FROM CANNIBALISM TO EMPOWERMENT:
AN ANALECTS-INSPIRED ATTEMPT TO BALANCE
COMMUNITY AND LIBERTY

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... across every page were the words BENEVOLENCE, RIGHTEOUSNESS, and MORALITY.... [F]inally I began to make out what was written between the lines; the whole volume was filled with a single phrase: EAT PEOPLE!

Lu Xun

The Confucian tradition has often been credited with a strong allegiance to the value of community. It recognizes that certain goods might be attained through special forms of human association, but not by any solitary individual. Are such community goods attained at the expense of the liberty of individual members? Philosophers have struggled with the tension between liberty and community since the dawn of Western philosophy. Aristotle complained about the false idea of liberty as “doing what one likes,” which is contradictory to the true interests of the polis. Such liberty, or rather license, is undoubtedly detrimental to any peaceful coexistence, not to say the harmonious and mutually beneficial association of community. Without regulation, such license would, according to Thomas Hobbes, result in a “war of all against all,” making life “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

It is not just illiberal philosophers who are concerned about liberty turning to license and destroying itself. John Stuart Mill remarked, “Freedom for the pikes is death for the minnows.” While recognizing a need to limit liberty, liberals are also perennially concerned that any group exercising power over individuals might deny members their status qua separate and autonomous individuals, and thereby threaten liberty. On the other hand, communitarians object, among other things, to the liberal conception of autonomous selves as fundamentally, even ontologically, separate units, who then choose whether or not to enter into relations with one another to form communities. From such a starting point, community goods are often neglected, and in extreme cases the insistence on the priority of individual rights could lead to “the moral fabric of community ... unraveling around us.”

While it is not impossible, with human intelligence and imagination, to resolve the conflicts between community goods and individual liberty, and while there are circumstances in which one could benefit the other, or both could be mutually beneficial, the likelihood of tension and outright contradiction between these two key values of democracy remains, in any group of human beings, blessed or cursed, depending on how you look at it, with what Kant calls “the unsocial sociability of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a...
continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up." The average person is torn between the conflicting inclinations to live in society and to live as an individual, among fellows "whom he cannot bear yet cannot bear to leave."4 We value liberty for the protection it provides for the individual, for its empowerment of her in her search for human fulfillment. The value of community captures our concern to render our unavoidable social existence as meaningful and beneficial as possible for all, or at least for as many as possible. The need to balance the two values—a perennial problem of ethics and politics—has been brought to the fore by the liberalism-communitarianism debate.5

This essay aims to develop an account of how to balance liberty and community through what Confucians called li 禮, which has been translated as "rites," "rituals," "ceremony," "ritual action," "ritual propriety," "propriety," "decorum," "manners," "courtesy," and "civility." I shall adopt the translation of "ritual." While I draw most of my textual materials from the Analects, I do not offer my perspective as a straightforward interpretation of its content; the problematic of liberty versus community is not germane to pre-Qin philosophical discourse. This exercise is motivated by a belief that the Analects, together with an interdisciplinary study of ritual in different contexts, could provide resources for new ways of handling the tension between liberty and community.

Confucianism’s Hostility to Liberty

Focusing on historical practices, many have accused Confucianism of having no place for individual liberty. Writers like Lucian Pye and W.J.F. Jenner have blamed Confucianism for China’s authoritarian social structure and political culture.6 Lest it be thought that this is just a simple case of cultural imperialism, or of ignorant barbarians pontificating on things they know little about, Chinese writers like Fei Xiaotong and Ch’ü T’ung-tsu have presented Chinese traditional society, usually deemed Confucian, in ways that justify the conclusion that Confucianism is hostile to individual liberty—a view still prevalent among many Chinese and other East Asians who could claim a Confucian legacy.7

Some scholars have tried to rescue Confucianism from such charges by arguing that there is a strand of liberal thought in the tradition, based on the expressed ideals of self-cultivation and ethico-political practices that sanction challenges to authority. Others have emphasized the humanistic character of Confucian philosophy, regardless of historical malpractices. Insofar as they have reconciled liberty and community in Confucianism, these approaches have been assisted by challenges to the liberal conception of the self and by arguments that Confucian conceptions of the self as fundamentally relational have a better chance of resolving the traditional contradictions between self and society.

Some have argued that the key ideal of ren 仁 (what Wing-tsit Chan considers the general virtue of “humanity”) provides a meaningful synthesis of individual liberty and community. While I agree with that suggestion, focusing on this most benign and too readily acceptable ethical notion, especially when we translate it as
“benevolence,” is too easy a way out if we do not tackle the close connection between ren and li. Even the severest critics of Confucianism have little to say against ren—at most they attack the failure of practice to live up to theory; but the ethical value of Confucian ritual has always been more problematic. On the other hand, Confucianism’s hostility to individual liberty has often been attributed to the Confucian li, equated with traditional and conventional “rules of conduct,” which historically were sometimes so destructive of individuals that they were condemned for “cannibalism.”

