


BOOK REVIEW

Metaphor and Meaning: Thinking Through Early China with Sarah Allan

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Metaphor and Meaning: Thinking Through Early China with Sarah Allan is part of a three-book series, with *Myth and the Making of History: Narrating Early China with Sarah Allan* and *Bone, Bronze, and Bamboo: Unearthing Early China with Sarah Allan*, that celebrates the prolific Allan and “the integral role she has played in the immense growth and development of early China as a field” (xi). *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (1997) is one of Allan’s better-known works. In it, she articulates the importance of the two metaphors of water and plants in early Chinese intellectual history. Building on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), she convincingly argues that, whereas Western intellectual history is (often) predicated on transcendent–immanent dichotomies, like Plato’s perfect forms versus imperfect instantiations of those forms, or the perfect Christian God versus imperfect human lives, Chinese intellectual history is (often) predicated on natural images, comparing ideal human becoming to the flow of water and the development of plants. This is the “metaphor” meant in the title *Metaphor and Meaning*.

In a *Festschrift* such as this one, it is not uncommon to have a mix of contributions, some technical and some for general audiences. At the risk of oversimplifying, I’ll divide the eleven chapters of *Metaphor and Meaning* in this way, with chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9 as more general, and chapters 2, 6, 7, 10, and 11 as more technical.

In Chapter 1, Erica Brindley describes her goal thus: “Rather than analyze the concrete image of water itself as a metaphor, I discuss watery actions and modes of being—movements and activities associated with the Dao of the cosmos, such as creativity, spontaneity, and flow” (1). She primarily looks at two excavated texts, dated to about 300 BCE, *Hengxian* 恆先 (Primordial State of Constancy) and *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水 (Taiyi Gives Birth to Water), but also includes the received texts *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and *Huainanzi* 淮南子. She examines creativity and spontaneity via narratives of cosmogony: *Hengxian* has a spontaneous cosmogony, while *Taiyi shengshui* (ostensibly) has a creator deity to get the ball rolling. The problem in both narratives is human activity that contravenes the natural order, and salvation is found by returning to its “flow.” While the framing of philosophical Daoism as “religious”

(2–3), and as “spiritual” (15), depend upon one’s definitions of fuzzy, undefined terms like “religious,” “spiritual,” “secular,” “divine,” and “Divine,” the chapter is nevertheless a good analysis of Daoist thought.

In Chapter 3, Gil Raz examines the metaphors of forward-flowing and backward-flowing water and how they relate to medieval religious Daoist depictions of both health and government. Raz examines several texts, beginning with the *Nüqing guilü* 女青鬼律 (Demon Statues of Lady Blue; ca. 300 CE), and concludes that religious.

Daoists saw themselves as fighters in a cosmic battle against hordes of ghosts and demons ... [who] are nourished by backward-flowing *qi*, stale, or old *qi*, or improper control of *qi*. On a metaphoric level these ghosts and demons are manifestations of chaos, due to the lack of proper governance in the world. The illnesses caused by these ghosts and demons are therefore metaphors for the absence of good government” (66–67).

The literal versus metaphorical divide in religion is a perennially interesting topic, and Raz does a good job carrying Allan’s insight forward several hundred years into an entirely different intellectual milieu.

In Chapter 4, Edmund Ryden seeks to “argue the case for *li* 理 (principle, pattern) as the third basic metaphor of Chinese philosophy, thus allowing the full development of Chinese thought” (75). Ryden explains that “Etymologically, [*li*] is the pattern in a piece of jadeite. The value of jade, its presence in the tombs, and its overall significance surely suggest that the natural patterns in it were studied and gave rise to thinking about the patterns (*li*) of veins that run through each object ... and, by extension, through the whole universe” (85). While I’m not convinced that the patterns in rocks and wood are “alive” (86)—except, perhaps, metaphorically—Ryden’s argument that the metaphors of water and plants are sometimes hampered by their proclivity to typically move downward and upward, respectively, and that the “principle” of rock vein and wood grain (particularly in gnarled wood) can run in any direction, is a good one.

