



Roel Sterckx, *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China*

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ONE MIGHT recklessly infer that the Chinese had already developed an exquisite food culture in very early times. Indeed, for the Chinese, food has always been something more than a means to nourish their bodies, as K. C. CHANG confidently remarked: “Few can take exception to the statement that few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese” (1977, 11). In the last three decades, archaeologists in China have discovered many treatises on medicine and food recipes from ancient China. But until now, there has been a relative dearth of scholarship, maybe outside of Roel STERCKX’s own edited volume on ancient Chinese food culture (2005), that analyzes food as an essential part of ritual ceremony and social life. In *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China*, Sterckx represents a major advance in the field by drawing from an impressive array of sources to show how “this rich world of food inspired an equally fascinating world of ideas” (1). Instead of investigating what exactly the ancient Chinese ate, the focus of this volume is on the cultural and sociopolitical meanings of food in China from the Warring States period (476–221 BCE) to the Han era (202 BCE–220 CE). In particular, Sterckx endeavors to demonstrate how food served as a component in the ritual culture of early China which “far transcended the demands of physical sustenance” (204).

Chapter 1, entitled “Customs and Cuisine,” is likely to be the most revelatory to many readers. Here the author offers a broad discussion of the unusual significance of food in ritual and culture, the use of food “as nourishment for the spirits, its influence on ideas of human self-cultivation,” and “its role as a metaphor in the world of ideas” (11). Departing from the pre-Qin ritual and philosophical texts that form the basis of the rest of the book, Sterckx makes extensive use of recently discovered materials, including the gastronomic texts excavated at Mawangdui 馬王堆 and Huxishan 虎溪山 (which Sterckx erroneously renders as 虎溪扇; 16), as well as the judicial documents excavated at Zhangjiashan 張家山 (25) that contained a prosecution for food adulteration. For him, the stories and scenes examined in this chapter disclose “how interacting with food emerged as a template for moral self-cultivation” (48). Exhaustive in detail, this survey is sure to provide an excellent resource for nonspecialists on the topic, moving away from the idealized situation described in philosophical and ritual texts and providing a rich background understanding to the quotidian and moral aspects of food culture in ancient China.

Chapter 2 explores “Cooking the World,” by which Sterckx means “the idea that butchering, cooking, and dining were forms of self-cultivation” (5). Given that linkage, the story of the magnificent Cook Ding 庖丁 by Zhuangzi 莊子 (fourth

century BCE) receives sustained attention. Beyond the conventional interpretation of the story as an anecdote about living in accordance with the Way, here the author emphasizes the role of cooks and butchers as sage-advisors and considers the image of cooking and butchering as a metaphor for government. Sterckx then tackles the topic of “harmony” (*he* 和), here meaning “blending the flavors,” on the grounds that “[t]he cook’s mastery of flavor and his direct influence on the sensory world of his superior provided a source of psychosomatic nourishment that could help advance a ruler’s moral potency for government” (60). After offering a scintillating discussion of the cook-turned-minister Yi Yin 伊尹, the chapter ends with a survey of what Sterckx summarizes as “cosmic dining” that details the sociopolitical and cosmological stakes involved in a ruler’s diet.

Chapter 3, “Sacrifice and Sense,” turns from feeding the living to feeding the dead through sacrifice. As recorded in ancient texts, in contrast to human food, the most potent offerings should be simple, flavorless, and untarnished by human doing, because “spirits operate in a world beyond taste” (85) and simple offerings symbolized the idealized purity. Thus early ritual texts prefer vapors and odors to actual food since vapors were thought to represent *qi* 氣 in its purest form. Strictly speaking, the citation of Shen Yue’s 沈約 (411–513 CE) poem (91) falls outside the chronological framework of this volume. However, its reference to “reverting to the root” (*fanben* 反本) and “return to antiquity” (*fugu* 復古) serves the reader well insofar as it encapsulates the cosmogonic sequence spanning life to death and death to life again. The chapter also includes sections on the use and abuse of alcohol and on “Searching for Spirit,” the theory and practice of locating spirits prior to sacrifice. Although the term *xuanjin* (玄酒, dark liquid), an appellation for sacrificial water, has been touched upon (89), the chapter fails to mention the fact that *xuan* 玄 originally referred to reddish-black blood and objects consecrated by it. Indeed, the working out of the relations believed to pertain to blood is a matter of consequence to both early thinkers and modern readers.