I propose to rescue the Confucian concept of li from such charges and show that it should instead be understood as a concept of moral empowerment of the free individual in community. Moreover, as a concept about empowerment it is still relevant to contemporary society and can offer some clues on how contemporary Confucians might balance liberty and community.

Creating Community through Ritual

While there is no consensus among contemporary scholars who study rituals in various contexts, the Confucian li fits quite comfortably into Eric Rothenbuhler’s definition of ritual as “voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life.”8 Ritual is the constitutive means of Confucian community. Robert Eno presents early Confucianism not primarily as a body of doctrine but as a community with ritual activity as its distinguishing core. The Analects contain “not merely instructive sayings of the Master but inter-subjectively validated ideas, communal values exemplified by life experiences of the speakers in the act of li.”9 Creating community through ritual is central to Confucianism. As a norm to aspire to, Confucian community should be understood not as a closed collective—an abstract entity to be set above its individual members—but as an open network of relationships.10 What separates one such community from another community is a matter of relatively weak, marginal relationships, not necessarily a total absence of relationship. A community grows or shrinks according to the changing number and strengths of its constituting relationships.

Borrowing a metaphor from the works of David Hall and Roger Ames, a Confucian community may be considered a field constituted by multiple foci, which are members of the community.11 A member’s personal cultivation (xiu shen 修身) results in an increase in intensity or extension of focus. Improving a relationship so that more is achieved cooperatively within that relationship would be an increase in intensity; increasing the number of relationships that are productive of communal good would be an extension of focus. Extension of focus might be within the existing field of a community, or it might increase the field if new relationships involve individuals who are not members of the community. Hence, both qualitatively and quantitatively, personal growth and communal growth are interdependent.

The goal of Confucian personal cultivation is to achieve authoritative “humanity” (ren—which is more often translated as “benevolence”). Tu Wei-ming has ana-
alyzed the Chinese character for ren as “man-in-society”: it points toward the fundamental relational characteristic of the Confucian conception of the person and the mutual implication of personal cultivation and community creation. In Confucianism, ritual is central to this process of personal-communal growth. “Through self-discipline and observing ritual (li), one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct (ren).” The meaning and value of ritual lie in its being a constitutive means of community through authoritative conduct (Analects 3.3, 4.13).

A community achieved through Confucian rituals is one that places a high value on harmony. According to Master You, who was said to resemble Confucius, “Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety” (Analects 1.12). Valuing harmony need not mean denying the existence, even the inevitability, of conflict in human interaction. Ritual might contribute to communal harmony by limiting the damage that results from conflict by creating artificial boundaries in social interaction. Take, for example, two family members working together in a company. Addressing each other by their official titles and adhering to other office rituals could serve to set a boundary and define those situations in which the two persons are allowed to disagree strongly as belonging strictly to the office setting, so that the impact of a conflict on their familial relationship will be minimized. Ritual forms, by limiting the ways in which conflicts can be expressed, might also prevent conflicts from becoming personal or total. Contrary to the belief that the Confucian esteem for harmony prevents a realistic treatment of social conflicts, Confucius recommended that competition, and by extension disagreement and conflict, should be limited to the necessary and appropriate, and, most important, it should be carried out according to ritual (Analects 3.7). Although it could degrade into mere legitimation, ritually structured conflict will not undermine harmony, and at times might even enhance it.

**Law versus Ritual**

But does not this exaltation of ritual ignore the fact that laws and rights are required to protect the weak from the strong in human society, where conflicts are ineradicable? Even those willing to concede that Confucianism does not explicitly reject individual liberty and is not inherently authoritarian are often skeptical of the possibility of making room for liberty within Confucian society without some institutional structure to protect liberty, which is seen as being constantly under threat from social and governmental oppression. Such structures usually include a certain kind of legal system. Defenders of Western liberal democracy, Ronald Dworkin among them, insist that the rule of law is crucial to the protection of individual liberty.