In Chapter 5, Roger Ames interrogates the metaphor of the reciprocity between humans and nature (or heaven: *tian* 天) or, more specifically, the “correlation between the sages and the celestial order (*tianming* 天命)” (93). He asks a question of Allan, and us: “since the relationship between *tian* and human beings is irreducibly collateral, we have to ask: ... what does *tian* get in this relationship from human beings?” and argues that “if ‘correlative’ and ‘resonance’ (*ganying*) in fact mean to be mutually shaping and being shaped, we must challenge a familiar unilaterality as defining of a dualistic *tianren* relationship in which human beings are affected by it but *tian* is not” (95). Although I wish Ames, as with Brindley in Chapter 1, would define words like “religion,” “numinous,” and “divinity”—and I’ve never understood what the difference might be between “pantheism” (95) and “atheism,” since if “God” is everything, then it is nothing in particular—this is a great question. After exploring similarities between Confucianism and Emerson’s Transcendentalism, and then several early Confucian texts, Ames suggests that sagely humans can in fact “broaden” (弘) heaven/nature (*tian* 天) by “continuing and carrying out” (繼) its workings. I think Ames is implying that the evolution of sagely human ethical norms is actually improving the cosmos. Any historian who engages with world religions should read this excellent chapter.

In Chapter 8, Shirley Chan analyzes the Tsinghua Bamboo manuscript *Tang chuyu* *Tangqiu* 湯處於湯丘 (Tang Resides Near the Mound of Tang; ca. 300 BCE) for the use of historicity and metaphor. The Warring States era Tsinghua Bamboo manuscripts (清

華簡) are excavated texts that were acquired by Tsinghua University in 2008 and are being published in thirteen volumes. Chan defines “historicity” as “past events presented through varied forms such as history, myth, or popular memory with the purpose of presenting philosophical and political agendas rather than accurately representing factual events” (p. 165). The primary metaphor that Chan looks at is that of good cooking for good government: both require a “harmonization” (和) of disparate elements, whether various ingredients or a variety of citizens. In the text under examination here, the mytho-historical Shang King Tang promotes his cook Yi Yin to minister because the king recognizes this shared principle. Chan also investigates the somewhat related connection between “moral integrity” or “moral quality” (德) and illness (疾).

In Chapter 9, Cheung Kwong-yue notes how ancient archery contests were construed as a metaphor for how virtuous people live. The archery contest seems to have had seven parts: 1. the archery supervisor requests the contest; 2. three pairs of archers wait their turn to shoot; 3. the archery supervisor guides the contest; 4. the losers drink; 5. the winner is rewarded; 6. music is played; 7. the archers toast one another (191). These seven steps demonstrate orderliness, collegiality, rule-following, how to lose gracefully, how to win gracefully, the harmony-inducing effects of musical performances, and good sportsmanship. Cheung concludes: “The long history of the archery ritual involves the essentialized blend of ritual, music, and virtue and not simply the art of archery. The deeper meanings found hidden in the bounty of traditional culture have the power to correct the human heart and create changes in ways that should not be ignored” (197).

Turning to the more technical chapters, Vivienne Lo and Gu Man in Chapter 2 begin with a discussion of the cosmogonical text *Taiyi shengshui* 太一生水 (Taiyi Creates Water) that was examined in Chapter 1. Following Donald Harper’s 2001 exegesis,¹ they highlight the metaphor of *shen ming* 神明 as “the spiritual and intellectual core of a human being,” i.e., “consciousness” (24) and, later, as a “radiant way of being-in-the-world” (25). (*Shen ming* is a slippery phrase that Harper translates as “spirit illumination” and defines as “the limitless responsiveness of a numinousness that is everywhere in the cosmos—including particularized spirits—and in the human microcosm,” and Brindley translates as “the numinous and bright” (9).) The physical basis of these epiphenomena is concretely manifested in a ca. 150 BCE lacquer figurine excavated at Laoguanshan 老官山 that specifies a number of acupuncture points, some of which suggest the metaphor of the flow of water for the flow of *qi* 氣 throughout the body. With help from the medical classic *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (ca. 50 CE?), Lo and Gu conclude that the movement of *qi* and blood to and from the stomach mirrors the hydrological cycle in nature (39).

