

MAUSS OR BATAILLE?
GIFT, SACRIFICE, AND FEASTING ACROSS
CHINA AND THE NORTHWEST COAST¹

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The types of man which we find on the North Pacific Coast of America, while distinctly American, show a great affinity to North Asiatic forms, and the question arises, whether this affinity is due to mixture, to migration, or to gradual differentiation. The culture of the area shows many traits that suggest a common origin, while others indicate diverse lines of development [...]. [W]hat influence the inhabitants of one continent may have exerted on those of the other are problems of great magnitude.

Franz Boas, *The Jesup North Pacific Expedition*,
vol. 1, 1898

We are still faced with the question of [...] whether these hierarchical societies based on prestige appeared independently in different parts of the world, or whether some of them do not share a common cradle [...] I think that the similarities between the art of archaic China and that of the Northwest Coast [...] are too marked for us not to keep this possibility in mind [...]. It would not be a diffusion of details – that is, independent traits traveling

1 I have visited several Native American areas around Vancouver Island in 1994, 1999, 2002, 2005, and 2016, participating in one Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch on the island of Alert Bay. I thank the following Kwakwaka'wakw leaders for taking the time to sit through my interviews with them: Gloria Webster Cranmer, the great granddaughter of George Hunt, who was an invaluable research partner of Franz Boas; Chief John Smith of the Tlowitsis Nation, and artist Wayne Alfred, who let me watch him carve a wooden mask on Alert Bay.

2 I am deeply grateful to François Gauthier, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Feng (Gilbert) Qu, and Zhichun Jing for valuable comments and reference suggestions for my paper.

each on its own and disconnected freely from any one culture in order to be linked to another – but a diffusion of organic wholes wherein style, esthetic convention, social organization, and religion are structurally related.

Claude Lévi-Strauss,
Structural Anthropology, 1963

Several scholars have noted the striking similarities in the art motifs of Northwest Coast Native American cultures and those found on bronze ritual vessels of the Shang (商朝) and Western Zhou (周朝) Dynasties in China in the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE³. However, there are as yet no historical or archaeological evidence to suggest any direct contact or diffusion of these art motifs. The above epigraphs from respected anthropologists, Franz Boas and Claude Lévi-Strauss, encourage me to add a new angle to this discussion of possible links across cultures separated by significant time and space. I focus here on their cultures of gifting, feasting, and ritual expenditures, including the later interpretations by the early Confucians (6th-1st c. BCE), who sought to reinvent Western Zhou culture. This exploration across the continents of Asia and North America will be conducted with the help of two important theorists of the gift and sacrifice: Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille.

Both Mauss and Bataille were especially inspired by what anthropologists call *potlatches* or clan feasts of the Northwest Coast, each developing a different theoretical approach to understanding the significance of archaic gifts, sacrifice, and banquets. Mauss wrote the classic book *The Gift* (1925), which drew from ethnographic reports of non-Western societies around the world. Fewer scholars are familiar with the surrealist writer and philosopher, Georges Bataille (1985, 1989a, 1989b, 1993), who was influenced by Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Mauss' *The Gift*. The deep inspiration he gained from Friedrich Nietzsche led Bataille to appreciate the transgressive and ecstatic components of archaic religions (Biles & Brintnall, 2015; Lingus, 2015; Richman, 2002), thus he both extended as well as subtly undermined these other thinkers.

3 The word “China” is employed here as a convenient term, with the awareness that back in the Bronze Age, there were no “Chinese” people or identities, the area of China was divided into different states, tribes, clan territories, and so forth, with little unity outside the Shang or Zhou territory, until the Qin military unification of the Six Warring States by the First Emperor in 221 BCE, the beginning of China's centralized empire.

I will highlight Bataille's contribution, which is especially relevant to both ancient China and 19th century Northwest Coast cultures: excessive ritual expenditures and destruction of wealth. Although these features have greatly declined with modernity, capitalism, and colonialism, they may still have something valuable to say to our troubled modernity today.

Engaging with Mauss and Bataille will help to attain two objectives. First, it will extend Edward Said's (1979) critique of the persistent East-West binary found in modern knowledge systems, which he correctly observed, has also spread to the "East", where it may now be more intractable than in the "West". By showing how Mauss and Bataille were both inspired by Northwest Coast cultures, which may have certain genealogies with ancient Asiatic and Chinese cultures, I deconstruct the binary from a different angle than Said's critique of the West. In other words, modern Western theory is sometimes not as Western as one thought, since it is sometimes constructed out of observations of societies radically different from the West. Indeed, examination of non-Western cultures often makes possible Western theory's reflexive, innovative, and self-critical dimension. Thus, Mauss and Bataille's ideas are relevant not only to Native America, but can also shed considerable light on China. This essay will lay out some possible ancient connections between these different societies. Second, just as Mauss and Bataille represent two early critiques of capitalist industrial modernity, Bronze Age China (Shang and Western Zhou) and the Northwest Coast continue to offer insights for how we might detach ourselves from 21st century consumer capitalist modernity.

INTERCONTINENTAL MIGRATION: ANCIENT ASIANS AND THE NORTHWEST COAST

There are many similarities between the Shang and Western Zhou people of the first two millenniums BCE and Northwest Coast cultures of the 19th century: ancestor worship, clan or lineage solidarity, shamanism and animal spirits, hierarchical ranked society, slaves/human sacrifice, and elaborate ritual feasting. At the same time, they are also quite different societies. The Shang Dynasty (1700-1027 BCE) was an archaic state emerging out of a landscape of tribal and other proto-state and state formations on the Central Plains of Northern China (Henan Province) (Campbell, 2014).

It was an aristocratic society based on patrilineal kinship that is credited with the invention of Chinese writing for ritual divination at the court. The Shang was an agrarian society that colonized and traded with other states and tribal societies, many of which do not appear in the earliest written records of China, but we only know through modern archaeology. Shang culture was oriented around elaborate ancestor rituals, such as offering animal sacrifices in bronze ritual vessels and consulting ancestors in divination rituals. The latter made use of animal scapula bones and tortoise shells, inscribing them with statements and affirmative or negative answers (Keightley, 2014). The ancestors were called down to be present at these elaborate banquets, and there was a role for young male descendants, known as the “impersonator” (尸, literally, “corpse”), who was the impersonator of the primary ancestor receiving the sacrifices (Cook, 2005).

Bronze was used mainly for casting ritual vessels used to cook and offer animal sacrifices or alcoholic beverages⁴ to the ancestors and gods by the royal court officials and priests and local aristocratic clan heads, and for weapons of war and horse chariot fixings. These ritual vessels were used at both underground funerary rituals held in tombs before burial, and above-ground rituals in lineage temples, where the ancestors were invited down to enjoy the feasts with the living (Cook, 2005). Many vessels were either shaped in the form of animals, or had animal and sometimes human faces molded onto their surfaces: ox, bear, tiger, rhinoceros, boar, duck, owl, turtle, elephant, deer, water buffalo, serpent, as well as dragon and phoenix. Although lineages and clans were the basic form of social organization, it is not clear that the bronze animals represented either clan totems or lineage ancestors. The archaeologist K. C. Chang argued that these animals were the “assistants” who helped the shamans mediate and communicate between Heaven and Earth, or the world of spirits and that of humans (1983, p. 65). The recent dazzling archaeological discoveries of other Bronze Age cultures of Sanxingdui (三星堆) and Jinsha (金沙) in Sichuan Province (Xu, 2001), and the late Neolithic hilltop city of Shimao (石峁) (Childs-Johnson, 2020; Sun, *et al.*, 2017) in northern Shaanxi Province reveal evidence of contacts with the Shang and some shared art motifs, including the animal-humanoid faces⁵.

4 Chinese Bronze Age alcoholic beverages were different kinds of grain alcohol, they did not use grapes, so we avoid using the term “wine”.

5 For Shimao animal-humanoid design similarities with Shang bronzes, see:

During the Western Zhou Dynasty (1027-771 BCE), the Shang practice of human sacrifice declined, however, the Zhou court shared with the Shang a lack of centralized administrative authority over outlying territories, which they indirectly governed through local aristocrats tied by kinship to the king (Shelach-Lavi, 2015, p. 265-266). While the basic artistic designs on the surfaces of ritual vessels were continuous between the Shang and early Western Zhou, there is material evidence of what some scholars call a “Late Western Zhou Ritual Reform” around 850 BCE (von Falkenhausen, 2006, p. 29-52). During this time, there were sudden changes in the types of bronzes found in tomb goods and buried hoards, such as: a decline in alcoholic drink containers; replacement of zoomorphic designs with abstract geometric or wavy patterns; and an abundance of musical bronze bells and stone chimes, signaling the increasing importance of music in ritual. For von Falkenhausen, this archaeological evidence reflects “a fundamental religious shift in the sphere of the ancestral cult: away from “dionysian” rituals centered upon dynamic, even frenzied movement, to a new kind of far more formalized ceremonies of “apollonian” character, in which it was the paraphernalia themselves, and their orderly display, that commanded the principal attention...” (2006, p. 48). Thus, the drunken ecstatic trances of earlier shamanistic rituals of communion with the gods and ancestors were perhaps replaced in late Western Zhou by a more detached and orderly approach to ritual to strengthen the sumptuary rules of a ranked state order.

The Northwest Coast cultures were not state formations, but “chiefdoms” with no writing, and their kinship system was matrilineal or bilateral, with a moiety system. They are found in southeastern Alaska, on Vancouver Island, and nearby islands, and coastal British Columbia, Canada. They include such nations as the Tlingit, Kwakwaka’wakw (or Kwakiutl), Haida, Bella Coola, Bella Bella, Tsimshian, Coast Salish, Heiltsuk, and Nootka⁶. Animals such as bear, raven, thunderbird, sea lion, orca, wolf, and two non-humans, the *sisiyutt* (a two-headed serpent) and *dzunukwa* (a child-eating female ogre with

<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2180389/chinas-beastly-bronze-designs-found-stone-carvings-prehistoric> (Laurie Chen, “China’s beastly bronze designs found in stone carvings at prehistoric settlement”, in *South China Morning Post*, accessed July 13, 2022).