With greater sensitivity to the importance of community, laws could also be used to protect communities. However, legal protection alone is unlikely to be adequate in building community. Indeed, if a society resorts too much to the legal system to resolve its problems, law could be counterproductive for community; such excess is of course not necessitated by the rule of law itself. Litigation inclines people toward selfishness by requiring them to think in terms of themselves as being
opposed to others, thus undermining trust and reducing the chances of harmonious
association thereafter. Even when functioning well, litigation often focuses on prob-
lems of economic or social distribution, material compensation, or retribution. A
community is not simply a group of people living together to optimize their share of
goods and rights vis-à-vis other groups. An individual as a member of a community
thinks not in terms of "mine and others" but in terms of "ours." A community does
not just fight for a share of the societal pie with other groups or individuals; it is
capable of creating goods shared by its members.

Communal goods may require legal protection in an environment that is hostile
or potentially hostile. But, over a long period, the frequent use of laws to protect
itself from a hostile environment is self-destructive for a community. A community
must transform its environment into one that is conducive to its own growth and the
growth of other communities; a purely defensive response to a hostile environment
will eventually undermine the quality of its own constitutive relationships and per-
vert community ties into something oppressive. The need to constantly protect itself
will lead to the development of a siege mentality of "us" versus "them," or what
Richard Sennett has called "the ethos of the ghetto." Suspicion and hostility to-
ward "outsiders" could foster an intolerance of differences internally. This would
result in relations that stifle individual creativity and the liberty of the members of a
community.

A key insight in the Analects is that laws alone, at least when they are purely
punitive, cannot create or sustain community. In Confucianism, ritual is contrasted
with punishments and, by implication, punitive laws.

The Master said, "Lead the people with administrative injunctions (zheng 故) and keep
them orderly with penal law (xing 刑) and they will avoid punishments but be without
a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (de 德) and keep them orderly through
observing ritual propriety (li 礼) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover,
will order themselves." (Analects 2.3)

Confucian leadership is concerned with more than administering a fair system of
distribution or umpiring conflicts. Exemplary leaders must combine personal accom-
plishments with the achievement of community through their authoritative conduct
(Analects 6.30). A Confucian community is achieved and sustained not through the
sanctions and punishments of a legal system, however fair it might be, but through
authoritative leadership that brings about spontaneous order among its members.
This does not mean that Confucians must totally reject the use of litigation and the
rule of law. But the coercive nature of laws implied in the penalties imposed on
transgressors renders laws inefficacious in achieving harmony, and therefore inade-
quate in creating community.

There is an unfortunate tendency to obfuscate or reduce the difference between
ritual and laws in contemporary scholarship. While stressing that there is room for
flexibility within any ideal Confucian li, many scholars nevertheless treat it as being
about "rules," external constraints imposed on individuals' behavior for the sake of
social harmony. Wm. Theodore de Bary considers li "a basic constitutional order"
and argues that “there was a considerable overlap in the conceptions of ‘rites’ and ‘laws’ in Confucian usage.” Acknowledging that Mencius used па, the modern translation for “law,” to designate “model institutions of the sage kings” as well as the laws advocated by the Legalists, de Bary, focusing on Song-Ming Neo-Confucian thought, adopts “laws(s)” as the translation of па in the Confucian context.

The further back one goes in time, the more misleading it is to view Chinese “па” according to the modern concept of “law.” Confucian па, which could be considered close to ritual, was not the tool of rational bureaucracy or brutal realpolitik; it comprised codes deeply embedded within the religious and ritual practices of the society from which they emerged. The па that could be translated as laws in the modern sense, with coercion implied in its enforcement, could only be the Legalist па or something close to it. Moreover, if we remember that the ruler is not “equal under the law” in Legalist thought, then we would be persuaded that pre-Qin Chinese thought actually had no concept of law, in the sense of “universal propositions with either descriptive or prescriptive necessity.”

It is critical to an adequate understanding of Confucian community to maintain the difference between ritual and law. Ritual operates through transformative influence, law by coercive sanctions and punishments. Historically, social institutions that have been called 仁 in traditional Chinese society were often degenerate forms that also worked through coercion. If Confucian ritual is to have contemporary meaning and use, we must move away from conceiving it in terms of coercive constraints. Only in doing so can we see that a Confucian community created and sustained by ritual is one in which its members are free. Just as personal cultivation and community creation are mutually implicated, so are community and liberty.

The difference between ritual and law reveals that when properly conducted, ritual does not deprive its participants of liberty through coercion. Despite later views that 仁 “works from the outside,” the Analects challenges the characterization of ritual as external constraints. People who were only concerned with externals exasperated Confucius, who insisted that ritual did not merely have to do with “gifts of jade and silk” (Analects 17.11). If one does not feel the appropriate emotion and adopt the appropriate attitude, there is no point in adhering to rituals, which become nothing but empty formalities (Analects 3.4, 3.26, 17.21, 19.1). Tu Wei-ming argues that there is historical and textual evidence to emphasize the dynamic process rather than the static structure of ritual. Ritual works only if the external form and internal content are balanced. Coerced performance defeats the purpose and could never amount to genuine ritual practice.

