



## Performing Sacrificial Texts and Reenacting the “Imperial Metaphor” in Rituals of Ancestor Worship in Qimen County, Huizhou, China

Through the lens of performance study, this article analyzes five sacrificial texts that are read or sung in ritual performances worshipping ancestors (and deities) organized by the Chen and Wang lineages in Qimen County, Huangshan City, traditionally known as part of Huizhou area. Viewing these texts in a communicative process rather than as static and isolated items, I firstly entextualize them and find them to be structured in a set of distinctive communicative means or keying devices such as special formulae, parallelism, and archaism, which aim at the arousal and fulfillment of formal expectations to evoke the resonant associations among audiences. The sacrificial texts are then recontextualized in different communicative events to endow the aesthetic forms with social meanings. I find that the keying devices of sacrificial texts and their interactive processes within the ritual performances establish the ancestral authority in an imperial metaphor that both reflects and shapes current social and political realities. This article aims to facilitate a better understanding of generic flexibility, form–function relationship, and text–ritual interplay in theoretical concerns across disciplines such as folklore, anthropology, history, and literature.

Keywords: sacrificial text—ritual performance—ancestor worship—keying device—imperial metaphor—Huizhou

Since the late 1980s, there has been a performative turn within and across various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, folklore, and cultural studies that “reflects significant rethinking about human nature” (Stucky and Wimmer 2002, 12; Bell 2008, 132).<sup>1</sup> As Victor Turner argues, people are in essence self-performing and self-reflexive creatures (1986, 81). Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs (1990, 59–71) note that performance-based studies serve the scholarly interest in deciphering context-sensitive meanings of a folklore item, social interactions between performers and audiences, dynamic relationships between aesthetic forms and sociopolitical functions, as well as the reflexive arena that engages various ethnographic interlocutors. According to Bauman’s definition, performance is both “a mode of communicative behavior and a type of communicative event . . . an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (1992, 41). As such, in this case study, sacrificial texts embedded in ritual performances are both performative and communicative in the sense that their meanings are interdependent upon the generic features, intent of the composer, attitude of the audience, and the interpretive framework constructed by the related communicative events and processes (Bauman 2004, 3–4; Ben-Amos and Goldstein 1975, 3).

In the field of Chinese cultural history, it is increasingly important to combine the study of sacrificial and liturgical texts with a close scrutiny of their ritual contexts. As Martin Kern fairly points out, text, ritual, and especially their manifestations in one another constitute central aspects of ancient Chinese culture (2005, 7). It is thus worth “looking at the ritual structures of textual composition . . . and at the textuality of ritual practices” (*ibid.*, 7). Likewise, the study of the modern history of Chinese religions also suggests a combination of philological and ethnographic approaches to examine the social production of religious texts (Clart and Ownby 2020, 13). Since the sacrificial text (*jiwen*) is a genre commonly seen in historical records and contemporary folk life, its form must carry its own force by accumulating “resonance from the history of its uses, exceeding the intentions and awareness of the immediate users” (Noyes 2016, 132). Therefore, it is fruitful to study the communicative interplay between sacrificial texts and the ritual performances that enact them in the contemporary context with an eye on the generic features of their antecedents; at the same time, contemporary examples may also shed light on historical studies.

Using the framework of performance studies, this article examines five sacrificial texts that are recited or sung during ritual gatherings honoring ancestors (and deities). These rituals are conducted by the Chen and Wang lineages in Qimen County, which is situated in Huangshan City and is historically considered part of the Huizhou region. I argue that these texts should be viewed in a communicative process rather than as fixed and separate entities. To analyze them, I firstly entextualize them or render them extractable, lifting them out of their interactional settings so that their formal properties can be better studied from an agent-centered view of performance. These texts are organized with distinctive communicative means or keying devices, including special formulae, parallelism, and archaism. The goal is to trigger and meet formal expectations, provoking a resonance of connections among the audience. These sacrificial texts are subsequently recontextualized in various communicative settings to imbue the aesthetic forms with cultural and social significance. This examination reveals that the keying devices and interactive dynamics of these sacrificial texts within ritual performances establish the ancestral authority in an imperial metaphor that both mirrors and influences contemporary social and political realities.

### Fieldwork

Qimen County, located in Huangshan City, Anhui Province, eastern China (see figure 1) was one of the six constituent counties of Huizhou prefecture in late imperial China. Saturated with Confucian teachings and norms, Huizhou was famous for its “Confucian gentry society, strong practice of kinship organization, and far-reaching mercantile influence” (Guo 2005, 1). Zhu Xi (1130–1200) and Wang Yangming (1472–1529), two great synthesizers of neo-Confucian philosophy and morality, profoundly affected the social and cultural landscape of Huizhou region. Although Huizhou

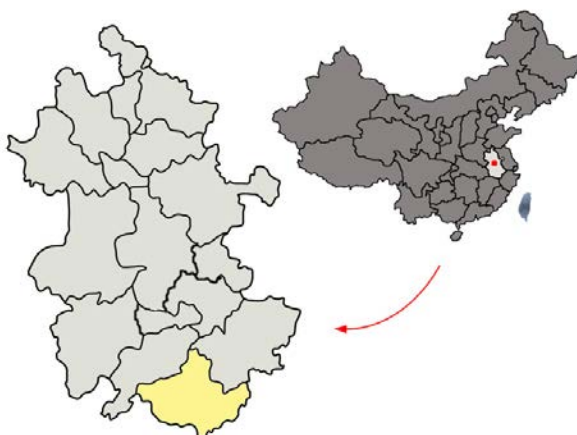


Figure 1. Location of Huangshan City (yellow area), Anhui Province (light grey area) on the map of the People's Republic of China. Qimen County is the westernmost division in Huangshan. Source: Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou,\\_Anhui#/media/File:Location\\_of\\_Huangshan\\_Prefecture\\_within\\_Anhui\\_\(China\).png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huizhou,_Anhui#/media/File:Location_of_Huangshan_Prefecture_within_Anhui_(China).png)



Figure 2. A municipal ICH transmitter named Wang Hongsheng showed me the recently repaired ancestral hall in Ruokeng village, Qimen County. Photo by Wei Liu, May 26, 2021.

no longer exists as an administrative region, it gains and retains more currency in cultural and social terms.