6 Unfortunately, space and lack of knowledge prevent me from going into details about the cultural differences between different nations of the Northwest Coast societies.

upturned lips making a scary sound) figure prominently as matrilineal clan totems. Often, they are animals that the ancestors of the chief encountered in mythical times, or they are nonhuman assistants to clan leaders (Jonaitis, 1991, p. 90). During *potlatch* ritual feasts, dancers donned wooden masks of totemic animals and birds and impersonated clan ancestors. There were no strict rules forbidding the eating of totemic animals, but these emblems were sacred, and if others were seen to harm the animals, whether wild or captured, the humans represented by these totemic animals would come to their defense (Kan, 2016, p. 72). The zoomorphic split totemic animal faces were painted on the sides of “big houses” for communal rituals and carved on totem poles, painted onto coppers, carved into wooden masks for ritual performances, or woven into woolen capes called *chilkat* blankets. While the Shang people indicated the presence of an ancestor in their sacrificial banquets, with the “impersonator”, in 19th c. Northwest Coast potlatches, many native groups also deployed tangible evidence of ancestral presence, such as wooden effigies and dancers impersonating the ancestors (Kan, 2016, p. 180).

While the Shang used bronze technology, the Northwest Coast societies had copper technology even before European contact (Jonaitis, 1988, p. 37; Macnaughtan, 2020, p. 2). Their “coppers” were precious ritual wealth objects that were passed down as family or clan heirlooms, occasionally given away, broken off, or even destroyed at *potlatches*. Although there are cultural and language differences among these nations, they all share the *potlatch* culture of clan rivalry. *Potlatches* are held when a child assumes a clan name, as mortuary feasts, upon the ascension of a clan leader to the role, and so forth. The hosts of potlatches expend great wealth distributing generous gifts to the guests: special foods, ceremonial dishes, animal furs and skins, which later become the industrially manufactured Hudson’s Bay woolen blankets, the new unit of measurement for wealth (Suttles, 1991, p. 104-105). The high prestige foods served at *potlatches* were the oil of the deep-sea eulachon fish, cranberries, seal meat, and other berries mixed with the fish oil. The host and important guests punctuated the eating with florid speeches recognizing the status claims of the host, who distributes property and gifts at the end of the ceremony.

The Shang Dynasty’s territorial range was in northeast-central China, across portions of Hebei, Henan, and Shandong Provinces, with far-flung colonies and interactions with other states, as well as non-state pastoral and hunting-and-gathering societies in its orbit (Campbell, 2014; Shelach-Lavi, 2015, p. 256). The recent archaeological sensation of Shimao, a city of stone ramparts

and walls, unearthed stone carvings that are regarded as precursors of Shang Dynasty bronze iconography of animals and humans (Sun, Shao, Liu, *et al.*, 2017; Childs-Johnson, 2020)⁷. Shimaos are dated to 2200 BCE, starting earlier than the Shang, but overlapping in time. It is located in the far northern tip of Shaanxi Province, known as the Ordos transitional zone where traditionally, agricultural people interacted with nomadic pastoralists. Thus, ancient peoples sharing overlapping artistic cultures, could have emerged from an interactive network across northeast-central China, southern Siberia, and Mongolia in the third and second millennia BCE, and a set of art motifs and animal designs must have made their way, through intermediary cultures, to Alaska and the Northwest Coast in the New World. The timing of these movements of artistic and religious cultures from northern Asia to the Pacific Northwest could have occurred before, during, or after the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties.

Sinologist Herrlee G. Creel (1935) and anthropologist Lévi-Strauss (1963) have focused on the striking similarities between the artistic iconographies of symmetrical bifurcated animal, humanoid, or monster face designs, found in Shang and Northwest Coast art. These zoomorphic faces or bodies are called *taotie* (饕餮) in Chinese, both characters written with the food (食) radical, and they are cast onto the bronze ritual vessels of the Shang and Zhou Dynasties. In the case of Northwest Coast Native Americans, they are carved or painted onto wooden totem poles, masks, feasting dishes, boxes and trunks, or house fronts, and woven into woolen Chilkat blankets and capes. Wrote Herrlee Creel:

In studying Shang design, I have constantly been aware of the feeling that this art had great resemblances [...] to [...] the Northwest Coast Indians [...]. I have found one incontrovertible case of a design which gives the effect of the splitting and spreading out of an animal, over the whole front of a house, in a manner quite like that of the Shangs. In another case, the head of an animal only was represented as if split and applied flat to the surface; the chest on which it occurs is said to be “typical of carved and decorated wooden chests fashioned by the Northwest Pacific Coast Indian tribes”. Such use of the split head only was also common with the Shang designers [...] this representation of the animal as if split and laid out flat is characteristic only of Chinese art and that of the Northwest Coast Indians.

⁷ The two other Neolithic cultures of China, the Longshan and the Yangshao, do not display these art motifs of bifurcated symmetrical animal or humanoid designs.

Creel, 1935, p. 64-65

It is likely that the Shang and Western Zhou people also carved or created designs in wood or other perishable materials, however they have not been preserved over time. The Northwest Natives were living cultures when first contacted by Russian and European fur traders in the 18th century, so their art survives on wood and woven wool. Contemporary Native artists continue to study the old art works, now scattered in museums, and they produce new ones for the art and tourist markets and government commissions, like the famous Bill Reid and the talented Wayne Alfred, who I interviewed on Alert Bay as I watched him carve a wooden mask. In [Figure 1](#), the *taotie* design on a bronze ritual vessel shows an animal or monster with horns and fangs, but without the mouth or teeth. While [Figure 2](#) features a more three-dimensional carved goat, it shares with [Figure 1](#), in the symmetrical bifurcated flattened face.



Figure 1: *Taotie* bifurcated facial design of animal or monster with horns on a late Shang *ding* (tripod container).

Source: Wikipedia for "[Taotie](#)".



Figure 2: 19th c. Haida wooden chest with mountain goat moon crest, orig. from Haida Gwaii Island, now in the Museum of Natural History, New York.

Source: *The Globe and Mail*⁸.

In [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 5](#), we see the shared iconography of animals on two contemporary Northwest Coast Native artworks. They both resonate with the design on a Shang Dynasty bronze axe that is over 3 000 years old in [Figure 4](#). All three images feature the same wide mouth full of teeth, pair of almond-shaped eyes, rounded eyeballs, thick eyebrows, and a pronounced bulbous nose. These striking similarities in art motifs suggest some sort of cultural connection across vast spans of time and space.

8 Image from article by Marsha Lederman, “For Haida, this Wooden Chest Holds Promise of Reunion with Indigenous Treasures”, in *The Globe and Mail*, July 8, 2017. URL: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/haida-indigenous-repatriation/article35572292/> (accessed July 4, 2022).



Figure 3: Kwakwaka'wakw "Big House", in Thunderbird Park, Victoria, B.C., built by Chief Mungo Martin in 1953.

Source: Wikipedia for "[Potlatch](#)".



Figure 4: Shang Dynasty bronze executioner axe.

Source: Wikipedia for "[Shang Dynasty](#)".



Figure 5: Haida painting of a grizzly bear on a ceremonial drum by Bill Reid, 1988.

Source: *Prince George Citizen*⁹.

Although we have no archaeological evidence to suggest any direct intercontinental contact between Bronze Age China and the Northwest Coast, given the many shared cultural traits between them, we can surmise indirect contacts, separated by both geographical distance and temporality, along with independent development on both continents. In a jointly written book, Soviet and North American archaeologists suggested that “the great number of masks and zoomorphic images in the Old Bering Sea complex seems [...] to have been related, through a process not yet understood, to the art of Scytho-Siberian, Shang, and Eastern [*sic.*] Chou peoples on the one hand [...], and to Northwest Coast Indians on the other [...] Art, technology, funeral practices, and shamanism somehow seem to be deeply involved in these transfers” (Arutiunov & Fitzhugh, 1988, p. 125). The *taotie* and other Shang bronze designs may also date back to the jade carvings of the Liangzhu culture (3200-2000 BCE), whose sites were scattered along rivers, lakes and the Pacific Coast in eastern China, with evidence of a maritime hunting culture (Qu, 2014). Liangzhu art displays similarities with Inuit and Yupik art in Alaska.

9 Image from article “New toonie honours Haida culture”, in *Prince George Citizen*, July 28, 2020. URL: <https://www.princegeorgecitizen.com/local-news/new-toonie-honours-haida-culture-3741014> (accessed July 4, 2022).

The squarish shape of the Shimao stone head in [Figure 6](#) is echoed by the squarish heads of wooden house posts in [Figure 7](#), in a Kwakwaka'wakw village of the late 19th century. The same downward drooping mouth, bulbous nose, and big eye sockets are found in both the Shimao stone image and the Northwest Coast wooden ancestor posts.



Figure 6: Stone humanoid figure excavated from Shimao, Shaanxi Province, China (photo by CCTV).

Source: see note 1, [page 307](#).



Figure 7: Kwakwaka'wakw ancestral figures as house posts at the Gwa'sala Village of T'akus in Smith Inlet, British Columbia.
Source: Photography by C. F. Newcombe (1905), Harvard Peabody Museum.

In [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#), we see the same style of humanoid face, with the same almond eyes and wide mouth with a row of teeth. In the Chilkat blanket, the eyes are disaggregated, so that the eye sockets become separate stylized floating shapes independent of the two faces. These four large floating eye sockets resemble the stone eyes from Shimao. The facial designs of stretched-out mouth and row of teeth in [Figure 8](#) and [Figure 9](#) bear strong resemblance to [Figure 3](#), [Figure 4](#), and [Figure 5](#) above.



