

# Empty Time: Canon as Sacred History

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a brief but, interesting look at developments in music (and architecture and art) in relation to canon (its constituents-order and multiplicity) and the hermeneutic effects of Sinologists looking at Chinese canonical texts and history books as canon. Developments away from explicit canon to a framelessness (music as weather—process no beginning, middle or end) still have an implicit echo of purpose and still recover the same sacred.

## KEY WORDS

canon

surface

Liu Xiang

framelessness

Multiplicity

Shi Kuang

John Cage

*Zhouyi Xici*

hermeneutics

Han China

sacred history

sage

music as an object having parts, to music without beginning, middle, or end; music as weather” (Cage 244). In this framelessness Cage is kept good company by Morton Feldman and Mark Rothko in the architecture and music for the Houston “Rothko Chapel” of 1971. With them, modern art has in an unstructured, unpredictable, and indetermined way regained what we could unhesitatingly call “a sacred locus.” Thus it would seem only superficial to think that modern art had succeeded in doing so by rejecting such canonical corner-stones as “places where attention is given to spiritual matters” and “the action of memory.” But as the 1991 CBC interview shows,<sup>6</sup> it is John Cage who elaborates on that which makes *Bach* and especially *Mozart* so “canonical,” namely *order* and *multiplicity*.

## 2

Sinologists devoted to ancient Chinese scriptures are, like John Cage and the canonical European composers, on a continent different in space, history, and language from the very texts of their readings. Sometimes in their silent private deciphering we can hear them hum their litanies and rosaries. They are “now more than ever” in a dire need for poetry and *philosophy* and what Pierre Hadot, the teacher of Foucault, would call *exercices spirituels*.<sup>7</sup> This seems to be one of the reasons why they take their refuge in ancient, that is, in many cases sacred philosophy. They delve into pre-Han literature to join in the process of the making of Chinese literature itself, as if they were calling for the rebirth of their deadly threatened environment in saying “It” afresh for the sake of survival for the generations to come. The textual surfaces they scratch are very much like the line-drawings of Han lacquer-ware, with each of a thousand lines being self-sufficient in its fragmentariness and minuteness, not a single curl flowing together with the individual course of the other. But forming an entire panel, the whole texture of lines and curls takes on one unique rhythm. The fabric and borders of the tiniest textual portions, that still reside independently in the Han court-librarians’ canonical chapters, can in many cases be made visible by modern synopses of related texts in the

form they were edited by, say Liu Xiang (79-8 B. C.): There is in the making of scriptural unity a tendency towards order, although most often the scriptures, in their pre-Han and Han forms, preserve the multiplicity and independence of each poetical and commentarial textual unit. If you have a *textual* eye for Han lacquer-ware, then it will be all the more advantageous to read the texts of ancient Chinese philosophers of the same time as if they were panels of lacquer-ware consecrated in tombs.<sup>8</sup>

### 3

Let me present you with an example for this subtle *multiplicity* of readings. In the traditional edition of the *Zhouyi* appendix, the *Xici*, there are the following famous lines:

“子曰：書不盡言，言不盡意。然則聖人之意，其不可見乎。” (*Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 82:c)

“The Master said: ‘Writing does not exhaust words, and words do not exhaust ideas. If this is so, does this mean that the ideas of the sages cannot be discerned?’ The Master said: ‘The sages established images in order to express their ideas exhaustively. They established the hexagrams in order to treat exhaustively the true innate tendency of things and their countertendencies to spuriousness. They attached phrases to the hexagrams in order to exhaust what they had to say. They let change occur and achieve free flow in order to exhaust the potential of the benefit involved. They made a drum of it, made a dance of it, and so exhausted the potential of its numinous power.’” (Lynn 67)

Among the archaeological finds in a Han tomb at Mawangdui there is a different version of the *Xici*. The deviation from the above quoted passage in the first lines is small, but significant:

“子曰：書不盡言，言不盡意。然則聖人之意，其意

可見已乎。” (*Mawangdui Hanmu wenwu* 馬王堆漢墓文物 123)

“The Master said: “writing does not exhaust words, and words do not exhaust ideas. If this is so, does this mean that the ideas of the sages . . . that *their* ideas can be fully discerned?”

Through the use of the additional particle *yi* (已), “fully,” the repetition of the word *yi* in “*qi yi* (其意), “their ideas”, and the replacement of the negation by an affirmation in the last phrase of the proverb quoted, the “curl” of this passage bends into another direction than does the traditional one in that it elicits the question, why the sense and meaning of the *shengren*, *the sages*, is so dramatically important—which the traditional text does not. Every text and context is laden with meaning that is never entirely understood. Using the trails of the textual surface to reach back to it as far as possible is a well known hermeneutic and every-day enterprise common to any reading of scriptures, of leading dialogues, and of interpretation at any given time or place. After 2,000 years of persistency of the traditional text, in the Mawangdui version the problem seems to be shifting now from the inherent scepticism of this hermeneutical proposition to the distinction of and precise attention to one special type of sense and meaning that is alone historically decisive: that of *the sages*. The accent is not put on the question whether *sense and meaning* of the sages *can be exhausted through words and scriptures*, but on the question whether *sense and meaning of the sages can*. The text seems to take it for granted that other species of sense and meaning are anyhow either exhaustible or less important. Since the *Xici* appendix is to be understood as an instruction for the use of one of the canonical books, what makes these books canonical is *the sageness* of their meaning. Let us recoin this into John Cage’s statement: The capability of the early canon of “astonishing some listeners spiritually” arises either from the fact that it is used “in places where they are giving attention to spiritual matters,” or it is “because of the action of memory.” The “action of memory” points to the *historical* dimension of

the sacredness of the canon, just as memory in listening to the music of Bach points not only to the full realization of the art of the fugue itself, but also to the high integrity and order of the world, which we cannot afford to be forgetful of.