Huizhou culture features practices of a complex lineage tradition including rituals of worshipping ancestors, compiling genealogies, repairing tombs, and reiterating family regulations and community pacts. The transmission of the lineage tradition was interrupted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) when traditional culture was denounced and feudal superstitions were uprooted, but since the economic reforms of the late 1970s, religion has been allowed greater social space, which has led to the resurgence of various religious traditions with non-Marxist ideologies (Overmyer 2003,1; Li 2016, 1). The lineage tradition has been more actively transmitted since the beginning of the twenty-first century; traditional symbols in popular religions have been promoted by various groups as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) to boost domestic tourism, propagate government ideology, and enhance “China’s assertive political maneuvering on the world stage” (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013, 4). In this case, designated as ICH items at the national, provincial, and municipal levels, rituals of worshipping ancestors have been restored and ancestral halls repaired by the representative transmitters with the support of other local people (see figure 2).

I have done fieldwork in Qimen County every year since August 2015. From 2015 to 2018, I stayed no longer than a month each year to establish initial contacts and get familiar with local ritualists and their village life, paving the way for my later sojourn from June 2019 to April 2020 when I did extensive fieldwork for my dissertation research. In May 2021 I rounded off my research by revisiting old informants and clearing up some remaining questions. From 2015 to 2021, I visited several villages and lived with people mainly surnamed Chen and Wang. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, villagers were required to cancel all big events, including ancestor worship, that are often performed in public during and after the Spring Festival. Thus I was not

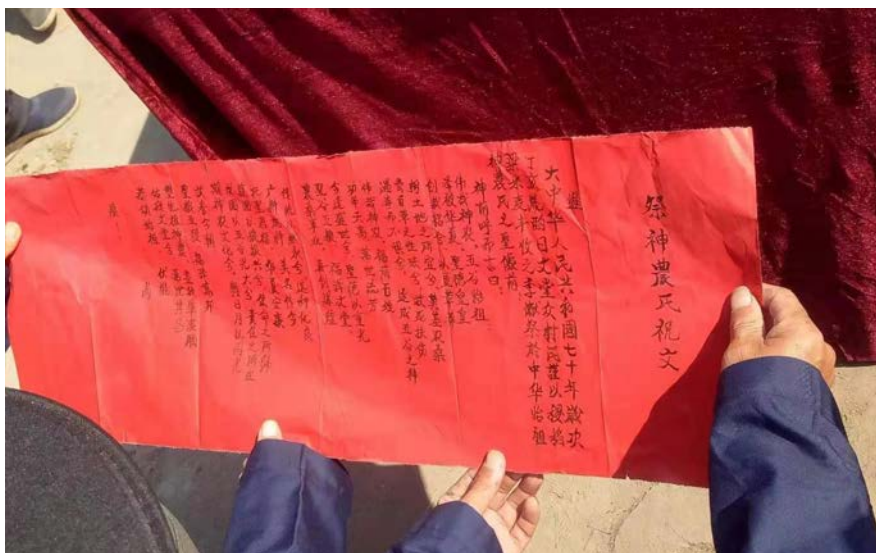


Figure 3. The sacrificial text of Wentang villagers worshipping the harvest god was held and sung aloud during the harvest festival. Photo by a Wentang villager who wishes to remain anonymous, September 30, 2019.

able to record any performances due to the Covid situation, but local villagers had videotaped their annual ritual performances before and gave me access to some of these videos. In this article I will also draw on a complete performance that I was able to record live in 2018. This article is therefore a combination of autoethnographic sources and my own fieldwork.

I obtained three of the sacrificial texts from people of Chen lineage in Wentang village. They instructed me to download a video of ancestor worship from the *Youku* website, which was made by the local TV station in 2010. In that year, villagers held a big event because they had just finished compiling the genealogies and wanted to celebrate this, but the video does not record the whole ritual completely, so the sacrificial text is not read as a whole in it. Later in 2021, I asked the main ritualist and provincial ICH transmitter Chen Xiaomin to write a complete sacrificial text for me, which turned out to be different from the one in the video. I also obtained the sacrificial text of Wentang villagers worshipping the harvest god (*shennong shi*) as an ancestor of the whole Chinese nation during the harvest festival held on the National Day of 2019 (see figure 3). The harvest festival is a recent invention by the local government to boost the tourism industry.

The last two sacrificial texts come from two villages close to Wentang: Taoyuan and Limu. Taoyuan is home to another branch of the Chen lineage who also held ancestor worship in the ancestral hall in their own way. The ritual master Chen Dunhe was designated a national ICH transmitter in May 2018.<sup>2</sup> I attended and videorecorded a ritual performance of ancestor worship in May 2018, during which I digitized the sacrificial text. The ritual was staged for a photography workshop sponsored by the People's Government of Huangshan City, whose aim was to train photographers, archive images of local life, and advertise Taoyuan village (and Huangshan City more broadly) as a fantastic tourist destination (see figure 4).