Figure 8: Another stone humanoid figure excavated from Late Neolithic Shimao, Shaanxi Province.

Source: Wenbo China, “[文博中國](#)”, [online](#).

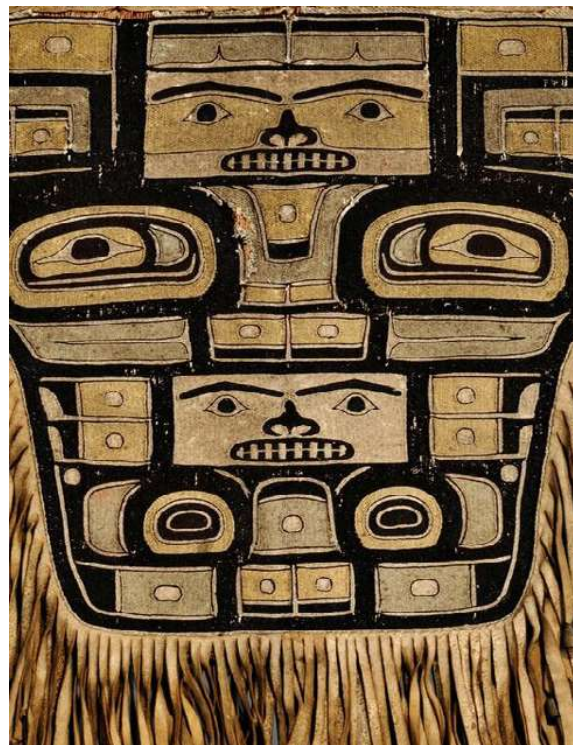


Figure 9: Tlingit Chilkat woolen blanket or cape, 19th century.

Source: Skinner's Auction, [online](#).

Having shown some striking similarities in art motifs, the question arises as to when and how these artistic features moved from northern China to the Northwest Coast of the New World. Recent genetic analysis confirm that Native Americans came out of Asia. Analysis of nuclear gene markers, mitochondrial (mt)DNA, and Y chromosomes show that all modern Native Americans share very similar haplogroups with the indigenous populations of southern Siberia, from the Altai Mountains in Western Mongolia to the Amur River region to the east (Goebel, Waters, O'Rourke, 2008, p. 1497-1498). A human tooth excavated from Ust-Kyakhta, south of Lake Baikal, at the border between Russia and Mongolia, dates to 14 000 years ago, and its genome shares the same unique mixture of East Asian and Eurasian ancestry as today's Native Americans (Price, 2020).

Unfortunately, the vast majority of scientific publications on the settling of North America from the ancient Asian landmass address only the *earliest* migration and settlement, back in paleolithic times, much earlier than the Chinese Bronze Age that concerns us here. It used to be thought that the earliest humans in the Americas crossed over from northern Asia via the land bridge Beringia during the last glacial age, about 11 000 to 12 000 years ago, moving south in a deglaciated land corridor between two huge ice sheets. However, recent stone tools found at Swan Point in Alaska, dating to 14 500 years ago, and resembling those found in central Siberia (Goebel, Waters, O'Rourke, 2008, p. 1498), challenge this long-held thesis. Furthermore, recent drilling and extracting of lakebed cores in the supposed ice-free corridor in Alaska revealed that, from 15 000 to 12 500 years ago, this corridor was still ice-bound and did not sustain plant or animal life to feed the humans who supposedly took this land route (Pedersen, Ruter, Schweger, *et al.*, 2016). So how did ancient Paleoamericans enter and settle across North America when the land was pervasively glaciated and supported no food?

There is growing scientific consensus that another important route for early humans entering the New World was the *maritime route*, crossing the Bering Sea and hugging the partially deglaciated northwestern coast of North America, moving southward and feeding on the abundant marine life as well as shore life (Pedersen, Ruter, *et al.*, 2016; Hirst, 2020; Koppel, 2003). Studies suggest that even after the sea had inundated the ancient land bridge of Beringia, boats could still cross the narrow Bering Strait of only 51 miles across, with two islands conveniently positioned in-between as rest points (Gurvich, 1988, p. 17). In ancient times, the sea level was considerably lower than today (300-400 feet), so

that more land and islands such as the Aleutians were exposed for easier island-hopping maritime crossings from the Asian landmass to North America. Off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, the discovery of the skeletal remains of “Arlington Woman” on Santa Rosa Island, dating to 13 500 years ago, further strengthens what has been called “The Kelp Highway” hypothesis (Erlandson, *et al.*, 2007). This hypothesis suggests that ancient mariners relied on marine animals, shellfish, and plants growing in a kelp forest ecology stretching across the cold waters of the north Pacific, from Japan down to Baja, California. The strong North Pacific Current that flows north from Taiwan, north along the eastern coast of Japan, and then eastward across the North Pacific to the Northwest Coast of America, would have aided sailboats. During the latter part of the Shang Dynasty, there was a population shift into Shandong Province, which has a long coast on the Pacific. Recent evidence of the strong North Pacific Current was shown when the 2011 Fukushima earthquake and tsunami disaster sent about 20 million tons of Japanese debris into the Pacific, many items soon washing up ashore in Alaska, British Columbia, and the states of Washington and Oregon. Large objects included a crewless squid fishing ship and a Harley Davidson motorcycle (Paterson, 2016).

Once we have the maritime migration thesis that is not tied in with the narrow dates of the Beringia land bridge, one important question emerges: perhaps the Americas were not settled in a single original migratory move¹⁰? Why not envision a *series* of later maritime migrations out of north Asia? If Paleoamericans could already migrate on boats across the north Pacific 14 000 to 16 000 years ago, it would certainly be easier for people of later ages to continue maritime migrations¹¹. Some estimates for when the ancient ancestors of Northwest Coast natives crossed into North America have been pushed later to 4 000 years ago for Athapaskan (Na-Dene) speaking people (Paper, 1993, p. 9; Dzeniskevich, 1994, p. 54). If this is corroborated by future archaeological

10 There is a tendency for archaeologists to focus on the earliest late Paleolithic arrivals in the New World, and to neglect evidence for later migrations. This is a pity, as it provides an incomplete picture of later influences from Asia, and assumes complete independent development in the New World since 11 000-18 000 years ago.

11 Some scholars surmise that strong cultural links persisted between Siberia and the Northwest Coast until the later arrival of a different culture, the Eskimos (Inuits, Iñupiat, and Yupik), into western Alaska, greatly attenuating the earlier cultural ties (Dzeniskevich, 1994, p. 57).

findings, then the case for indirect connections between the Shang Dynasty, and the Northwest Coast cultures is strengthened. If the arrival date of Northwest Coast cultures is much later than the first settling of the New World, then their memories of the Asian art motifs, kinship and social structures, ancestor and shamanic cults, and feasting rituals could have been kept alive better, even as they adapted to their new environments.



Figure 10: Kwakwaka'wakw sailboats, photography by Edward Curtis, 1914.

Source: Photography on [Wikipedia](#).

In a landmark joint exhibition by the Smithsonian Institution and the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1988 of prehistoric artifacts from Siberia, Bering Sea, Alaskan, and Northwest American Coastal cultures, many shared cultural features were found stretching across the far north of the Pacific Rim, between Asia and North America (Fitzhugh and Crowell, 1988). Such common items as snowshoes, clothing and boot styles, subterranean dwellings, seasonal animal harvest festivals, mortuary practices, the flat leather drums of shamans, and anthropomorphic and zoomorphic masks made of wood and leather used in ceremonial dances can be found stretching across the Siberian cultures of the Koryak, Chukchi, Tungus, and Itelmen to the Eskimos, Tlingit, and

Athapaskan-speaking cultures of Northwest America¹². A striking commonality that is shared on both sides of the Bering Strait are the myths of the Raven as hero-creator (Gurvich, 1988, p. 18-19; Dzeniskevich, 1994, p. 53).

The Shang and Zhou influence in art and religious motifs on Northwest Coast cultures was likely mediated by different groups that stretched across Northeast Asia and Northwest America. One possible intermediary were the ancestors of the Ainu people, who live in Hokkaido, Japan, and across Sakhalin and the Kurile Islands. The Ainu are an ancient maritime culture skilled in sailing and trading, hunting, and fishing on the high seas. After the Meiji Restoration (1868), the Ainu were colonized by Japan, and through modern forced assimilation policies, they lost their former geographic mobility. Scholars have found many cultural similarities between the Ainu and Northwest Coast cultures, such as bear-worship, first-salmon rituals, art motifs, and shamanism (Kono & Fitzhugh, 1999, p. 118). Fishing, basketry, and ship-building methods were also shared among the Kurile and Aleutian Islands, Hokkaido, Alaska, and the Northwest Coast (Ohtsuka, 1999, p. 375-376; Ogihara, 1999, p. 134). Before modern times, the Ainu hunted and ritualized many of the same types of wildlife as the Northwest Coast cultures: moose, deer, elk, bears, salmon, sea otters, orcas, whales, and owls. However, the Ainu did not make wooden masks nor celebrate potlatches. There is archaeological evidence of Ainu trading across the sea with Mainland Asia in prehistoric times, but the most impressive trading period was during the Yuan Dynasty of China (1271-1368 CE), in the Amur River delta and Sakhalin Island areas. The trade revolved around furs provided by the Ainu in exchange for Chinese silks, and trade flourished among Mongols, Han Chinese, Ainu, Japanese, Russians (Sasaki, 1999). From old 19th century photographs of Ainu people in traditional dress, some design

12 Stylistic parallels with Shang and Eastern Zhou Chinese burial masks have also been discerned in Ipiutak burial masks of northwestern Alaska, dating from the second century BCE to 800 CE (Collins, 1971; Arutiunov & Fitzhugh, 1988, p. 127). Especially striking are the similarities of large *tao-tie*-like protruding eyes. Wrote archaeologist Henry Collins: “We are dealing with a similar class of objects, having a similar function in mortuary practice” (Collins, 1971, p. 276). The Ipiutak masks are reminiscent of masks made of shell and marble shaped into a squarish frame, with nose and open mouth full of sharp teeth that were dug up from tombs at Kaifeng and Xun Xian near the Shang capital of Anyang in Hebei Province. The Shang and Zhou shells and marble pieces in China were attached to wooden backing, as were the ivory masks in Alaska.

motifs also look strikingly similar to Chinese Bronze Age designs. It is possible that through their maritime trading movements, the Ainu could have preserved ancient north Asian art motifs that were circulating during Bronze Age China, and spread them to the New World at later times.