In Chapter 6, Constance Cook analyzes the ca. 1200 BCE Huayuanzhuang dongdi 花園莊東地 (HD) excavated oracle bones for evidence that turtles used for divination were metaphors not just for the cosmos, as Allan argued (a turtle plastron is roughly square, which can denote the “four directions”), but also for the human body. (Cook describes such turtles as both “divine” and “gods” but again, without defining such terms.) More specifically, Cook argues for a correlation between the turtle plastron and the king’s body, between the cauterization of the turtle plastron in divination and the health of the king, which seems something like acupuncture by proxy (though

¹ Donald Harper, “The Nature of Taiyi in the Guodian Manuscript *Taiyi sheng shui*: Abstract Principle or Supreme Cosmic Deity?” *Chūgoku shutsudo shiryō kenkyū* 5 (2001): 1–23.

acupuncture hadn't been invented yet). Another metaphor that Cook pursues in the HD corpus is the connection between various images of "binding" and healing. In a concluding speculation, she suggests that Shang-era "yu-exorcisms may have involved twisting or other movements that warded off ghosts and bound the site against their influence" (138). Though rather technical, this is cutting-edge scholarship.

In Chapter 7, Chen Wei shares his notes on how the Tsinghua Bamboo manuscript *Xin shi wei Zhong* 心是謂中 (The Heart is Called the Center) should be read. This is a great example of how excavated texts, after official publication, are pored over by scholars who go on to suggest alternative readings that can substantially alter our understanding of the text. For example, for anyone who teaches classical Chinese, the title itself is problematic because *shi* 是 does not typically mean "is" as it does in modern Chinese. If you have never read transcription notes on an excavated text before, this chapter can serve as a perfect primer. (And if you like this kind of article, the journal *Bamboo and Silk*—either the online Chinese version or the English version published by Brill—is for you.)

In Chapter 10, Han Yujiao analyzes two graphs in the Huayuanzhuang dongdi (HD) oracle bone corpus. The first is the graph *ge* 革, which he concludes "represents both the animal sacrifice and the method of cutting open the animal skin and removing the fur" (202–3). The second is *pi* 皮, which the HD editors take to be a place-name, but which Han argues is "a verb of sacrifice" (203). After these two points, Han comments on the fact that one particular diviner used a different method for making cracks in turtle plastrons. From this observation he infers that the Shang court did not enforce a single style of crack-making, but rather allowed a certain degree of individuality.

In the final chapter, Rudolf Wagner examines the evolution of the graph *gu* 故 ("therefore, this is why"). Using two sections of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 and the *Laozi* 老子 as sample representatives of narrative and argumentative texts, respectively, Wagner details how this word was used. He specifies three main situations where *gu* is employed: "explanations for the occurrence of an historical event," "explanations for the presence or absence of statements or formulations in texts, accepted by the author as authoritative," and "explanations supporting the validity of an abstract conceptual statement" (221–22). After considering examples from all three situations, he hypothesizes that "a vastly expanded argumentative toolbox developed during the Warring States period that became standardized and routinized since the Western Han" and that "Within this toolbox, *gu* ... played the role of a function word that provided the linkage between an *explicandum* [i.e., the thing that needs explaining] and an *explicans* [i.e., the explanation], rather than between a cause and an effect as scholarly convention has it" (233). If you are interested in the early history of Chinese grammar, or Wagner's earlier theory of "interlocking parallel style," then this chapter is for you.

Overall, this is an eclectic selection of articles by a number of good scholars. The wide range of the topics is itself a testament to how wide-ranging Allan's research has been and continues to be.