Figure 4: Taoyuan villagers performed ancestor worship in their ancestral hall for a photography workshop. Photo by Wei Liu, May 19, 2018.

Moreover, the fifth sacrificial text was obtained from ritualist Fan Zuren in another adjacent village, Limu in Qimen County, who composed it for the Wang lineage to worship their famous ancestor Wang Bi near his tomb (located in Tongluowan, Shanli town, Qimen County) in 2010. The ritual of ancestor worship performed at the tomb is open to all people surnamed Wang nationwide. Fan Zuren is not surnamed Wang, but he has become a member of the Wang lineage through uxorilocal marriage, because in his twenties, his family of origin was so poor that no girl would marry into his household. His skills in writing the sacrificial texts and performing rituals result from the motivation to make money and his interest in reading.<sup>3</sup> Another ritualist, Wang Hongsheng of the same Wang lineage in another village, Ruokeng, handed me the videos of worshipping Wang Bi in 2013, 2015, and 2019 (the 2015 video was used to apply for the municipal ICH item, and the other two videos record almost the same ritual proceedings) and explained ritual symbols and procedures to me. He is an important coordinator in the Research Committee of Wang Bi Culture and the Association of Wang Lineage Members from Xin'an, Langya as well as a municipal ICH transmitter.

### Entextualization of sacrificial texts

Entextualization is “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit—a text—that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 73). Bauman categorized these devices into different types, including special formulae, language use, paralinguistic features, parallelism, and appeals to tradition (Bauman 1984, 16; Bender 1996). On the linguistic level, performers use archaic words and jargon to enhance their communicative competence. In terms of paralinguistic features, they rely on shifts in register, gestures, posture, and other behaviors to express unspoken meanings. On the one hand, the sacrificial text is a performance integrated into the whole ritual of ancestor worship; on the other, it is extractable from its original context as a bounded entity with a distinctive poetic function. This article studies various ritual

performances in the cultural landscape of Wentang village and nearby villages, which form the “performance-scape” with similar literary structures and interconnected motifs (Bender 2010, 120). The following section will focus on the marked and artful form of the sacrificial text featured by special formulae, archaism, and parallelism.

#### *Special formulae as genre marker*

A special formula is inherent in the performance to begin and end the narration (Bauman 1984, 21). It functions as the marker of a genre and indicator of the relationship between performers and audience. It also has some referential functions. According to Xiaoguang Zhou and Jihong Guo (2016, 187–89), in the late imperial era the sacrificial texts in Huizhou area could be divided into three types: an invocation to deities (*zhu jiwēn*), mourning for the dead or worshipping ancestors (*ai jiwēn*), and others (*za jiwēn* such as celebrating ancestors’ birthdays, the accomplishment of renovating ancestral halls, and the installation of ancestral tablets). Sacrificial texts of mourning (*ai* or *dao*) can focus on either releasing one’s sorrow over the deceased or lauding the virtues of the deceased (Zhang and Xie 2010, 83). But more often than not, the texts for ancestor worship express more of an invocation (*zhu*) to deities than mourning (*ai*) for the deceased relatives, because as time goes by, the ancestor is deified.

Dating back to the origin of this genre, the boundary between the two categories of sacrificial texts is blurry. Junling Zhao (2013, 102) argues that, generally speaking, the sacrificial text derives from the oration or invocation (*zhu*) by an officer to communicate with spirits in an activity of sacrifice. The oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions of Chinese characters *zu* and *zong* (combined to indicate ancestors) are pictorial symbols showing descendants holding the meat to display in front of ancestral spirits and invite them to taste (Du 2019, 2). The critic Liu Xie (c. 465–c. 522) (see Liu 2012, 109) stated that from the beginning of the world, people invoked and expressed gratitude to spirits. He further elaborated that in the *Yili* (Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial) the invocative texts of sacrificing to ancestors were no more than inviting the deceased to feast on offerings but evolved to include praising virtues of the deceased in the Han and Wei dynasties (ibid., 113). Gradually the sacrificial texts were divided into two types: one was sacrificing to deities represented by spirits of mountains and rivers, and the other to dead relatives and friends (ibid., 115). Tang Biao (1989, 151) of the Ming and Qing dynasties argued that sacrificial texts have four functions: praying for rains or sun, driving away evil spirits, pleading for blessings, and mourning over the dead. Texts serving the first three functions emphasize honorific wording and sincere emotions without haughtiness or exaggeration. The last one stresses the expression of earnest sorrow by describing their life stories and regretting their quick deaths.