Figure 11: Zhou Dynasty bronze tripod with whirlpool design that wraps inward in concentric squares (Association of Music and Art Archival Materials).

Source: Sohu.com¹³.

13 Image from article “朱宗明：商周青铜器兽面纹与饕餮纹的名实简述”，on *sohu.com*, July 17, 2017. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/157700093_772510 (accessed July 4, 2022).



Figure 12: Shang Dynasty bronze vessel, Shaanxi Historical Museum (Association of Music and Art Archival Materials).

Source: Sohu.com¹⁴.



Figure 13: Ainu robe, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Source: The Met, [online](#).

14 *Ibid.*

The similarities and resonances across the North Asian and American continents suggest that theories arising out of cultural formations on one side of the Pacific may be relevant to cultures on the other side. The shared artistic motifs and patterns, the common emphasis on ritual feasting and elaborate food containers (whether carved wooden bowls and utensils for Northwest Coast potlatches, or bronze ritual vessels for Shang and Zhou sacrificial feasting), imply that theories of gifting, sacrifice, and feasting rivalry may shed light on both areas. Thus, we will now turn to the theories of Mauss and Bataille.

MAUSS: RECIPROCITY AND GENEROSITY AS SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

In his classic book *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss showed that primitive exchange and economy could not be reduced to barter, but was highly social, generating impacts not only in the economic realm, but also in ethics, politics, and religious realms. The delayed reciprocity of gift exchange means that the significance of gifts lies beyond the utilitarian or material gain of the gift itself, for gifts compel social obligation and establish social relationships between persons and communities. Mauss saw traditional gift-giving as connecting two communities through “exchange” and “obligation”, which establish “moral contracts” between them (Mauss, 1967, p. 3).

Employing the Maori notion of “*hau*” or “spirit” of the gift, Mauss explained the compulsion to repay the social debt buried in the gift:

One gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence. To keep this thing is dangerous, not only because it is illicit to do so, but also because it comes morally, physically and spiritually from a person [...] it retains a magical and religious hold over the recipient. The thing given is not inert. It is alive and often personified, and strives to bring to its original clan and homeland some equivalent to take its place.

Mauss, 1967, p. 10

Here, gift relations embed the person of the giver into the person of the receiver, until the recipient is able to repay the gift and reverse the indebtedness. Mauss’ approach to the gift was the recognition that reciprocity and its construction of interlocking personhood produced the power to forge social

bonds between persons and communities, and the Durkheimian dividend of social solidarity. For Mauss, the obligation and indebtedness that interlinked personhood in gift relations was an antidote to the alienated individuals of his own time.

In Shang and Western Zhou China, both below-ground and above-ground ritual events and sacrificial banquets often involved the bestowal of bronze ritual vessels, as well as the right of recipients to cast vessels, as gifts from the host to important guests. Some of these vessels bear bronze inscriptions recording the gifting from the host to the guest and the special occasion. Mauss' stress on gifts as forms of exchange that establish obligation, indebtedness, and a moral contract is relevant here in two ways. First, the sacrificial meats, alcohol, and grain offered by humans in ritual feasts inviting the ancestors obligates the latter to reciprocate with protection for the descendants, good harvests, and abundant offspring. Second, the human host's gifts of ritual vessels to various lineage heads below him tie them to him, in terms of indebtedness and recognition of his stature as host and leader (Cook, 2005, p. 9-11).

Over two millennia earlier than Mauss, Confucian thinkers had already made the discovery about the benefits of reciprocity and built it into their social prescription for healing and repairing the conflicts and breakdown of social institutions in their age:

太上貴德, 其次務施報. 禮尚往來, 往而不來, 非禮也;
來而不往, 亦非禮也.

« 禮記 », 曲禮

In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good (*de*); in the time next to this, giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety value is that reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety.

“Qu Li”, in *Book of Rites*, Legge J. (trans.), 1885, p. 65

The Confucians were fully cognizant of the obligations to give and to repay, the mutual imbrication of the persons of giver and receiver, and notions of reciprocity were central to their teachings of behaving according to norms of ritual propriety. The creation of incomplete and interlocking persons through gift relations was understood by the Confucians as an outcome of the proper conduct

of social relations. Indeed, it can be said that unlike post-Reformation European culture, the basic unit of Confucian discourse was not the individual, but a social relationship. The Confucians lived during the troubled times of the Spring and Autumn era (770-476 BCE), which witnessed the breakdown of the earlier Bronze Age order governed by kinship and sacrifice. Social order degenerated further into all-out bloody warfare involving whole populations during the Warring States era (475-221 BCE). While Mauss saw the social solidarity of gift-giving as an antidote to the greed, anomie, and social dislocations of modern capitalism and urbanization, the ancient Confucians were addressing their own social breakdown, and calling for the return to an idealized Zhou era.

The Confucians taught that, through the obligations and indebtedness of gift and ritual relations, social cohesion is achieved without having to rely on state laws and punishments. Indeed, the terms for “gift” and “ritual” were one and the same: this was the character 禮 (*li*), according to the oldest extant Chinese dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* « 說文解字 » written by Xu Shen (許慎, 1959) between 100-121 CE. This character featured the radical for “spiritual beings” (示) on the left, and the phonetic element of *li* (豐) on the right. The bottom of the phonetic element was a pictograph of an elevated dish or vessel *dou* (豆) on a stand, holding food or meats, as sacrificial offering to the ancestors of the nobility. Thus, this central concept in the Confucian classics, written with the character 禮 (*li*), meaning both “gift” and “ritual”, connected people with the bronze ritual vessels used as cooking vessels or dishes for sacrifices to the ancestors in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties, a thousand years before Confucius (551-479 BCE). There is also a fascinating continuity in the notion of the “host-guest” (主賓) relation from the Shang, when “guest” referred to the ancestors come down to share the feast, to Confucian times, when this relationship becomes a central philosophical metaphor for healthy and respectful social dynamics.

During the Bronze Age, the notion of *de* (德) meant “a kind of Heaven-provided life-force or power”, and an “internal force connected to Heaven’s Command” that was inherited from one’s ancestors and accrued through the reciprocity established with ancestors during ritual feasting (Cook, 2005, p. 14-15). Later, while the Confucians did not have an exact corollary of the “*hau*” of the gift, they did produce a new twist in the meaning of *de*, which comes close to *hau*¹⁵. If we follow Arthur Waley’s translation of *de* in the Daoist classic, *Dao*

15 *De* (德) is usually translated into English as “virtue”, which does not bring

De Jing « 道德經 » as “power” (Waley, 1994) and A. C. Graham’s translation of the same term in the *Zhuangzi* as “potency”, or “the power in a man which inspires awe in his presence” (Graham, 1989, p. 282, p. 307), we can see that *de*, like *hau*, is an inner quality of power or potency that is possessed by the donor of the gift, banquet, or sacrificial ritual. We see this demonstrated by the first four characters in the quotation above from the *Book of Rites*: “In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good (*de*)” (太上貴德). The practice of “simply conferring good” is contrasted here with the writer’s own supposedly less exalted later age of expecting repayment or reciprocity. Thus, we see that the Confucians valorized the “highest antiquity”, which presumably was the era of *non-reciprocity*, of producing potency in giving, without expecting material things in return. With the help of Georges Bataille, let us examine what this non-reciprocity might mean in many archaic societies.

BATAILLE: THE NON-RECIPROCAL DESTRUCTIVE EXCESS OF POTLATCH AND FEASTING

Thanks to the fieldwork of Franz Boas and others, both Mauss and Batailles’ thinking about gift culture were greatly influenced by the *potlatches* of the Northwest Coast. Potlatches were great community gatherings and feasts held during the winter months that could last several weeks. Banned by Canadian colonial authorities in 1885, and only legalized again in 1951 (Cole, 1991), they continue to be held today among the Native American communities of British Columbia and southeast Alaska. However, the current forms are a pale shadow of the “total prestations” and competitive feasting of the 19th century, when they served as the pivotal axis of the whole society, encompassing its economy, politics, religion, kinship, and education. The hosts were usually chiefs representing powerful clans or families. Gifts and food were distributed to the guests with exaggerated generosity bordering on profligacy. Today in the Anthropology Museum of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and the Natural History Museum in New York City, one can see the giant carved and painted wooden food bowls, basins, and utensils that were

out the resonances with “*hau*”.

used to serve the feast to guests, as well as the carved wooden masks that were used to impersonate the ancestors and animal totems of clans in ritual dancing.

The potlatch events consumed great amounts of labor and expenditures of clan wealth. The amount of wealth given away was directly related to the amount of honor and authority the host and his community would gain. Among the important guests who were rivals with the host for prestige, whoever could not reciprocate with a costlier potlatch, would be diminished in social stature. Mauss compared this culture of agonistic male honor-jousting with Chinese culture:

Kwakiutl and Haida noblemen have the same notion of “face” as the Chinese mandarin or officer. It is said of one of the great mythical chiefs who gave no feast that he had a “rotten face”. The expression is more apt than it is even in China; for to lose one’s face is to lose one’s spirit, which is truly the “face”, the dancing mask, the right to incarnate a spirit and wear an emblem or totem.

Mauss, 1967, p. 38

Thus, despite the ostensible differences between China and the Northwest Coast, they still shared the importance accorded to “face”, honor, obligation, reciprocity, and community generosity, key elements of gift cultures.