Ritual as Semiotic Structure

I have been discussing community as if it were self-evident what it is, when there exists a huge literature arguing about its definition. Liberals often complain that communitarians have no clear definition of “community.” Sometimes, when liberals claim a concern about community, communitarians disparage the adequacy of their understanding of “community.” It will not be possible to find a conception of com-
munity that will satisfy everyone. But a working understanding is certainly needed. For this, I draw on John Dewey’s understanding of community, which I consider particularly appropriate to this discussion since, for Dewey, democracy “is the idea of community itself.”

There is more than a verbal tie between common, community and communication. Men live in a community by virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common. (Democracy and Education)

A community is a regulative ideal designating a group of individuals who achieve shared goals and goods through communication and other activities among themselves and with others. Communication is of course found not only in communities. In a community, communication not only enables joint undertakings but also achieves a sharing of emotions and ideas. A Deweyan community sees its primary task as the realization of communication in the most profound way possible. Part of the difficulty of trying to distinguish a community from society or other social groups arises because the differences are mostly qualitative. It is in the quality of communication, rather than in exclusionary boundaries or oppressive homogeneity, that we will find the commonality of community.

Anthropologists have noted the centrality of communication in ritual, and ritual figures prominently in cultural approaches that are gaining influence in communication studies today. Communication involves transactions using signs. Semiotic structures give social processes, including those of community, continuity and stability. Confucian ritual is a semiotic structure. The early Chinese script for li depicts a sacrificial vessel; it referred to religious rituals practiced in ancient China. Rituals were attempts to communicate with nature, with cosmic forces, with deities and ancestors, to bring satisfactory outcomes to joint human enterprises. As Clifford Geertz observed, albeit in a different cultural context, religion is a social institution, worship a social activity, and faith a social force. Ancient Chinese religious rites were often symbolic reenactments of cooperative tasks of great import—for example, those related to the cultivation of crops or the waging of battles—in which participants also communicate with one another, acknowledging their interdependence, reaffirming their mutual trust and commitment to shared goals. According to the Zhongyong, ancestral worship clarifies and reinforces the order within the clan/family—it rehearses symbolically the attitudes that various individuals should adopt toward one another according to the way they are related.

As the “magical” element loses its importance, or credibility, human communication becomes more important and ensures the persistence of ritual. Today, engaging in ancestor worship need not mean that one believes in the ability of dead ancestors to influence our lives through occult means; the significance of the ritual can lie more in what it conveys about one’s relationship with those who have gone before us, and those who will come later. The ritual honoring of dead ancestors plays an important role in the building of what Tu Wei-ming calls a fiduciary community. In a broader context, Bruce Lincoln believes that ritual is “an authoritative
mode of symbolic discourse and a powerful instrument for the evocation of those sentiments (affinity and estrangement) out of which society is constructed. It plays an important role in sustaining human communities, and some see its loss as a critical contributing factor to various forms of social pathology and individual psychological malfunction. Some argue that rituals are necessary and inevitable phenomena in any culture.

Rituals have established and maintained the Chinese social and political realm for thousands of years. “He who understands the ceremonial sacrifices to heaven and earth, and the several sacrifices to the ancestors, would find governing a kingdom as easy as looking into his palm.” Rituals facilitate government. Angela Zito’s study of the Grand Sacrifices during the eighteenth century shows ritual as a technique of imperial rule. By establishing the emperor as the privileged exemplar of correct embodiment and perfect practice, the imperial court produced and attempted to control the meaning and value that extended to every corner of Chinese life. Such hegemonic attempts were not new in Chinese history. They varied in their success and did not go uncontested. Successful ritual hegemony is not a thing of the past; Huang Shaorong’s study of the Cultural Revolution reveals the importance of rituals in understanding the political communication in the movement. Ritual as a key form of political communication is relevant not only to Chinese politics because of its unique Confucian past; the concept has also been employed in, for example, contemporary studies of American presidential campaigns, among other things.

The effectiveness of ritual as a technique of political control is due to the state’s ability to control the semiotic structure of rituals, as well as to the pervasiveness of this structure in the daily life of the people. The significance of ritual goes beyond the political, and its results are not limited to the sinister and oppressive. Within the ritual semiotic structure lies rich possibilities for personal and communal growth. In Confucianism, ritual comprises the ways of being human that are necessary to social order. Contemporary scholars like Rothenbuhler, without any reference to Confucianism, also argue that “ritual is necessary to humane living together.” Whether in premodern China or modern societies, we find important rituals such as rites of passage celebrating birth, coming of age, marriage, and death; these mark significant moments in human life, moments of transition between key stages of the life cycle and between significant social territories. These moments of closure and beginning anew signify important changes in human relationships.