Even today, the sacrificial text of worshipping ancestors still oscillates between the invocative (with religious undertone) and the mourning (purely in memory of the deceased and a demonstration of filial piety), a generic flexibility for manipulation (Briggs and Bauman 1992). But be it invocative text or mourning text, it usually begins with the word *wei* and ends with *fuwei shangxiang* (Zhou and Guo 2016, 189). The Limu text begins with *wei* and ends with *fuwei*, while the Taoyuan text doesn’t have such a

beginning but ends with *fuwei shangxiang*. As for Wentang village, the video does not show such a beginning, but it ends with *shangxiang*, and the ritualist Chen Xiaomin's text and the sacrificial text of worshipping the harvest god both begin with *wei* and end with *fuwei shangxiang*. The word *wei* does not have any specific meanings, but it functions to call the audience's attention to the following main messages. The ending remark *fuwei shangxiang* means that the worshippers prostrate on the ground and respectfully invite the ancestors to eat the offerings to their hearts' content. Along with the signal of beginning *wei*, the performer speaks to an audience that includes all the participants present in the ritual, on the one hand, and invisible ancestral spirits, on the other. It opens up a communicative space that engages both worshipers and those to be worshipped, so in a ritual of ancestor worship among the Chen and Wang lineages there should be two sets of texts that are structurally dialogic, containing the worshippers' praise of the ancestors' merits and plea for blessings, and the ancestors' answers to their prayers. In Wentang and Limu ancestor worship, the sacrificial text that ends with *fuwei shangxiang* is the main text analyzed in this article. There is another text of benediction saying that the ancestors bless the descendants, which I will discuss later.

A complete sacrificial text also gives contextual information such as the date and place of worship, participants, the offerings, and the name(s) of the ancestor(s) at the beginning.

#### 1. *The Limu text*

Starting the sacrifice in 2010 CE, during the reign of the Great People's Republic of China; in the lunar calendar February 12, the year of Geng Yin, the day of Bingzi; Offering wine, cups, incense, paper money, and silk; To our first ancestor, Wang Bi, Duke Daxian, the Grand Master of the Palace with Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon, and Minister of the Ministry of War of the Tang dynasty, in front of your tomb. (Fan 2010)

#### 2. *The Wentang text of ancestor worship*

On a day of Shuzhuo,<sup>4</sup> in the first month of the lunar year of Xinchou, 2021 CE, Wentang descendants respectfully offer fish, eggs, and meat as sacrifice to all ancestors and deceased parents before ancestral tablets in the ancestral hall. (Chen 2021)

#### 3. *The Wentang text of worshipping the harvest god*

On a day of Shuzhuo, in the 70th year of the reign of the Great People's Republic of China, the lunar year of Dinghai; in the season of harvest, Wentang villagers respectfully offer grain, rice, and wheat to the divine statue of the harvest god, the first ancestor of the Chinese nation. (Chen 2019)

#### 4. *The Taoyuan text of ancestor worship*

(A superior man is) as perfectly virtuous as water or earth that nurtures every creature but does not crave fame. Chinese civilization is longstanding and well established, with respecting ancestors as its traditional virtue. Descendants of Duke Dingxin, the first ancestor of the Taoyuan Chen lineage, respectfully prepare deli-



cious food, solemnly stand in the ancestral hall of Baoji, and prostrate in sacrifice. (Chen 2018)

In all four texts, the contextual information or the metacommunication serves to connect the main message with the broader performance context in a way that finds favor in the present audience and is archaic for them to interact with the objects of worship. The Limu and Wentang composers use *da* (the great) to add to the majesty of the current political authority, as was always done in each previous generation, such as *da Qing* (the Great Qing dynasty) and *da Ming* (the Great Ming dynasty), showing that this performance is traditional and transmitted from the past.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Wentang and Limu composers detail the titles of the ancestor and the harvest god, aiming to elevate them to the honorable position of being worshipped and elicit respect from the audience. After this contextual information, the second Wentang text written by Chen Xiaomin lists seven ancestors' honorable titles in a call for their spirits to descend. The invocations in their texts were written specifically for lineage members and serve the purpose of solidifying the lineage organizations. In comparison, the Taoyuan text is slightly different by downplaying the influence of ancestors but framing the performance to be a show of praiseworthy virtue of filial piety that glorifies the Chinese civilization. The reason that the Taoyuan and Wentang texts of worshipping the harvest god both show a broader view of the Chinese nation is because their performances serve the current political and economic interests of identifying with the authoritative discourse. Instead of stepping into the grey area of popular religion (with its superstitious content under question), they skillfully manipulate the cultural resources to stage sanctioned performances that fit into the dominant slogan of rejuvenating the Chinese dream.<sup>6</sup>

### Archaism

In addition to the special formulae, archaism is another feature of the sacrificial texts, which is consistent with the linguistic style of the verbal instructions running through the ritual performance of ancestor worship. Composers employ ancient Chinese words or classical Chinese idioms to achieve the effect of traditionality, the esoteric, and a sense of estrangement. The sacrificial texts are replete with four-character idioms—some of which are quite commonly seen now, while others are seldom used in current daily life. For example, the Limu text describes Wang Bi as a capable, virtuous, and important minister who did much meritorious work to save the Tang empire from collapsing. Some idioms are plain to understand: *debei caiquan* (virtues and talents are both complete), *niuzhuan qiankun* (miraculously turning things around), and *dongzheng xitao* (fighting against enemies on every side) (Fan 2010). But some are hard to explain without the composers' interpretation: *biyao kuichan* (Wang Bi is gloriously radiant, attracting others to surround him), or *shudong laoge* (trained in martial arts to skillfully use weapons) (Fan 2010). Moreover, the Limu text continues to narrate that Wang Bi raised nine children, in whom so many Wang descendants find their origin. Before concluding the text with a plea for blessings, the composer also mentions how Wang descendants gathered and worshipped before Bi's tomb. In his narration, some unfamiliar idioms such as *ke shao ji qiu* (to inherit one's father's and grandfather's meritorious work) and *sanduo cengjin jiuru* (three more

blessings and being like nine things)’ are taken from Confucian classics *The Book of Rites* and traditional Chinese popular art.