Whereas Mauss looked past the heated rivalries and costly outlays of potlatch to focus on the “reciprocity” of gift-giving and feasting, Georges Bataille (1897-1962) honed in on what he called the “excessiveness” of ritual expenditures. Bataille pursued a different and often overlooked logic of the gift, what could be called the *non-reciprocal* goals of the gift. In thinking about the decline of religiosity in modernity and the loss of religion’s lavish ritual expenditures, Bataille discovers how modernity has come to label religious expenditures “useless” and “wasteful” (Bataille, 1985, 1989a). In his transgressive way, Bataille proposes a new appreciation for religion’s gratuitous and excessive expenditures, in the modern age of deferred gratification and accumulation of profit and capital.

Religion is the satisfaction that a society gives to the use of excess resources, or rather to their destruction... This is what gives religion their rich material aspect, which only ceases to be *conspicuous* when an emaciated spiritual life withdraws from labor a time that could have been employed in producing. The only point is the absence of utility, the *gratuitousness* of these collective determinations. They do render a service, true, in that

men attribute to these gratuitous activities, consequences in the realm of supernatural efficacy; but they are useful on that plane precisely insofar as they are gratuitous.

Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1

For Bataille, there is a “satisfaction”, in the ritual destruction of property or squandering of wealth, even as modernity has made this behavior extremely difficult, producing an “emaciated spiritual life” due to the compulsion to work. Wasteful ritual life defies modern this-worldly rationality, because it consists of expenditures with a meager return, or whose return is not in this life, or explicitly made impossible due to the excessive outlays. Contrary to Mauss, it is this very goal of *non-reciprocity* found in competitive potlatching that Bataille wanted to salvage from the human past for modernity. When hard-earned wealth requiring much expenditure of labor is squandered in exaggerated generosity so as to prevent any return, then people who cannot understand or accept this behavior call it “wasteful”. This was neglected by Mauss in his focus on reciprocity. The emphasis in this second logic of the gift is not reciprocity or redistribution, which are utilitarian expectations, but a reaching *beyond* this temporal world, to attain a power (*de*) that transcends practical life.

This is how Franz Boas describes the potlatches he witnessed at the end of the 19th century on Vancouver Island:

The rivalry between chiefs and clans finds its strongest expression in the destruction of property. A chief will burn blankets, a canoe, or break a copper, thus indicating his disregard of the amount of property destroyed and showing that his mind is stronger, his power greater, than that of his rival. If the latter is not able to destroy an equal amount of property without much delay, his name is “broken”.

Boas, 1966, p. 93

If we think about the potlatch, the aim of the hosts was actually *not* reciprocity from their guests, for they would be most happy if their guests did *not* challenge them back with a bigger potlatch. Then, the generous hosts could prolong their “sovereign moments” (Bataille, 1993) of ritual power and pleasure, keep their exalted social status gained from the last costly ritual feasting, and attain what Bataille called “intimacy” (1989b) with the clan ancestors and gods who received their sacrifices. To destroy such huge wealth and have no challengers who could

reciprocate was to attain the pinnacle of potlatch power, even though the family or clan would be reduced to difficult material conditions for years to come. This spirit of profligate destruction of material wealth in the potlatch were acts of bravado that reached for something *beyond* material reciprocity. In the context of modernity, these acts were transgressions of utilitarianism, a pervasive condition in modernity, which caught Bataille's theoretical fancy.

A potlatch usually had to be returned within a year if a guest wanted to challenge the host, and the interest rate for the credit incurred in being a guest was often very high: the response must be a potlatch worth 100% more (Codere, 1950). Sometimes, a rival and his clan were unable to repay, and they had to accept humiliation. If there was a return, this would eventually cause a spiraling inflation that would ultimately be unsustainable. Helen Codere noted that there was a built-in mechanism to defuse or dissolve the inflation: the dramatic destruction of coppers (Codere, 1950, p. 75-77). Copper-making was a native technology present even before the encounter with the West. The mineral was smelted and hammered into a rectangle of about 3 feet long, with a rounded head that flared outward, and raised ridges on the lower half. These coppers represented the accumulation of great wealth, and were owned by powerful families and clans who could afford to gather the huge amount of animal skins, Hudson's Bay woolen blankets, and other forms of wealth needed to purchase them. So rare and precious were these finished coppers, that they were each given their own name. For example, among the Kwakwaka'wakw of Alert Bay, there was a legend of a copper called "Causing Destitution", whose value attained a worth of 20 canoes, 20 slaves, 100 painted boxes, and 200 cedar blankets in the 19th century (MacNaughtan, 2020, p. 7).

On occasion, a potlatch could involve the host engaging in the ultimate unbeatable act of property destruction: he would break off a piece of his precious copper and give it to a guest or throw it into the sea or into the fire, where it could not be retrieved. Sometimes a whole copper would be destroyed, and this might even lead to suicide on the part of his shamed rival who had no hope to match such profligate display. Great boxes of eulachon oil would also be thrown into the fire, singeing guests' blankets and smoldering roof rafters. Canoes were also burned, and in the old days, slaves were sometimes killed.

Mauss' emphasis on a return for the gift given, seems more compatible with the pragmatic ethos of modern capitalist societies. Bataille's second logic of the gift takes the Nietzschean spirit of anti-utilitarianism to new heights. Central to Bataille's passionate critique of modernity was his notion of "ritual expenditure"

as a key form of “non-productive consumption” that has all but disappeared in our calculative and future-oriented modern life. These expenditures included religious festivals, massive rituals, feasts, and sacrifices, competitive spectacles, lavish court luxuries and ceremonies, large non-productive monastic communities such as Tibetan Buddhist and medieval Christian ones, and giant monuments like the Egyptian pyramids and medieval European cathedrals, that we moderns consider “wasteful” (Bataille, 1985, 1989a). For Bataille, these expenditures allowed archaic people to maintain a deep connection with the sacred realm of the gods, ancestors, and supernatural beings. He envisioned archaic humanity as being closer to the state of animality, where consciousness is in a state of original oneness and immanence with the world. This original non-differentiation between self and the world, humans and sacred spirits, animals, and ancestors he called the state of “intimacy” (Bataille, 1989b). Bataille’s notion of intimacy resonates with the Daoist state of an original monistic cosmos. However, what breaks up this originary world of unity for Bataille is not language, as in Daoist philosophy, but tool-use and its introduction of a distinction between subject and object. The Marxist emphasis on technology, via the 19th century anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, can be seen to exert its influence on Bataille.

For Bataille, increasingly in human history, distinctions are drawn between human and animal, and between humans and supreme beings (Bataille, 1989b). With progressive tool-use, not only animals become “things” for the use of humans, but humans themselves become increasingly objectified as “things”. According to Bataille, the longing for a return to our original lost “intimacy” is then partially satisfied through periodic effervescent religious rituals and festivals that refocus people on “the present” and allow them to indulge in an excess of material waste and loss. To destroy material wealth is to destroy the “thingness” that has come to imprison us and to allow us to get back to intimacy with the gods for a time. Thus, the Northwest Coast Native American destruction of property and wealth during potlatch rituals can be understood as an effort to transcend material practicality and utility to return to intimacy with the transcendent divinity of ancestors.

Non-Reciprocity and Wasteful Destruction in Ancient Chinese Rituals

Turning now to the Chinese archaic past, we find “wasteful destruction” not only in banqueting, but also in rituals and festivals of a religious nature, when sacrifices are offered to transcendent beings. The characters 祭祀 (*jisi*), both with the “spirit” (示) radical, refer to the act of making a sacrifice to spiritual forces or ancestors. Another term for sacrifice, using the ancient characters 犧牲 (*xisheng*), displays the “cow” or “ox” radical, and referred to “animals used for sacrificial rites, such as oxen, goats, and pigs” (*Ci Hai*, 1976, p. 872). In sacrifice, the gift represents the transfer of wealth from this world to another world beyond this one, and return is quite uncertain or not at all. In sacrifice, the simple Maussian notion of reciprocity in the gift does not suffice. Certainly, there is the hope that in sacrifice to ancestors and spirits, these beings would “respond” (對) to such gifts and reward the sacrificers. However, sacrifice also reaches for something *beyond* a return. If Bataille had learned of Shang and Western Zhou bronze ritual vessels, he might have said:

What better way to destroy wealth and their instrumental value than taking precious goods out of daily use and circulation, and burying them deep into the ground where they will never be used or enjoyed by the living?

Sometimes, in excessive no-holds-barred sacrifice, there is simply the desire for destruction or self-destruction for its own sake, a transgression of the supposedly “natural” human instrumental pursuit of life, survival, and species expansion. So Bataille wanted to explore a dimension of sacrifice where it ceases to be a mere means to gain a repayment from the gods, but displays an excessiveness that becomes a spiritual end or quest in itself. This second logic of the gift, found in the excess of the gift with no repayment, enables one to transcend the means-end relationships that entrap us in the conventional world.

Indeed, Bataille’s theory of archaic non-reciprocity and wasteful destruction may help explain the Chinese archaeological mystery of “smashed vessels” (毀器 *huiqi*) in many unearthed tombs of early China. Vessels intentionally broken or burned before burial are commonly found in tombs ranging in time from the Neolithic through the Bronze Age, and as late as the tombs of minority people during the Liao (916-1125 CE) and Jin (1115-1234 CE) Dynasties (Gao, 2010). At Erlitou, the purported archaeological site of the Xia Dynasty, and in Early

(Erligang phase) and Middle Shang Dynasty tombs unearthed at Zhengzhou, Huanbei, and other sites, it is common to find pottery, jade, and bronze ritual vessels that were first intentionally smashed, broken, and burned, then buried next to the dead. Of course, besides artifacts, the Shang were infamous for their human sacrifices and entombing of horses and chariots, especially in larger tombs and palatial sites. However, by the late Shang, associated with the YinXu site near Anyang, Henan Province, increasing numbers of grave goods consist of “spirit vessels” (明器 *mingqi*), vessels that were not used during the owner’s life, but were cheap, coarse, or miniature copies made only for burial. These imitation vessels proliferated in graves of the Eastern Zhou and became the norm (von Falkenhausen, 2006, p. 302), perhaps marking the end of the profligate ritual expenditures of the Bronze Age.