The meaning of such moments is constructed through communal participation, a sharing of ideas and emotions through ritual acts that create and strengthen the relationships that constitute community. The “coming of age” ritual embodies an acknowledgment on everyone’s part of a key development in a person’s relationship to various others and her position in the community—which implies changes in expectations and demands on her future conduct and in what she in turn may expect and demand from others. Funeral rituals embody the meaning of the life and death of the departed for the mourners. A funeral celebrates and honors the work and achievement of the departed; it expresses the grief of the living and sometimes their commitment to the continuity of the words and deeds of the dead.
Rituals—for example, those regarding dress, greetings, and behavior on various social occasions—also facilitate everyday interactions. Introducing a Royal Society of London discussion on the “Ritualization of Behavior in Animals and Man,” Julian Huxley used “ritualization” to denote the “adaptive formalization and canalization of motivated human activities so as to secure more effective communicatory (‘signaling’) function, reduction of intra-group damage, or better intra-group bonding.” Ritual is a way of mobilizing individuals “as self-regulating participants in social encounters.” As an important part of human interaction, relevant across cultures, ritual has been defined as conventional acts of display through which one or more participants communicate information concerning themselves. As a generic kind of social action, ritual is neither archaic nor exclusively Chinese. Herbert Fingarette argues that although external forms vary from culture to culture and generation to generation, there remains a vast area of human experience wherein interaction is ritual: promises, commitments, excuses, pleas, compliments, pacts. Studying ritual as a form of communication, Rothenbuhler goes so far as to claim that ritual is an aspect or element of all social action.

Some psychological studies indicate that ritual acts play a critical role in human development. Early infant learning and the subsequent ability to learn may depend on the communication that takes place in what Eric Erikson calls “the daily rituals of greeting and nurturance” between infant and caregiver. Victor Turner and Erving Goffman have analyzed various ritual elements in the everyday interaction of contemporary societies. The relevance of the concept of ritual to studies of modern societies and contemporary experience has been gaining greater acceptance among sociologists, social psychologists, and others. Anthony Giddens sees it as part of a wider sociological interest in symbolic forms rooted in the concern in philosophical, linguistic, and anthropological studies with problems of meaning.

In rituals, the meanings and values shared by the community are embodied in certain forms of speech and action and the use of certain kinds of objects. As the embodiment of shared meanings and values of specific occasions within the context of the relationships in which the participants stand to each other in their overlapping social networks, ritual guides action so that better coordination can be achieved with less effort than would be possible if one had to search anew for the appropriate way of interacting in every situation. Ritual is the outcome of, and in turn it contributes to, the striving to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events in human interactions. It does more than facilitate interaction; it structures the very way we make sense of our world and assign meanings and values to various entities, phenomena, and relationships. According to Fingarette, “we learn and practice the li of our culture not because we find it to be right, but by virtue of its defining for us what we are to value as right.”

Any set of rituals constituting a community’s total semiotic structure, exclusive and comprehensive, would imply a single valid perspective and a closed notion of human perfection, which seems to leave little room for creativity and individuality. While we should not jump to the conclusion that this automatically implies an intolerance of diversity that will lead to some form of totalitarian society, such a dan-
ger is undeniable. Should any individual or group succeed in imposing its semiotic structure on others, it would achieve hegemonic control over the latter’s sense of reality and value. Indoctrination, “brainwashing,” results in what appears as “voluntary” compliance, but is in fact the most insidious destruction of individual liberty.

Such betrayals of liberty are also detrimental to community. We could criticize them within the Confucian ritual context if we understood that ritual at its best is an artistic performance. The perversions of imposed practices become apparent when we compare them with the exemplary performances. The difference between the harmony of a community created by ritual and the indoctrinated homogeneity of a totalitarian society lies in the flexibility and creativity individuals are able to exercise within the shared semiotic structures. Confucianism is not restricted to a totalistic, closed conception of its ideal and a rigid semiotic structure of ritual grounding the ideal. The structure should be open and dynamic, leaving room for creativity and liberty. To understand better how this is possible, we need to examine more closely the artistic dimensions of ritual practice.