#### 4

Ban Gu (32-92), in his “Gu jin ren biao” chapter, “Table of men in ancient and late times,” in the *Hanshu*, the *Book of the Han*, makes up a three times three pattern, that vertically maps out nine types of a total of about 2,000 historical figures from most elevated sages down to the crudest and most dangerous foolhardiness, and horizontally a time scale from ancient pre-dynastic antiquity to the end of the Warring States period. Among the sages, there are the pre-dynastic culture heroes, the early kings of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, the duke of Zhou, and as the last of the sagely paragons, Confucius. After him, the deterioration of history becomes all too obvious, and the lower ranks are more and more filled with crafty personnel.

There is a provocative thesis on this chapter and Ban Gu’s (班固) point of view of Chinese history by Professor Wagner of the Institute of Chinese Studies at Heidelberg University.<sup>9</sup> Prof. Wagner concludes that this table reflected Ban Gu’s sensitivity for the end of history or at least that taste of scepticism and high emergency that should incite the best of the knowing to save China from the eternal abyss and hell by simply congealing the last state of historiographically definable affairs.

Without this result the following question would not have emerged. Is it not possible that Ban Gu at the same time still wanted to say something quite different, namely, that history was in the last resort a canonical narrative determined by the measure of sagesness, or simply “sacred history?” If we add this question to the *Xici* remark just mentioned—and Prof. Wagner himself underlined that Ban Gu could not be treated outside this horizon—, then it seems to be quite clear that Ban Gu was not simply branding his own culture because it was so deterrently devastating, but that he had a clear understanding

and a canonical standard or criterion not only for what sacredness and sageness had *once* been, but still validly *were* at the time of his own writing of Chinese history.

There is another question closely connected to this one. To Ban Gu, writing history means writing a book. According to the *Xici* passage mentioned above, writing a book at its best means entrusting the sense and meaning of the sages to the most flimsy medium of tradition. ut since words and verbal teachings have gone with the wind and the last sage died some 700 years ago, there is no other way than constructing the architecture of the sacred locus-or the “place where they are giving attention to spiritual matters” and take care of the “action of memory” -in the long run of the centuries in a *history* book. Thus, in this respect, the history book takes on the same function as does the rest of the canon. Moreover, it is itself a canonical memorial stone of sacredness and sageness. Its validity is thus not confined to contemporary political or moral criticism, just as Confucius cannot be fenced in an enlightened cluster of *moral* conceptions, as Henry Rosemont, Jr., has pointed out in his essay, “Against Relativism.”<sup>10</sup> So, we can conclude that there is, stringed to the same historical, canonical, and scriptural thread, the empty time of sacredness and sageness, that could aptly guide the Western sinologist’s humming of his litanies and rosaries, when he is professionally deciphering Chinese commentaries on the *Canon of Changes* or the *Book of the Han*.

## 5

According to an account in the “Bo zhi” chapter in the *Lüshi chunqiu*, Kongzi, Mozi, and Ningyue were visited by the demons of King Wen and the Duke of Zhou, the last sages of the Zhou dynasty, at night after they had been reciting and teaching the scriptures all day long. But in their “prayers,” the ancient Chinese are not, like the Jews and the Greeks, expected to thee-and-thou the gods. There can be a sometimes dreadful, sometimes joyous, and sometimes even ironic distance from the gods and spirits. In his book, *Chinese Ideas of Life and Death*, Michael Loewe writes:

“There seems to have been no conscious sense of gratitude to a god or spirit in return for unsought blessings or for benefits received as a result of prayer.” (17)

No angel would appear through the power of prayer, as Gabriel did to Zachary and Mary in the gospel of St. Luke, at the same time germinating holy beings in the carnal bodies of men. But after the donor of a ritual and the liturgical actors of the dead had been fasting, exercising, and preparing for days the vessels and music, the presence of gods and spirits in the ritual hall could be of an overwhelming closeness. In some of the literature of the 4th century B. C., the sacrificial characteristics of the ritual hall, that had to be swept accurately to assure an undisturbed epiphany of a god or spirit, were transformed into those of the heart of man who had to fast and “whiten,” before great spiritual endeavour would bear fruit. But, in the last resort, the spirits themselves would always be more thoughtful and shrewd than the best of ordinary men.