It is interesting to note that in the Pacific Northwest, in Tlingit mortuary potlaches of the 19th c., the guests’ eating and receiving of gifts was the vehicle through which the host made the sacrificial offerings to his own matrilineal ancestors, who would receive the spiritual essence of the gift via the guests. As gifts were bestowed upon each guest recipient, the host would call out one of his ancestor’s name to receive it, and the wealth bestowed was said to be “killed”, “burned”, or to have “died” (Kan, 2016, p. 48, p. 182-184), reminiscent of the Bronze Age phenomenon of “smashing vessels.” Since burning was thought to convey gifts directly to the ancestors, some of the gifts were thrown into the fire. Sometimes copper shields were also “killed”, and before 1849, slaves were literally killed as sacrifice to the ancestors.

Moving to another Bronze Age civilization to the west, roughly contemporary with the Shang, is Sanxingdui culture in Sichuan Province. Very little is known about this culture, as they had no writing, were not mentioned in the Chinese historical records, and no residential, tomb, or palatial sites have been unearthed. Only precious bronze, jade, and ivory objects have been excavated from giant pits in the ground. Although Sanxingdui art motifs and styles are very different and unique, they shared with the Shang a culture of “smashing vessels” (*huiqi*). The bronze ritual vessels and statues in Pits 1 and 2 were smashed into pieces, or burned at high heat, as revealed by bronze material melted into lumps, before they were thrown into the pits (Xu J., 2001, p. 30-31). Jay Xu hypothesizes that this destruction was “killing” the artifacts in order to send them from this world to the supernatural realm. Recent excavations of six more pits at Sanxingdui in 2021-2022 show a similar pattern of the prior destruction and burning of bronze vessels and statues, giant masks, and huge

elephant ivory tusks before being thrown into the pits¹⁶. All these artifacts took tremendous wealth and labor to mine the minerals, ship them long distances, design and cast the bronzes, capture the elephants, assemble the heavy objects for the rituals, etc. What better way to destroy wealth in a profligate way than to take precious objects, break them so they can no longer be used, and bury them deep beneath the earth? A Bataillean explanation would suggest that it was the sacrificial objects' "thingness" or utility that were symbolically "killed", so that human society could regain transcendence from the practical temporal world and regain "intimacy" with divine forces.

Bataille's emphasis on the non-reciprocal logic of gifts and rituals also sheds light on a very different later religious culture in China, Buddhism. Chinese Buddhists in the fifth to tenth centuries CE were also prone to wasteful and destructive expenditures. As Buddhists, they did not make blood sacrifices, but the fervent faithful made lavish presentations of wealth to the Buddhas and bodhisattvas: gold, jewelry, entertainments, foods, and even human life in self-sacrifice. According to the French sinologist Jacques Gernet:

The Buddhist faithful competed in spending, and ruined themselves in the process. It cannot be said that this claim represents simply a literary formula, for it recurs too frequently, in official memorials, decrees, and even in stele inscriptions. It must therefore be assumed that these competitions in wastefulness reveal a trait that is peculiar to the religious phenomenon itself... Certain Buddhist festivals provided the occasion for an extraordinary display of sumptuousness. They created an atmosphere of exuberance and of collective excitement that is palpable in the descriptions of the historians. At such times, fervor reached its paroxysm and acts of self-sacrifice and the renunciation of wealth became commonplace. These great reunions, where entire fortunes were squandered gratuitously for entertainments and as offerings and where self-mutilations and self-immolations by fire took place, therefore provide an opportunity for apprehending the scope and underlying aims of the religious phenomenon.

Gernet, 1995, p. 234-235

16 Anonymous. "3000 年前古蜀人, 為何摧毀器物再掩埋?" ("Why did the Ancient Shu People 3000 Years Ago Smash their Vessels and Artifacts Before Burying Them?") in « 上觀 » (*Shang Guan*), June 13, 2022. URL: <https://export.shobserver.com/baijiahao/html/497474.html> (accessed June 30, 2022).

When the court patronized Buddhism, as in the Wei, Jin, the Southern and Northern Dynasties, and the Tang Dynasty, the state was often the largest sponsor of extravagant public rituals. Self-mutilations and self-immolations were the ultimate destruction and sacrifice. The destruction of material goods and in non-Buddhist rituals, sacrificial animals, was merely the destruction of the fruits of one's labor, thus they were only the temporary ridding of the "thingness" as an attribute of oneself. However, offering up one's own human body and life was much more, it was the religious desire to completely and permanently kill the "thingness", in oneself, and meld with the vast sacred universe beyond profane life. Suffice to say here that in almost every period of Chinese history, we can find examples of Bataille's rituals of non-reciprocal and wasteful destruction of wealth. Of course, these practices become highly constrained with modernity.

Although Buddhism enjoyed extravagant court patronage, there were also times when the state turned against it, such as under Emperor Zhou Wudi in 574 CE and Emperor Wuzong at the end of the Tang Dynasty in 840 CE. Both periods saw the court calling for the burning, destruction, and melting down of Buddhist icons and statues, especially metal ones (Kieschnick, 2003, p. 70-71). Here, destruction seems very different from Bronze Age China, when wasteful religious expenditures and ritual sacrifice were religio-political acts of communication with the ancestors, or "total prestations". The rationale of later imperial era destruction often had a narrower political or economic agenda, rather than a religious one. For example, the later destructions often harbored a nativistic antipathy to a "foreign" teaching, or condemned the laziness and parasitism of Buddhist monks. The state campaigns opposed the wastefulness of Buddhist religious wealth by melting down copper and metal statuary and converting them into agricultural implements or minted coins, and forced Buddhist institutions to turn over gold and silver to the state Ministry of Revenue. Thus, already in medieval China, we witness a very early separation of the religious from the political, and concerted efforts to emphasize the "useful" and the "economic" at the expense of religious and ritual life.

CONFUCIAN INTERVENTIONS: THE MODERATING HAND AGAINST RITUAL EXTRAVAGANCE IN CHINA

As noted above, the Confucians lived during the breakdown of the Bronze Age cultures of large-scale ritual sacrifice, animal motifs, and polities held together by ritual and kinship. Amidst the social unrest and growing interstate conflict and violence of the Spring & Autumn period (770-476 BCE) and the Warring States era (475-221 BCE), they sought to salvage and re-invent a lost ritual order for their troubled times. They taught that ritual and education, rather than law, punishment, and warfare, were the keys to social order. Thus, early Confucian teachings can be seen as advocating ritual expenditures, but seeking controls on ritual boisterousness and excess. They looked to the Western Zhou rather than the Shang Dynasty as their lost Golden Age, objecting to the Shang's human sacrifice and ribald drunken feasting. The Confucian moderating influence on ritual excess and the tamping down of ecstatic dancing and feasting was already prefigured and enabled by the "Late Western Zhou Ritual Reform", in the archaeological record, ca. 850 BCE. Here, human sacrifice and vessels for alcoholic beverages declined significantly, while the making of music, in the form of bronze bells and chimes increased (Shelach-Lavi, 2015, p. 279-280).

While the Confucians advocated a return to the ritual order of the Zhou, they also sought to domesticate what Durkheim called the "effervescence" of rituals and replace it with solemnity. On the question of when and how the archaic shamanistic porous boundaries between humans, animals, and divinities were abandoned, I suspect that we must examine the Confucian intervention. While Confucians extended the Bronze Age's ancestor worship, they also taught detachment rather than entanglement with the world of spirits, as this famous line in the *Analects* "語: 雍也", indicates: "Honor the ghosts and deities, while keeping one's distance from them" (敬鬼神而遠之). Here, Confucius cautions against excessive trafficking with the divine world, and instead, favors the focusing of people's energies on this-worldly concerns of family life, economic production, and producing descendants. Below, I will roughly sketch the historical shifts in Confucian attitudes towards ritual expenditures from early China, when Confucians supported ritual generosity, to their inculcation of moderate rather than ecstatic ritual, to late imperial China, when they became highly critical of

ritual excess. Thus, after the Bronze Age, the Confucian impact on Chinese ritual and banqueting meant that the Chinese cultural landscape greatly diverged from what we know about 19th c. Northwest Coast cultures.

In the Confucian classics, the “host-guest” (主人–賓客) relationship is a frequent trope for discussions of propriety, ethics, and social relationships, as in the “Country Feast” (鄉飲酒義) chapter of the *Book of Rites* « 禮記 ». This text is purportedly a record of Zhou rituals, but was likely compiled in the early Han Dynasty, ca. 2nd c. BCE¹⁷. Here, we see an important commonality between Northwest American Coast and Chinese cultures, of the social importance of banquets and feasting. Certainly, in both cases, there is an elaborate banquet etiquette and emphasis on social rank, proper seating arrangements, and order of precedence. For Kwakwaka’wakw potlatch feasts, speeches were given by important participants, and

[The] emphasis on correct procedure was applied alike to ordinary meals and opulent feasts sponsored by high-ranking chiefs. Acts that publicly demonstrated the relative social position of each member of the community, such as the right of noble individuals to eat and drink before others, were an important component of the public dining experience.

Jonaitis, 1991, p. 25¹⁸

Similarly, in the Confucian “Country Feast”, there is a rule that:

Those who are sixty years of age and above should be seated, while those in their fifties and below must stand and wait upon them. This is to make clear the respect accorded to seniority. Those who are in their sixties will be served three dishes; those in their seventies will be served four dishes; those in their eighties will be served five dishes; those in their nineties will

17 Eugene Cooper (1982) has suggested that the “country feast”, in the *Book of Rites* and the *Yi Li* « 儀禮 » was something like ancient Chinese potlatches (Cooper, 1982). However, I am showing here that the Confucians greatly modified earlier raucous forms of ancient Chinese feasting, and made them more sedate and gentrified.