This tripartite linguistic structure of archaism in the sacrificial text shows the layered communicative competence of the performance. First of all, the basic plain Chinese idioms should constitute most of the sacrificial text, so that the main messages can come across to the general audience without much difficulty. After all, both participants and audience need to have a basic understanding of how and why they should worship the ancestors or at least appreciate it. Then the second layer of linguistic choice taps into people’s knowledge of traditional Chinese culture, and the third layer is esoteric knowledge. The traditionalization of the sacrificial text alludes to the eminent and illustrious status of a family (*mingmen wangzu*) featured with high literacy, good education, and excellent literary writings. The esoteric is like the shibboleth, establishing the composers as a distinctive group of artisans with their own expertise that cannot be easily copied. The esoteric further creates a sense of estrangement among the audience, which in Victor Shklovsky’s term means distancing and making strange (Shklovsky 1997, 4). Estrangement makes art artistic as “shifting perspectives and making things strange can become an antidote to the routinization and automatization of modern life that leads to mass apathy and disenchantment” (Boym 2018, 421). From the perspective of performance, the esoteric shapes the artistic form of the performance that distinguishes its message from the mundane surrounding stream of discourse. This is what performance usually does: to sharpen, intensify, and stylize the lower-level, improvisatory, and all-inclusive social patterning (DaMatta 1991; Noyes 2016, 133). From the functional point of view, the elusive style of wording aims to bring the audience out of its familiar environment into a new realm of solemnity, mystery, and majesty, so as to arouse interest and influence emotions and minds. As is noted by Jan Assmann (2006, 133) in his study of Egyptian religion, “[i]t is their foreignness and their foreign-language nature that helps us to transcend our own nature.” But in order to enhance the communicative competency of the performance, the composer should weigh between the drive to make the text esoteric and the demand to connect with daily discourse, so as to balance the intelligibility and artistic estrangement.

#### *Symmetrical balance and parallelism*

Lastly, the aesthetics of sacrificial texts as literature and performance are also governed by symmetrical balance and parallelism. Chinese poetic lines are composed with couplets that generally convey a sense of semantic completeness and metrical balance, especially the type of parallel couplets “in which the two lines follow the identical syntactical pattern but use words with opposite or complementary meanings” (Egan 2010, 41). The linguistic parallelism reflects the innate bipolar symmetry of nature. As Liu Xie (2012, 402–3) wrote, “Nature, creating living beings, endows them always with limbs in pairs. The divine reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary expressions, and organizes and shapes one hundred different thoughts, making what is high complement what is low, and spontaneously producing linguistic parallelism.”<sup>8</sup>

In my case study, the sacrificial texts are full of couplets (some of which are parallel ones) that add to the beauty of linguistic symmetry, emphasize the key messages, and make their delivery more efficient. For instance, in the Limu text, one parallel couplet is *dingding weiguan xianhuan, daidai beichu nengren* (every man is a prominent officer; every generation produces capable men) (Fan 2010). The Wentang text of worshipping the harvest god reads, *mou guo yi liang zhenxing xi, shiming zhi suogui; qiu guo yi wugu guangda xi, zeren zhi suoze* (it is his mission to rejuvenate the country with food; it is his responsibility to glorify the country with five grains) (Chen 2019). The two lines in each couplet are complementary and repetitive. In written literature, the complementation always serves artistic purpose, but in oral performance, complementary lines in a couplet express one message repetitively for pragmatic concerns, to repeat the message in case the audience didn't get it the first time. Another kind of parallel couplet is made up of contrasting words. For instance, the Limu text reads, *zhifen wanpai, maixi jiuzhou* (lineage divided into tens of thousands of groups; bloodline ties nine districts)<sup>9</sup> (Fan 2010). The Taoyuan text reads, *qingfang yongji, jiuze nanwang* (your fragrance will be forever remembered; your old blessings are hard to forget) (Chen 2018). Although the two lines in each couplet are not contrastive, the three sets of opposition: *fen* (to divide) and *xi* (to tie together), *qingfang* (fragrance that is as close as if in front of the audience) and *jiuze* (blessings from the distant past), and *ji* (to remember) and *wang* (to forget), cause tension in the couplet and achieve audience arousal. Since the experience of ritual is sought out but not necessarily wanted and distraction is licensed, the archaism and parallelism of wording become ritualists' skills to attract attention (Noyes 2016, 144–45).

Not only do sacrificial texts display the linguistic symmetry and parallelism, but the ritual performances of ancestor worship also show thematic symmetry and other parallel constructions. In the Limu and Taoyuan sacrificial texts, they mention both civil (*wen*) and military (*wu*) achievements of their ancestor(s). Akin to the principal duality of yin and yang, the complementary opposition of *wen* and *wu* undergirds many Chinese folkloric imaginations of a superior man or deity (Boretz 2011, 40; Louie 2002, 10–11). *Wen* covers the civil sphere of society that includes the literati, moral values, or cultural and educational success, while *wu* indicates the merits earned by military service (Filipiak 2015, 4). The Wang lineage ancestor Wang Bi is depicted as adept at literary writing (*kuiwen beiwu*) and full of valor and vigor to conquer enemies (*pingkou weigong*). The tomb garden of Wang Bi is also guarded by two stone men: one is a civil official and the other is a military officer. The Taoyuan text lists some famous Chen ancestors that include both a civil officer (minister of the revenue division) and a military general. In Wentang ancestor worship, there are two performers taking the roles of “number one” scholars in the highest civil and military imperial examinations. In the ritual, it is the civil scholar who reads the main sacrificial text and the text of benediction. As to the military scholar, if someone is disobedient in the clan, he is responsible for meting out punishments. In terms of other parallel constructions, in the Limu and Wentang videos, the whole space (ancestral hall or Wang Bi's tomb garden) is divided into halves by table(s), and there are an equal number of performers standing to each side (see figure 5). They repeatedly salute each other by using the typical gesture of an open hand covering a