I do not deny that art can be used to serve the political ends of domination. All semiotic structures are vulnerable to manipulation to determine the way people who use them understand, appraise, prescribe, and consequently act. Nor is this the occasion to argue that such uses of art betray artistic ideals. Instead of arguing that liberation is essential to any artistic endeavor, this essay is making a weaker claim that, as an artistic endeavor, ritual can liberate individuals even while it harmonizes their relations for community. This essay limits itself to discussing how ritual could balance liberty and community rather than argue that it invariably does so. One’s semiotic structures may bind one with the most powerful chains that human beings have been able to fashion, or may place in one’s hands the most powerful of all instruments for individual liberation and communal reconstruction. Whether ritual achieves the balance between liberty and community in any specific case will depend largely on what individuals do as potential members of communities.

Ritual as Art

Confucian ritual is closely associated with poetry and music. In Confucian education, exemplary communication is inspired by the Songs, established through ritual and consummated in music (Analects 8.8). Confucius admonished his son, “If you do not study the Songs, you will be at a loss as to what to say” (Analects 16.13). Skill in quoting the Songs (Shi, sometimes translated as the Odes) is a form of ritual mastery. Quoting poetry or other classical works to express one’s sentiments has been a feature of Chinese banquet rituals since the Warring States period. Appropriate quotation involves the use of expressive and presentational forms the meanings of which have been shaped by previous usage, passed from generation to generation as part of the cultural legacy. Yet it is not without room for creativity: these forms, when used appropriately in new situations, have had to accommodate new meanings that enrich the present content of the forms without erasing all previous
contents. In the same way, a musical composition is richer for having been played by different master musicians without losing its identity.

The close association of ritual with poetry and music is further elaborated by Eno’s characterization of early Confucians as “masters of dance,” employing dance as a guiding metaphor in his inspiring study of early Confucianism. Dance is music and poetry in motion. “Dance, as an expressive form of thinking, sensing, feeling and moving, which may reflect or influence the individual and the society,” is an extremely appropriate metaphor for ritual practice. It is the art form that provides the best parallel to ritual both in its multisensory modalities, which enable it to engage participants at many levels of experience, and in the centrality of movement in its performance. Mencius describes moral achievement in terms of an unstoppable experience of joy that expresses itself in dance (Mencius 4A27). Book 10 of the Analects describes in loving detail the Master’s gestures, postures, bodily movements, and facial expressions. In ritual practice, the body and its parts are vehicles of meaning, embodiments of value. Through performances that fully engage the various dimensions of participants’ personalities, ritual reconstructs situations to effect affective and cognitive transformations in the relationships (between different participants as well as between participants and audience) that constitute both persons and community.

We could better understand the difference asserted earlier between indoctrination and ritual by considering the distinction between dancing mechanically (as even animals can be trained to do through operant conditioning) and dancing artistically, which requires skills in symbolization, emotional expression, agility of movement, and the ability to use syntactically novel forms without being trained in the phrases of that form. If we take the syntax of a dance “language” as “a finite system of conventions describing how the realm of semantic interpretation is related to movement realization . . . new sequences of movement and gesture never previously encountered may (nevertheless) be created and understood by the audience.” Ritual, like dance, can and should be an open, productive semiotic system that can accommodate as well as create new meanings.

The potential for innovation in ritual is recognized in the Analects, notwithstanding the popularity of conservative readings. Confucius did not reject all changes in ritual (Analects 9.3). He followed the rituals of the Zhou, who had learned and improved on the practices of earlier dynasties (Analects 3.14). For him, a teacher’s work is not merely transmitting a mumified past to future generations; the teacher must revitalize the past so that it is embodied in the different experience of the present (Analects 2.11). Confucius’ characterization of himself as a transmitter rather than a creator (shu er bu zuo 述而不作) attests more to his modesty than to a denial of creativity. Confucian sagehood is closely associated with creativity (zuo 作) in the Book of Rites: “One who creates is called sagely; one who transmits is called perspicacious. A perspicacious sage means one who transmits and creates.” Given that Confucius repeatedly denied being a sage, it is not surprising that he should also consider himself falling short of creativity. We need not be pessimistic or elitist about the human capacity for creativity.
As an artistic performance, ritual requires a creative projection of unique personality and a personal investment of meaning, which paradoxically can dissolve personal boundaries, creating altered states of consciousness often described as “self-transcendence,” wherein a soaring, oceanic sense of oneness with others, with the universe, occurs. Eno compares the ritual experience of the Great Oneness (taiyi 太一) with the modern psychological analysis of skill performance, where a similar combination of perfect self-mastery and self-transcendence is manifest.47 A merging of liberation and interpersonal harmony, which is what we are searching for in proposing that ritual could balance liberty and community, is also found in Peter Herschock’s description of improvised music, as in the Double Quartet’s “Free Jazz”:

We are not making music, but are being continuously remade, reborn by it. Losing our boundaries, slipping into incandescent concourse which is the essence of musical improvisation, we no longer anticipate or follow our fellow musicians but are released into an unmitigated oneness in which anything can occur even though absolutely nothing is lacking.48

It is in the artistic dimension of ritual that we find the improvement of the quality of relationships and the concomitant refinement of sensibilities, the sharpening of perceptions and judgment, that brings together personal and communal achievement. The balance of liberty and community achieved in consummatory ritual performances has an effect beyond these occasions. The participants are more likely on future occasions to achieve a similar balance with one another and, more difficult but still possible, with others. Ritual forms that have proved successful previously in achieving such balance could work for different groups of participants and increase their chances of success compared with situations without a similar semiotic structure.