18 The American Museum of Natural History in New York City possesses a major collection of Northwest Coast Native American artifacts, collected by Franz Boas and others over the course of many ethnographic journeys in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to northern Vancouver Island and the west coast of British Columbia.

be served six dishes. This is to make clear the importance of taking care of the elderly.

“Country Feast”, in *Book of Rites*, Wang, 1987, p. 976

The “Country Feast” passage then goes on to explain that these ritual requirements are intended to instill in the feast participants an ethic of filial piety and respect for seniority and elders, which are hallmarks of a socially educated populace and a harmonious state. Thus, both Northwest Coast potlatches and the Chinese country feast are highly ritualized social feasting events that produced social dispositions and the social ranking system.

However, the Confucian textual treatment of the ancient Chinese country feast diverges from what we know of 19th c. potlatch conduct. An important difference between them is one of style and ethos. The Confucian description of polite and sedate ritual banquet movements are in stark contrast with the rivalrous potlatch rituals of the Northwest Coast cultures. Helen Codere titles her book on potlatch culture, *Fighting with Property* (1950). From Boas, we get a taste of the agonistic ethos of generosity in potlatches:

Boys and men are vying with each other in [...] the distributions of property. Boys of different clans are pitted against each other by their elders, and each is exhorted to do his utmost to outdo his rival. And as the boys strive against each other, so do the chiefs and the whole clans, and the one object of the Indian is to outdo his rival.

Boas, 1966, p. 81

In contrast to this combative one-ups-man-ship, the Chinese “country feast” describes the relationship between host and guests as polite and harmonious. For example, even the brief ritualistic vying between host and guest to give the other the honor of the first move at the entrance, is portrayed in the *Book of Rites* as a dainty formal procedure. After the host brings the guest into the room, they bow to each other three times and then each tries to give precedence to the other three times before the guest finally ascends the stairs (三讓而后升). After the guest ascends, the host bows to thank him for doing so, then he washes an alcoholic drink goblet for the guest, which is acknowledged with a bow from the guest. Then the host fills the goblet with alcoholic beverage and graciously presents it to the guest, who bows to receive it. The host bows to acknowledge the guest

drinking the alcohol. The passage then moves on to explain the ritual efficacy of this ritual procedure:

君子尊讓則不爭。絮敬則不慢。不慢不爭。則遠於鬥辨矣。不鬥辨則無暴亂之禍矣。

« 禮記. 鄉飲酒義 »

The gentleman respectfully gives precedence [to the guest], therefore [the ritual] promotes an ethos of avoiding struggle. Pure and dignified is he, therefore he is not arrogant or lacking in courtesy. Not lacking in courtesy and not indulging in contestation, therefore he distances himself from struggle and argument. Not engaging in struggle and argument, therefore [the ritual] enables people to avoid violent social outbreaks and disasters.

“Country Feast”, *Book of Rites*, Wang, 1987, p. 972-973¹⁹

Thus, what Confucian moral reasoning did was to tone down and harmonize banqueting in order to inculcate a more sedate culture through ethical teachings²⁰. Furthermore, the Confucian descriptions of the country feast stress how the ritual steps solidify and confirm *pre-existing* status and ranks of host and assistant host, primary guest and secondary guests, and the different age-grades. In contrast, the Northwest Coast potlatches were the *very means* through which hosts could change or upgrade their positions, so they are predicated on shifting and fluid social statuses. This is in line with the fact that China had already become a state-ordered society, with the state providing more social stability, and the state could promote or demote people in rank, instead of relying on rituals of generosity to do so. The ethnographic descriptions of Northwest Coast cultures were made just at the point when these non-state indigenous societies were brought under the authority of a Western colonial state power, but their ranking system was still being worked out through potlatches.

Although the ethos and style of the Confucian banquet is quite different from the Northwest Coastal potlatches, nevertheless, what is significant is that for

19 Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from Chinese into English are my own, after consulting the modern Chinese annotations and translation into modern Chinese by Wang Meng-ou 王夢鷗 (1987).

20 See my earlier discussion of the tension between Confucian ritual ethics and Legalist state discourse and sovereign law and punishment (Yang, 1991, 1994).

both cultures, the reciprocity of feasting and gifting enjoys a pivotal social role. The ancient Confucians sought to ritualize all social transactions, to build upon what was then already a deeply ingrained culture of reciprocity and banqueting, in order to promote a system of harmonious, but hierarchically ordered social ethics. Just as the ancient Confucians found Shang rituals too undisciplined and their feasting too drunken, if they had encountered the rivalrous potlatches of the Northwest Coast, they would also have sought to impose their polite and harmonious ethos on the contentious potlatch.

In ancient China, there was also a debate about whether people should indulge in lavish funerary rituals and burial expenditures, pitting the philosophies of Mohism and Legalism against the Confucians. In the 5th to 4th centuries BCE, the philosopher Mozi (墨子) propounded ideas of radical egalitarianism and utilitarianism that must have shocked his contemporaries. He advocated “frugal [or thin] burials” (薄葬) in debates with the Confucians, who supported “generous [or thick] burials” (厚葬). The Confucians favored elaborate funerals and burials, in keeping with their emphasis on ritual propriety, filial piety, and reverence for ancestors. Mozi, however, attacked the Confucian position, with arguments that sound strangely modern:

If we follow the rules of those who advocated elaborate funerals... then the funeral of a king or high minister will require several inner and outer coffins, a deep grave, numerous grave clothes, a large amount of embroidery for decorating the coffins, and a large grave mound. If the family of the deceased happen to be humble commoners the wealth of the family will be exhausted, and if they are feudal lords their treasuries will be emptied.

Mozi: Basic Writings, Watson (trans.), 1963, p. 67-68

Mozi here contrasts the needs of the living against those of the dead, and clearly favors the living. He feared that excessive mourning and lavish funerals and burials would exhaust the living family members, distract state officials from their official duties, and impoverish the state. Nevertheless, archaeological evidence of lavish Warring States tombs and luxury grave goods shows that Mozi's arguments had little impact on the burial practices of wealthy families.

The growing power of Legalist discourse in the Warring States era sought a more persuasive strategy for moderation in burials. A new hybrid Legalist-Confucian text appeared, the *Spring and Autumn of the Lu Clan* « 吕氏春秋 », attributed to the Legalist Lu Buwei (吕不韋), and written around 239 BCE.

By this time, Confucianism had come under Legalist influence, and more Confucians were open to utilitarian thought. In this text, we find an attempt to reconcile Mohist/Legalist and Confucian arguments in a new synthesis that decried lavish burials, while using arguments that appealed to Confucian sentiments of respecting ancestors and ritual displays (Riegel, 1995, p. 328).

The passages below mount an argument in favor of moderate funerals and burials, decrying the lavish expenditures among aristocratic families.

國彌大，家彌富，葬彌厚。含珠鱗施，夫玩好貨寶，鍾鼎壺盥，輦馬衣被戈劍，不可勝其數。

« 呂氏春秋 », 第十卷, 節喪

As states grow larger and families richer, burials become more elaborate. Such a burial includes a pearl put in the mouth of the corpse, a jade shroud that covers the body like fish scales, silk cords and bamboo documents, trinkets and treasures, bronze goblets, tripods, pots, and basins, horse-drawn carriages, clothes and coverlets, as well as halberds and swords – all too numerous to count.

Spring and Autumn of the Lu Clan,
Riegel (trans.), 1995, p. 308-309

世俗之行喪，載之以大輜，羽旄旌旗、如雲儻翬以督之，珠玉以佩之，黼黻文章以飭之，引紼者左右萬人以行之，以軍制立之然後可。以此觀世，則美矣侈矣；以此為死，則不可也。

« 呂氏春秋 », 第十卷, 節喪

In the funeral processions of our vulgar age, a huge carriage transports the coffin: there are plumes, flags, pennants and banners, as well as the sides and top of the carriage painted in a cloud design, all of which screen the coffin from view; pearls and jade adorn it, embroideries and insignia embellish it; and it is moved by two ropes, each one pulled by myriad men, who are arranged in military formation. Only when all is like this is the funeral procession thought appropriate. This makes a beautiful and extravagant spectacle for the world to see but it is inappropriate treatment of the dead.

Spring and Autumn of the Lu Clan,
Riegel (trans.), 1995, p. 309-310

In the above passages, we see a condemnation of how the wealthy tried to outdo each other in burying jewels and precious clothing and weapons, in the lavish funeral processions, and in the elaborate burial chambers and funeral parks. Unlike Mozi, who favored the needs of the living against the dead, the main objection here is that these extravagant expenditures do not express sincere concerns for the comfort of the dead, for they only benefit the living. Lavish burials were inconsiderate towards the dead, because such riches attracted tomb robbers, disturbing the peaceful abode of the dead. Thus, instead of the Mohist denial of the needs of the dead, this text merely suggests that lavish burials were selfish on the part of the living. It implies that sincere filial Confucians would ensure that their ancestors could enjoy undisturbed graves by being frugal.