There is one significant exception to this rule. One of the most solemn declarations of it, that promulgates the quasi “philosophical” definition of sacredness and sageness for the purpose of “the arts of the heart,” the “*xinshu*, can be found in the first four lines of the *Neiye*, *Inner Exercise*, a text that was probably composed during the second half of the 4th century B. C.,<sup>11</sup> transmitted independently before the Han, and only after some 300 years incorporated in the *Guanzi* by Liu Xiang:

“It is ever so that the essence of things [*jing*] is what gives them life. Below it gives life to the five grains; above it creates the ranked stars. When floating between Heaven and earth, we call it the spirit. When stored in the breast [of a person], we call it the sage.” (Rickett 158)

These lines could be treated as a sort of foundational article for the canonization movement of the “arts of the heart.” When sages of

this kind act, they are the leaders of the ritual dance to the best of the dynastic empire. Before the dawning of the Eastern Han, there were several candidates for sages, whose ancient face had to be that of the ritual dancing mask and whose present face had to be that of the godly sovereign needed for the ensurance of the prosperity of the ecumenical triad of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Only a few characters after the *Xici* passage quoted above, the old face of the sage once more emerges from the dust of antiquity. The images of the *Canon of Changes* being installed and their gnomons appended, the sages would “bedance them and bedrum them.” In the “*Yu Lao*” commentary on the *Laozi*, later edited as part of the book *Han Feizi*, Wang Shou, a private collector of books, at the advice of a certain Xu Bing having burned all his scriptures, “dances joyously.”

1,000 years later, the famous Chan-master Dongshan Liangjie (807-869) forbade his pupils in a *gatha* to make themselves “new circles and squares,” i.e., in the etymological sense of the ancient Greek word *Kanôn*, to make themselves “new canons.” In the same *gatha* there is the line: “When the wooden man bursts out into song, the stone woman rises to dance.” The same figures recur time and again in the sacred history of the canon.

## 6

In his “Lecture on Nothing” (1959), John Gage writes:

“We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment, it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition? Only if we thought we owned it, but since we don’t, it is free, and so are we.”<sup>12</sup> (*Silence* 110f.)

The most celebrated human music-master and wise counsellor of princes in the literature of pre-Han times is Shi Kuang, who served the kings of Jin in the 6th century B. C. In the *Shiji, Memoirs of the Court-Scribe*, Sima Qian tells a canonical story about him, that in-



cludes the following passage:

“Shi Kuang beat the Qin zither. As he was playing the first sequence of the piece, two rows of black cranes gathered in the door of the corridor. As he was playing the second sequence of the piece, they stretched out their necks and cawed and spread their wings and danced.”

After that, Shi Kuang interrupts the performance and asks his aristocratic listeners not to let him conclude. The highly virtuous nature of the piece would surely be to the detriment of his lord’s state and person. But the marquis forces him to go on. Sima Qian writes:

“Shi Kuang took up his Qin zither and beat it. As he was playing the first sequence, white clouds drew near from the north-west. As he was playing the second sequence, furious winds approached, and heavy showers of rain ensued. The tiles flew off the corridor, and all the ministers took to flight. The marquis trembled with fear and hid away in a room at the side of the corridor.”<sup>13</sup>

“We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment, it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition?” The reappearance of canonical truth at the end of the 20th century-of order, as in the music of Bach, or of multiplicity, as in the music of Mozart, or framelessness and silence, as in the paintings and architecture of Mark Rothko and the music of Morton Feldman for “Rothko Chapel,” seems to recover virtuous and sacred locuses in a world that is now mainly deprived of them. If time is empty just in the way Cage understood it, the sciences may have their difficulties in realizing it, but in practice, the music-masters may still celebrate it—music as weather,” as that of Shi Kuang and John Cage.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Cage on Colin McPhee in a German TV documentation.

See *Im Banne fernöstlicher Musik*.

<sup>2</sup> Re-written in time-line representation by John Cage under the title "Music Without Horizon: Soundscape that Never Stops (1991)." See Cage, *Writer-Previously Uncollected Pieces* 267-81.

<sup>3</sup> This is a formula that Anne Gibson used.

<sup>4</sup> A pianist, who was in many cases the first performer of Schönberg's piano pieces.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278. Gage himself points to the crucial importance, that the following books had for him: *Emptiness—a Study in Religious Meaning* and *Wittgenstein and Buddhism*. See Streng and Gudmunsen.

<sup>6</sup> And this is what brings Cage close to Swjatoslaw Richter, who didn't feel the need to play anything but Bach in his *last* years.

<sup>7</sup> See Hadot.

<sup>8</sup> This statement does, of course, not go for late Han commentaries and those after.

<sup>9</sup> See Wagner.

<sup>10</sup> See Rosemont 36-70.

<sup>11</sup> After the discovery of the Jingmen *Laozi* manuscript in 1993, which, according to Chinese Publications, dates from the middle Zhanguo period, i.e. the second half of the 4th century B. C., the *Neiye* should probably be dated somewhat earlier than that.

<sup>12</sup> This lecture was first printed in *Incontri musicali* (August 1959). My quotation here is from *Silence*.

<sup>13</sup> For the complete story see Takegawa, *Shiki kaichü kōshō* (*Shiji huizhu kaozheng*) 72-75; for a translation see Chavannes 287-290.

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