Virtuosic Liberty in Confucian Community

What kind of liberty is being balanced with community in this discussion of the artistic dimension of ritual? To get a clearer picture of Confucian liberty, I shall focus on the process of personal cultivation, which is critical to Confucian personal-communal realization. We find an account of the process in relation to Confucius in the Analects:

The Master said: “From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of tian; from sixty my ear was attuned; from seventy, I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries. (Analects 2.4)

Personal cultivation begins with an act of liberty: “setting one’s heart-and-mind” translates “zhi,” which has also been rendered into “will” or “purpose.”49 Learning, contrary to popular misunderstanding, is not just rote learning in Confucian educa-
tion. The *Analects* stresses the need to combine reflection, thinking (*si*), with learning (*Analects* 2.15). A student must think for herself, going beyond what her teacher tells her. Confucius requires that a student, “if shown one corner, return with the other three” (*Analects* 7.8). One corner is insufficient to determine the other three without also stipulating the size of the square. A student could give a good response that the teacher never even considered. Learning involves more than uncreative following or copying. At the risk of overinterpreting, this is a suggestive aspect of Confucius’ metaphor of teaching-learning.

Taking one’s stance requires orienting oneself to the rest of the world; it involves finding or creating a proper place for oneself in a wider, emerging scheme of things. This is done through ritual, with its combination of constraint in the form of self-discipline and creativity in endowing each act with personal significance. Having a sense of one’s place in a wider scheme of things means greater coherence in one’s experience; one can make better sense of what is happening and thereby find one’s way forward without being “in doubt.” “Realizing the propensities of tian” is both understanding our social and natural environment on an extensive scale and being able to “fit” in, not passively, but by actively interacting with it. The picture of liberty emerging is one of smooth interaction with one’s environment. One becomes more free, more powerful, when obstructions decrease or are more easily dissolved in the communicative processes between oneself and the rest of the world.

Personal-communal cultivation achieves virtuosity in communication, in interacting with one’s environment. Hence, Confucius’ “ear was attuned” from sixty. The *Shuowen* lexicon gives the meaning of sheng 聰 as “to communicate” (*tong* 通). The “sage” is associated with virtuosity in hearing and speaking (communication). The “ear” (*er* 耳) component associates the sage with “hearing” (*ting* 聴) and “keenness of hearing” (*cong* 聴). Keenness of hearing, indicating a more general sensitivity, is associated with intelligence (*congming* 明 in modern Mandarin). To be intelligent, to be good at solving problems, interacting better with the environment, is to be keen of hearing (sensitive) and clear-sighted (perceptive). This virtuosity is the liberty to achieve one’s goals and to have goals that are more “in tune” with our environment. The goals are “in tune” through a process of mutual rather than one-sided adjustment. A sage attunes himself to the world by sometimes “tuning” the world and sometimes “tuning” himself.

Confucius, “from seventy, followed what his heart-and-mind desired without overstepping the boundaries.” This is the highest level of virtuosic liberty. It is greater in scope and finer in quality than the liberty of “setting his heart-and-mind on learning.” Following one’s desires without overstepping the boundaries is a situation where mastery of skills transcends rules without lapsing into arbitrariness; it is not about the mechanical compliance resulting from a complete “internalization” of externally imposed rules. Confucius’ freedom is not that of a man who grew to love his chains—a case of “internalizing” coercive external constraints. Internalization through conditioning results in rigid behavior. In situations that do not map exactly onto the landscape in which conditioning has taken place, the judgment of what is
appropriate is impaired, and response lacks efficacy. Virtuosic liberty may begin with the application of rules. If the application requires a secondary set of rules of application, one would be trapped in an infinite regress. The appropriate application of rules in practice is an art that has to be mastered experientially. One does not overstep the boundaries at the stage that Confucius was supposed to have achieved at seventy not just because successful personal-communal cultivation has ensured that one’s desires are all ethical, but also because one’s improved judgment of where the boundaries are in any situation is also superior to others. The sage’s ethical leadership becomes especially important in new situations. A sage sets the ethical standards by leading the way in showing others where these boundaries are.