Figure 5. The whole space of Wang Bi's tomb garden was divided into halves by tables, and there were an equal number of performers standing to each side during the ceremony on March 18, 2019. Screenshot of the video provided by Wang Hongsheng.

closed fist. The Taoyuan performance was the same, except that there was no table. A speaker gives instructions throughout the ritual, and another performer stands on the other side to keep their positions symmetrically balanced. When the ritual master offers tributes to ancestors, on each side stands an equal number of assistants. In the Wentang video, when performers start to circumambulate the table, except for the ritual master who is in the middle, they are divided into two groups and walk side by side. The linguistic, thematic, and spatial parallelism throughout the ritual is used to create a temporary order or construct a harmonious performative world. Because Confucianism treats the world of lived experience as fundamentally broken, chaotic, and discontinuous, people need to generate patterns and order through ritual (Seligman et al. 2008, 17–18).

### Recontextualization of sacrificial texts

A sacrificial text is created as part of a ritual performance, so it tends to be restricted by the nature and atmosphere of the ritual (Ye 2015, 104). The sacrificial text is intricately associated with other texts in the performance, the performance itself, and the situational context of the performance (Wang 2010). For most of the rituals of ancestor worship in my case study, the sacrificial texts are written on red paper, read or sung aloud during the ritual, and burned in the end to be sent to the other world. They thus have semiotic functions in the performance realm that are beyond what verbal language can convey. Bauman and Briggs argue that the decontextualization of a folklore item from one social context involves its recontextualization in another, and since the process is transformational, it is worth noting “what the recontextualized text brings with it from its earlier context(s) and what emergent form, function, and meaning it is given as it is recentered” (Bauman and Briggs 1990, 74–75). As I can see from both the linguistic and paralinguistic uses of the sacrificial texts in cases of the

Wang and Chen lineages, the texts carry illocutionary force that is both traditional and context sensitive. In the following section, I will discuss how sacrificial texts are dialogically structured with other texts in the ritual performance and how they transmit various social and political messages in different communicative contexts.

*Dialogue between sacrificial texts and ritual performance*

The sacrificial texts of the local lineage are organized dialogically with texts of benediction to facilitate the conversation between ancestors and descendants. Because “religious ritual addresses a postulated subject,” to represent that subject the ritual should include an extravagant completion address and a performance of petition and response (Feuchtwang 2001, 156). In the video of Wentang ancestor worship, during the ritual performance, when the ritual master and his assistants kneel down before the portraits of ancestors, a performer (in the role of “number one” civil scholar) on behalf of all the community members reads two texts to ingratiate themselves with the ancestors. The first one is the sacrificial text mainly narrating the history of Wentang village, which can be dated back to the Song dynasty, when the first ancestor Shun Chenggong started to farm the land and sired a large family.

The Chen family has long kept to the traditional values of loyalty and filial piety . . . and in the later generations, famous ministers and scholars came forth in large numbers. They have left rich inheritance for their descendants. Their fame and grace should be remembered, and all the descendants keep silent before ancestors in reverence. Generation after generation, they benefited from ancestors’ virtuous work. Therefore, by no means could this ritual of worship be replaced or discarded. (Jia Yuan 2010)

This sacrificial text, replete with archaic words and phrases, is sung in Qimen dialect. As a eulogistic message, it aims to please the ancestors and invoke a sense of pride and pleasure in people’s hearts.

The other text of benediction later read by the performer is called *guci*, beginning with a proclamation that all the ancestors who have passed away bless them so that various blessings abound in them. Reading this text is a symbolic act of ancestors ordering a representative to speak out their blessing on the descendants. Then it further details what kind of blessings will come upon them. “You will get more filial sons and filial grandsons and have a good harvest because the Heaven will respond to your request, your plants flourish on the land, and you will have a long life” (Jia Yuan 2010). Similarly, in the Limu ancestor worship, performers not only read the main sacrificial text (*du jiwu*) analyzed earlier but also proclaim benediction (*baoguci*) almost the same as the Chen lineage. From the content and language use of these two texts, it is inferred that they integrate a plea for ancestors, praise of their virtuous work, and a confirmative answer from the ancestors. In other words, it is an interaction between descendants who express admiration and their forefathers who bestow blessings.

However, the Taoyuan performance is quite different in terms of the interaction between the texts, which tones down the religious invocation but enhances the political awareness. After the reading of the sacrificial text (which is less archaic than that of Limu and Wentang), there is no benediction from ancestors, but instead



a Chen elder and a Chen descendant read two texts to express their appreciation of the ancestral exemplarity and their motivation to cultivate the virtues of filial piety and benevolence, and to follow the lead of the Communist Party to make great social contributions. Their words respond to the opening remarks by Chen Dunhe, the national ICH transmitter who organized the whole ritual performance. In his talk, he clearly stated that “the purpose of holding this ritual is to demonstrate the didactic meaning of folk customs, the transmission of lineage rules, and that the ritual can profoundly prosper local culture, edify common people, and cultivate descendants’ virtues.” Even the sacrificial text in the Taoyuan ritual is quite modernized and has the most plain Chinese idioms compared to other sacrificial texts from the Wentang Chen and Limu Wang lineages. For instance, after describing ancestors’ virtuous works, the sacrificial text moves to a description of descendants’ humility and diligence (*xuxin haoxue*), politeness and moral integrity (*mingli chengxin*), patriotism and lawfulness (*aiguo shoufa*), generosity (*leshan haoshi*), thrift and self-improvement (*qinjian ziqiang*), and so on, which is almost the same as the code of ethics issued by the current government.