To ensure that all the elements for a proper sacrifice would be in place, several practical matters had to be resolved. Sterckx therefore leads the reader from the spiritual world to the mundane realm to deal with the “Economics of Sacrifice” in Chapter 4, supplying what he promises will be “detailed guidelines on how to sustain a vibrant culture of sacrificial gift exchange and ritual offering” (6). One may wonder how this chapter, which is devoted to practical matters relating to the costs and material organization of sacrifice, ties into the other themes dealt with in the volume, but for Sterckx, the material aspects are of special significance because “the provision and management of the goods and ritual paraphernalia required to facilitate sacrifice formed the basis of a complete religious economy” (121). Observing that during the time from the Warring States to the Han periods sacrificial levies were part of the regular state economy, Sterckx surveys various types of taxes related to religious activities, in particular in connection with the “monthly ordinances” (*yueling* 月令) (128–34). Many institutions were involved in one way or another with the sacrificial needs of the state, not only the central administration, but also governments at the local level, even down to ordinary households. Thus for Sterckx, “what was conceived of as moral could be material” as well (166).

The last chapter, “Sages, Spirits, and Senses,” highlights the role of the senses in conceptions of sagehood and rulership. Based on explanations of the connection between the model of the sage and sage ruler in early China and the ritual model of sacrifice, Sterckx argues that “ritual power and authority hinged on one’s ability to sense what was beyond normal human sensation” (168). Olfactory, aural, and visual stimuli during ritual sacrifice remained volatile and subject to interpretation by ritual agents, yet a concern with sage perception and the proper management of the senses was not limited to philosophical discourse. Sterckx goes on to examine Warring States and Han texts and suggests that “the ruler’s sensorium was to be maintained by other material means,” including “adequate ritual clothing and aids such as curtains, canopies, screens, veils, and earplugs” (191–92).

In short, this book presents many original and thought-provoking ideas about intellectual and religious dimensions of early China. Based in part on his earlier articles (STERCKX 2005 and 2006), this volume represents the culmination of Sterckx’s long-standing interest in the intersection of food, philosophy, and ritual culture. Linking sacrificial food to the larger ritual culture and spectacle in early China, the author has successfully handled an important yet long-overlooked issue in the study of ancient Chinese culture: the metaphorical use of culinary art. The whole of the text is replete with a sumptuous depiction of food culture in all its main aspects, and most of his analyses are compelling. Particularly impressive is the breadth and width of his command of sources, ranging from Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, texts of pre-Qin philosophers, to recently discovered Qin-Han bamboo slips. Sterckx is apparently confident that through careful sifting and by juxtaposing the vast information derived across such a wide range of textual genres, elements of past reality can be analyzed and reconstructed. This contributes to his masterful coverage of the textual evidence for the various types of cuisines and ales, methods of preservation, distribution of sacrificial meat, and banquet customs.

Despite all the sophisticated readings of sources and masterfully orchestrated interweaving of a large body of references to food and sacrifice, one may have the suspicion, though not necessarily true or fair, that his system seems too perfect. Ancient Chinese authors produced a considerable body of literature of the topic, yet whether these authors would all agree on the explications and implications that modern scholars have extrapolated from these stories is a question worth pondering. Anyone versed in Chinese history is aware of the complex nature of the textual sources, and we do know that Confucian ritual canons, anecdotes, and medieval liturgies all tend to idealize or exaggerate situations in the past, not to mention the fact that the subjects they recorded may or may not have really existed. After all, Cook Ding is the invention of a philosopher, not a description of early Chinese butchering practice. Readers more familiar with Chinese archaeology may expect more sufficient consideration of archaeological data. Certainly, Sterckx has made occasional references to some findings such as texts excavated at Mawangdui and Wang Mang’s 王莽 (45 BCE–6 CE) calendric wall discovered near Dunhuang. Nevertheless, his use of archaeological evidence for the pre-Han period is almost exclusively confined to secondary sources. For instance, the ice storages (*lingyin* 凌陰) excavated at the Qin capital can be consulted for the discussion of food pres-

ervation in pre-Han periods (SHAANXI SHENG YONGCHENG KAOGUDUI 1978). Of course, this is somewhat over-demanding for a scholar whose primary focus is not archaeology, but it is nevertheless to be regretted since archaeology can be greatly helpful for enriching our understanding of the past, particularly concerning the early periods on which extant written sources are extremely limited.

This brief review certainly cannot do full justice to the merits of this book. Through a comprehensive examination of ancient Chinese writings on the importance of food in cultivating personal virtue, administrating the state, achieving the sagehood, and offerings for the spirits, *Food, Sacrifice, and Sagehood in Early China* probes into the heart of China's religious culture and provides an inspiring study that deftly uncovers the complex associations between culinary art and ritual culture in early China. It will definitely serve as an indispensable reference for future scholars and students interested in the issue.

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Hang Lin
University of Hamburg