One may force another to follow a way, but she cannot be coerced into “realizing (zhì 知) it” (Analects 8.9), which requires integrating the way with one’s experience through learning and reflecting, and developing the understanding and judgment to respond appropriately to any situation. “Becoming authoritative in one’s conduct [i.e., personal-communal cultivation] is self-originating, how could it originate with others?” (Analects 12.1). It is not surprising that Zhang Dongsun and others identified zìde 自得, “getting it in, by, and for oneself,” as the closest Confucian equivalent of “liberty.”52 As Mencius described the process, “an exemplary person steeps himself in the way because he wishes to attain it in himself. When he attains it in himself, he will be at ease in it; when he is at ease in it, he can draw deeply upon it; when he can draw deeply upon it, he finds its source wherever he turns.”53 When the way is in oneself, it is constantly renewed, for it flows from, and with, one’s experience; it becomes one’s experience, made more coherent and more meaningful through cultivating oneself.

While personal cultivation cannot be accomplished in isolation, the contribution of others must come in the form of efficacious communication. Any attempt to “force people to be free” or to determine through coercion or indoctrination a person’s semiotic structures and consequent behavior would be self-defeating as a means to liberty. We may illustrate this with Mencius’ story of the man from Song “who pulled at his rice plants because he was worried about their failure to grow.”54 The man thought he was “helping the rice plants grow” when, in fact, he was killing them. Plants sometimes grow better with human interference—through watering when rain is insufficient, digging trenches to drain the soil when rain is too abundant, fertilizing, et cetera—but pulling at them is not one of the ways to help them grow. Others may help us cultivate ourselves—by deliberately teaching us, unintentionally providing a model or an example of what not to do, providing various needed economic and social conditions, challenging our views, criticizing our actions—but coercion and indoctrination will not help us become cultivated. It is one’s own efforts and success in integrating learning with reflection, thereby improving both sensitivity and judgment, that make the achievement a realization of oneself rather than the making of an automaton following good orders efficiently. It is only when cultivated relational individuals ritually communicate and participate in joint endeavors with virtuosic liberty that there is Confucian community.
Notes

A shorter version of this article was presented as a paper at the 2001 Beijing International Conference on Political Philosophy, organized by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Philosophy Summer School in China, and published in Mandarin under the title, “Liberty versus Community: A Confucian Perspective on Democracy’s Dilemma,” in a volume of selected conference papers (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Science Press, 2003). This revised article has benefited from the comments of the PEW reviewers and my colleagues at the National University of Singapore. Any remaining errors and omissions are solely my responsibility.


15 – But some consider the rule of law more committed to individual liberty than democracy, and it is at best ambiguous about the value of community; at worst it “sustains elitist politics, with its impoverished sense of community” (Allan Hutchinson and Patrick Monahan, “Democracy and the Rule of Law,” in *The Rule of Law: Ideal or Ideology* [Toronto: Carswells, 1987], p. 111).


19 – Chad Hansen, “*Fa* (Standards: Laws) and Meaning Changes in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 44 (3) (July 1994): 459.


25 – According to Saussure, a sign is a vehicle (signifier) carrying a meaning (signified) (Ferdinand Saussure, *Cours de linguistique generale* [Paris: Payot, 1916]). Peirce defines a sign as “something which stands to somebody for something in

26 – Liji 32.13/144/17.


29 – Liji 32.13/144/21–22; author’s translation.


32 – Rothenbuhler, Ritual Communication, p. 129.


34 – On Xunzi’s view of the mourning and sacrificial rites, see A. S. Cua, “Dimensions of Li (Propriety): Reflections on an Aspect of Hsun Tzu’s Ethics,” Philosophy East and West 29 (4) (October 1979): 387–388. On the importance of continuing one’s parents’ works according to the Confucian view of filiality, see Tu Wei-ming, Confucianism in an Historical Perspective (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophy, 1989), p. 41.


42 – Ibid., p. 244.


intentionally rhythmical, and (3) [a] culturally patterned sequence of (4a) the body movements (4b) other than ordinary motor activities, (4c) the motion having inherent and artistic value.”

45 – Ibid., pp. 34–35.


49 – There are some problems with treating zhi as a faculty, but as an activity, even if it is not exactly equivalent to choosing and willing, it overlaps with the activities that fall under these Western descriptions.

50 – For the link between “taking a stance (li)” with ritual practice, see *Analects* 8.8, 16.13, 20.3. Literally, how one stands in any ritual performance is also always a critical factor of its excellence.