#### *Reenactment of imperial metaphor*

In addition to textual dialogism, the ritual performances of ancestor worship in my case study imply an “imperial metaphor” (the folk spiritual world modeled on imperial bureaucracy) that has sociopolitical implications in the contemporary context.<sup>10</sup> The ritualist Chen Xiaomin provides an indigenous exegesis of symbols in the Wentang ritual performance. He said the form of this ritual is called *jinji*, a state ritual performed for emperors. Because their ancestor Chen Baxian is an emperor of the Chen dynasty in the period of Northern and Southern Dynasties, they adopt this form of performance. In this ritual, each performer has his own bureaucratic role. The speaker and the silent performer standing on the two chairs play the role of *jindian chuannu*, the court eunuchs serving the imperial majesty. One of their responsibilities is to summon ministers who honorably present themselves before the emperor. The ritual master is the leader of the community. The assistants are called *yinzan*, *zhongjunzan*, and *zhuangyuan*. *Yinzan* is the leading role of ancient minister of rituals; *zhongjunzan* is a role of messenger to accompany the general. Two other assistants take roles of “number one” scholars (*zhuangyuan*) in the highest civil and military imperial examinations.<sup>11</sup> Through his explanation, this ritual is like a minister presenting himself before the emperor on behalf of his big family. He also prepares the food and eats with the emperor. This scene of meeting ancestors is thus alternatively explained as a submission to imperial power. Likewise, before the ritual of the Wang lineage formally starts, there are two rows of villagers holding a precious canopy (*baogai*) that is used to shelter the imperial authority or deity, and a pair of boards—one says *sujing* (silence) and the other says *huibi* (avoidance)—parading toward the tomb. The ritualist Wang Hongsheng told me they indicate the guard of honor before an emperor or minister.<sup>12</sup>

The imperial metaphor reveals the culture of public display (in Michael Nylan’s term) in which “awesome authority” (*weiyi*) is established through visual magnificence of ritual performances as well as the archaic rhetoric, special formulae,



and symmetrical constructions of sacrificial texts. According to Nylan (2005, 24), as early as the Warring States, the public display culture was theoretically founded on assumptions about men's desire for connection with each other, cravings for pleasure and spectacle, and their experience of mimetic desires. In ancient China, the ruling class in command of a plentitude of resources regularly sought to demonstrate its power before large audiences; the emperor in particular was presented to embody the center of all the collectivities operating within the public display culture, and the ruler's will was supposed to be followed by the entire population, whose desires could be satisfied by a reward-punishment mechanism (*ibid.*, 26).

In contemporary society, the same logic behind the public display culture might be still at work. As I observed at a recently invented festival of picking local oranges in Longyuan village, Xin'an town, Qimen County in November 2019, the local government staged performances entitled "The Best Song for Our Country" (*zuimei de ger xiangei zuguo*), "Singing again a Folk Song for the Communist Party" (*zaichang shan'ge gei dang ting*), "Ten Verses of Farewell to the Red Army" (*shi song hongjun*), and "Singing in Praise of the Motherland" (*gechang zuguo*) in addition to other folk dances and songs (see figure 6). During breaks, the hostess asked the spectators to answer several questions, and winners could get awards. Her questions were all pertinent to government policies that had been implemented recently. These performances and Q&A sessions were designed to shape common people's desires in line with the current political authority. During the festival, a retired teacher shared his poem with his friends, and I accidentally saw it. The poem was applauding the festival organized by government leaders and sharing their vision of rural rejuvenation:

Village committee enthusiastically develops agritainment,  
offering oranges to express sincerity.  
(People) taste original and natural flavor,  
and the county in the mountain will march on a new journey.

Returning to the ritual performance of ancestor worship, from the perspective of local villagers, the imperial metaphor in the public display culture is not simply historical reenactment but rather the appropriation of the symbols and structure of the imperium to "articulate and manifest the power inherent in their own collective solidarity" (Boretz 2011, 41; Feuchtwang 2001). Imperial majesty demonstrated both verbally and visually is to enforce power and solidarity. In the ritual performances of the Chen lineage, especially the Taoyuan ritual, the roles enacted by the various performers and the sacrificial texts read by them are a vivid reflection of the local people's desires to act in conformity with the government and cravings for economic and political rewards generated by their being amenable. "Ritual typically has powerful interests behind it, and the aesthetic experience is often mobilized towards the reproduction of established power" (Noyes 2016, 145; Bloch 1989). The presence of the emperor is not an empty signifier, but on the contrary is politically mystified as the reign of the current government. This wish of following the emperor, if placed in modern context, is a tendency to follow the dominant official discourse. In both Taoyuan and Wentang villages, the locals seek the government's favor due to political and economic advantages. After gaining the imprimatur of national and provincial



Figure 6. All performers and government officials sang the song “Singing in Praise of the Motherland” (*gechang zuguo*) together in the festival of picking local oranges in Longyuan village, Xin’an town, Qimen County. Photo by Wei Liu, November 9, 2019.

