than language itself. As Wittgenstein believes, philosophy is not a theory but an activity. He used the term "language-game" to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (Wittgenstein, 1997).

As has been presented in the previous sections, in Chinese hermeneutic tradition, meaning lies in the bodily interpretation of everyday life or activities, where the deepest vocation, or Tao in Chinese term, exists where language cannot reach. 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. It is therefore not inappropriate to assume that the contemporary Chinese practices of communication are still unconsciously organized in ritual hermeneutics.

Jullien, a French Sinologist, has raised a series of questions regarding what can be an alternative to representational language so as to seek multiple perspectives to meaning expression and to the understanding the world:

What if the world were not the object of representation, and figurative meaning did not tend to represent something – symbolically? What if generalization were not the goal of thought, or speech tended not to define (to build a universality of essence) but to modify itself – to reflect the circumstance? What if the purpose of speaking about the world, to make it intelligible, were not to arrive at Truth? (Jullien, 2000:8)

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