ICH items, Taoyuan and Wentang people received much funding to renovate and decorate their ancestral halls and develop cultural tourism.

In the ritual of the Wang lineage, the imperial majesty is more projected onto the lineage authority that strengthens the social solidarity of the Wang lineage as an influential organization (*zongqin lianyihui*), which can generate great social capital for its members. Wang Hongsheng told me that as the coordinator of the tomb sacrifice, he has been honored by many Wang lineage members; especially on the day of sacrifice, many cars were stopping in front of his house and waiting for his command. He claimed that it was such a great honor (*fengguang*) that he felt it even better than a *zimo* win (win by taking a tile from the wall) in mahjong. He also told me that some Wang lineage members are wealthy businessmen who can purchase tea leaves from him.<sup>13</sup> He earns his living by planting, picking, and processing tea leaves (which Qimen County is famous for), so lineage members’ assistance in his work shows the economic value of lineage social networking. The anthem of the Wang Lineage Association is “Unity Is Strength” (*tuanjie jiushi liliang*), which aims at unifying all Wang lineage members in reciprocal ties.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Bauman has noted that performance entails complex, highly organized rhetoric and aesthetic devices; these serve, as Noyes noted, in “how messages resist entropy” (Bauman 1984; Noyes 2016, 132). By entextualizing the sacrificial texts collected from the Wentang and Taoyuan Chen lineages as well as the Limu and Ruokeng Wang lineages, it is easy to see that they are set off by keying devices of special formulae, archaism, and parallelism, and held together with the internal pillars of respecting ancestors, praising their merits, and demonstrating the worshippers’

virtues of filial piety and loyalty. Then by recontextualizing the sacrificial texts, they are fleshed out stylistically and semiotically in ritual performances of ancestor worship that acquire deeper sociopolitical meanings. This illustrates how genre both constrains and enables the production and interpretation of new texts. The generic flexibility between invocation and mourning has persisted into the contemporary performances, which can be swayed by the decisions of composers considering the power dynamics and audience expectations of each occasion on which the sacrificial text is performed.

The sacrificial text is constrained not only by its own generic form but also by the communicative process of the ritual performance that includes, for instance, the dialogue between texts within a performance and various functions of the sacrificial text in different situational contexts. In the ancestor worship, the ritual proceeding is completed through the petition and response to prove its efficacy, so the sacrificial text as an appeal to the ancestors should be responded to by the text of benediction from the postulated ancestor subjects. However, due to the genre ambiguity, the sacrificial text of worshipping ancestors can be categorized more as a mourning text than invocative text, so as to erase the religious connotation and make it acceptable in the current social context, as is shown in the Taoyuan case. When the sacrificial text is more broadly contextualized, its aesthetic form has the social function of the majestic display of ancestral authority that points to the public display culture from the imperial past and constructs an imperial metaphor reified in the current sociopolitical context as the dominance of political power and the solidarity of the lineage organization.

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#### AUTHOR

Wei Liu graduated from the Ohio State University with a PhD in Chinese literature and folklore. Her dissertation research examines the revival of local folk culture and Confucian tradition in the context of early twenty-first-century government initiatives such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) movement and President Xi Jinping's promotion of "excellent traditional culture." Her recent publications include "Religious Ambiguity, ICH, and Mulian Performances in Contemporary Huizhou, China" in *CHINOPERL: Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature*; and a review essay of Zhang Shishan's book "Li yu su: Zai tianye zhong lijie Zhongguo" in *Western Folklore Journal*.

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#### NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Dr. Mark Bender and the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions and comments.
2. For a discussion on the general application process, qualifications, and roles of representative transmitters of national-level Intangible Cultural Heritage items, see You (2020, 205–7).
3. Interview with Fan Zuren, January 12, 2020.
4. Xiaomin claimed that in the past people defined the Day of Shuzhuo as the first fifteen days of every month. Chen Xiaomin, WeChat communication, June 30, 2021.

5. Interview with Fan Zuren, January 12, 2020.
6. For more theoretical discussions and case studies on the interaction between the state and local society, see Zhang (2019).
7. It means in addition to having more blessings, a longer life, and more children, one prospers like the high hills, the mountain masses, the topmost ridges, and the greatest bulks; one increases like the stream ever coming on; one is also like the moon advancing to the full; like the sun ascending the heavens; like the age of the southern hills, never waning, never falling; and is like the luxuriance of the fir and the cypress. One being like these nine things originally comes from the *Book of Odes*.
8. Translated by Charles Egan (2010, 41).
9. *Jiuzhou* (nine districts) is another name for China.
10. In 1965, Arthur Wolf's (1974, 131–82) article *Ghosts, Gods, and Ancestors* interpreted the folk supernatural world of Chinese society as reflecting its imperial bureaucracy, whose line of argument was picked up by Emily Ahern (1981) and Stephan Feuchtwang (2001). Ahern argues that Chinese people's ritual interactions with spirits are often modeled on political processes, which is conducive to the established authorities. Feuchtwang's presentation of imperial metaphor means that the performance and imagery of local religious rituals and festivals display a sense of place and power that works as a supplementary universe to that of the ruling orthodoxy.
11. Interview with Chen Xiaomin, June 2016.
12. Interview with Wang Hongsheng, May 26, 2021.
13. Interview with Wang Hongsheng, May 26, 2021.

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