The merging of Confucian and Legalist voices in the *Spring and Autumn of the Lu Clan* paved the way for late imperial Confucian gentry condemnations of overindulgence in ritual wastefulness. By the 16th to 19th centuries CE, these condemnations by Neo-Confucian elites against excesses in ritual expenditures became more strident. In late imperial times, Confucian orthodoxy sometimes adopted a fundamentalist tone, so that one can often find sentiments by educated Confucian scholars like this one, traveling through the Wenzhou area during the Qing Dynasty:

溫郡之俗好巫而近鬼，大舉佛事道場，靡不盡心竭力以為之。不惜重費，乃若正月初旬，以至燈市十余日，夜游觀，男女雜沓，竟制龍燈，極其精工，大龍燈一條，所費不下數十金，鑼鼓喧闐，舉國若狂，不數日間，付之一炬，此种妄費，亦當急為禁革者也。
《甌江逸志》，勞大與，(清)

The local customs of the people in the Wenzhou Commandery support spirit mediums and gain access to spirits and ghosts. They hold elaborate Buddhist and Daoist rituals, engaging in extravagant expenditures and exhausting their energies. Unconcerned with heavy-duty wastefulness, each year during the first lunar month, they hold a lantern festival that lasts over ten days. These attract festival-goers late into the night, the men mixing freely with the women. They also get into competitions of dragon lanterns, each with fine detailed craftwork. Several tens of gold pieces are wasted on a single large dragon lantern. Gongs and drums are beaten thunderously, the boisterous din is insane. In just a few days, the dragon

lanterns are then put to the torch. This sort of reckless wastefulness must be immediately prohibited and changed.

Lao Daoyu, *Leisurely Tour of the Ou River*,
Qing Dynasty, 18th c.²¹

Unlike modern Chinese elites who wanted to end the “superstitions” that prevented China from developing modern science and economic growth, what disturbed educated Confucian sensibilities in late imperial China about popular religion, Buddhism and Daoism, was the foolhardy ritual extravagance of poor people. Confucians in late imperial China did not oppose religion against science, or see religion as “backwards” or “primitive”, in a linear history, but they looked down on the customs of the common people and decried the popular overindulgence in religious sentiments.

It took the powerful modern secularizing forces of the 20th century, and the Chinese embrace of Western utilitarian and economic discourses to render Mozi’s ancient argument no longer radical, but systematically adopted. For the 1930’s in China, Rebecca Nedostup has shown how the Guomindang government tried to put an end to lavish expenditures in Nanjing for the lunar calendar Ghost Festival and other traditional festivals by switching to a solar calendar (Nedostup, 2008). After 1949, the Chinese Communists went much further than the Guomindang in prohibiting public religious rituals altogether, and persecuting those who dared to defy the ban during the Maoist era.

I discovered Bataille’s relevance to China when, in the course of my fieldwork in rural and small-town Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province in the 1990’s to 2019, I frequently encountered local injunctions against “waste” (浪費, Yang, 2020). Local officials were always calling on the people to scale down their rituals and avoid waste or going into debt to pay for lavish weddings, funerals, religious festivals, and other rituals. The reasons given for why officials chastised people for excess ritual expenditure were that people would not have enough money for investing in their family businesses, in children’s education, and that these activities were “superstitious”.

Wenzhou local officials’ attempt to scale down ritual expenditure reminds me of the Canadian colonial authorities in 19th century British Columbia who banned potlatches in 1885 because they encouraged “heathenism” and

21 Cited in Cai Keqiang, *A Cultural History of Ouyue*, « 甌越文化史 », 1998, p. 80.

“indolence” (even though they always noted how energetically the natives prepared for potlatches) (Cole, 1991). The Kwakwaka’wakw were more defiant of the ban than the Tlingit and Haida, continuing to organize and conduct *potlatches* in secret. The colonial authorities made many arrests of people involved in large potlatches, such as Dan Cranmer’s great potlatch in 1922, meting out jail sentences and confiscating precious potlatch ritual properties which ended up in museum exhibits of native art (Jonaitis, 1991, p. 46). In the museums, they were rendered inert and detached from the living cultures that they had supported and animated. Below are two entries by a 19th c. colonial agent in British Columbia:

1883 – The energy they display in collecting property is certainly remarkable... but unfortunately, so much is squandered at feasts and otherwise, that they have not as they ought to have, continuous comfort.

1890 – I am sorry to say that I cannot report any improvement among these Indians; they seem to have given themselves up again to the “Potlatch”, which has absorbed the whole of their time and energies [...], and, in consequence they have earned very little money, though they could all have obtained remunerative employment at the different canneries had they chosen to work.

Codere, 1950, p. 82-83

Anthropologists who have studied the Northwest Coast indigenous people observe that they were quite hard-working, especially in their potlatch accumulations. They were quick to adapt to the Western money economy and were skillful in becoming economically prosperous, compared to other Native American groups. According to Douglas Cole, amongst the four recorded reasons for the European banning of potlatches in 1885,

the economic reason was doubtless the most important: the [potlatch] system was based on the hoarding of goods, not for savings and investment, but for seemingly senseless waste [...] The potlatch was not only a waste of time, but a waste of resources, and incompatible with the government’s goal of Indian economic and social progress.

Cole, 1991, p. 140²²

Thus, in the entries by colonial agents above, what the colonial authorities really objected to was that the natives did not spend enough time working in the way that they approved of, in fulltime permanent employment attached to the modern disciplinary apparatus of the Protestant Ethic-*cum*-capitalist economy. It was not until the 1980's that some of these pieces started to be returned to native descendants. I visited the U'Mista Cultural Center on the island of Alert Bay, where the returned ritual items were displayed through a logic quite different from Western museums: in terms of past family and clan ownership and kinship genealogy, in remembrance of ancestors.

Like the 19th century Canadian colonial officials before them, Chinese officials in contemporary Wenzhou are also trying to bend the local people to the modern rational enterprise of ascetic and disciplined savings, investment, accumulation, and “expansion of production” (擴大再生產). The local culture of Wenzhou, which indulges in excessive ritual “waste”, is today somewhat of an anomaly in China, an obstinate holdout in an oceanic tide of utilitarianism. Thus, we can see clearly here that both the colonial Canadian authorities and the Chinese Guomindang and Communists were modern colonizing state forces who sought to systematically suppress archaic Bataillean cultures of generosity and ritual destruction of wealth in order to promote modern mechanisms of instrumental reason, productivity, and disciplinary power. The Chinese Communist Revolution almost banned religion and traditional rituals completely during the Maoist era, and continues to constrain religious life during the Economic Reform era.

Yet, popular culture dies hard, despite the secularizing utilitarian tides, whether in the form of state modernizing forces in China, or colonial capitalist forces in the Pacific Northwest. Despite the shock of colonialism and demographic decimation due to imported diseases, Northwest Coast indigenous cultures were able to adapt and even flourish to an extent on their

22 The other three less important reasons for Canadian colonial officials banning the potlatch in 1885 were: 1) a concern for the health of the Northwest Coastal natives due to prolonged exposure to the cold in winter potlatch rituals; 2) potlatching supposedly encouraged the prostituting of native women as a way of accumulating the funds and wealth required to mount a successful potlatch; and 3) colonial school schedules were constantly interrupted when potlatches were held (Cole, 1991, p. 140).

own terms. Their integration into the white people's money economy of wage-earning work in the fishing industry and seafood canning factories meant that they acquired considerable disposable income. To the dismay of colonial authorities, they invested this new wealth on potlatches, which actually grew ever larger and more expensive, with more gifts, food, masks and costumes, and artwork to be produced and handed out (Jonaitis, 1991, p. 39; Codere, 1950).

Similarly, coming from a highly individualistic society such as the U.S., I was very impressed with many Chinese exaggerated displays of generosity. I had thought that the severe frugality, anti-ritualism, and iconoclastic scourges of Maoism would have rooted out ritual excess for good. When I first arrived in Beijing in 1981, I was riding in a work unit car with a Chinese friend. We passed by a small gathering on the street, with people pulling and shoving each other, and the reluctant victims kicking up dust as they dug in their heels to resist being dragged off somewhere. With a twinkle in his eye, my friend turned to me and asked what I thought was going on. I replied that the people were having a fight, perhaps passersby were trying to intervene in a couple's domestic squabble? He laughed heartily and told me that actually, it was one family trying to persuade the other family to stay for dinner at their home, and the other family was resisting!

My experience in China was that often, the lower the social rank of the host, the more the exaggerated or forceful the generosity. Once I visited a worker in Beijing, and he wanted me to stay for dinner with his family. I was very tired and really wanted to go home to write up my fieldnotes, so I politely insisted that I could not stay. After some physical struggles in which I tried repeatedly to get out his front door, he finally pushed me down into a chair and immediately bolted his door. I had no choice, but to stay for dinner, feeling like a prisoner. During many banquets in China, I have also experienced the forceful generosity of the hosts, where food was piled up high on my plate, my glasses were constantly filled with beer, wine, or grain liquor (白酒 *baijiu*), and I was repeatedly enjoined to eat and drink. I was often concerned by how much people were spending on a banquet, a much higher proportion of monthly earnings than I would ever spend myself. The host would always offer much more food than anyone could finish, and sometimes the last dishes were left untouched. I learned of the importance of seating positions, where the honored guest sits farthest from the door, and frequent tussles occurred in which people struggled to give each other the seat of honor. The exaggerated generosity also extended to gift-giving, which

I experienced multiple times when friends forced me to accept departure gifts, even though my luggage could no longer hold anything more.

While Wenzhou officials since the 1980's expected the people's waste of money on rituals to decline with increased prosperity and exposure to the rational influences of modern urban culture, the opposite occurred. As local people prospered from their private enterprises and commercial ventures, their family and community rituals and banquets became even more lavish. I was impressed by one large banquet for over one hundred kin, neighbors, and friends thrown by a wealthy woman, which included gourmet foods such as imported lobsters, French liquor, and delicacies such as frog-brain soup, shark fins, crab, and sea cucumber. With the Economic Reforms, Wenzhou people were more willing to donate to support ritual expansion, such as building deity temples, lineage ancestor halls, Buddhist and Daoist temples, Christian churches, funding religious festivals and processions, monastic clerics, and all sorts of charities (Yang, 2020).

Far from coastal Wenzhou, in rural Shaanxi Province to the north, the Chinese media also highlighted a scandalous case of ritual excess in May 2022 in rural Yulin Municipality (陕西省, 榆林市), not far from the archaeological site of Shimao. A wealthy local man threw a grand funeral feast for the local community to honor his deceased elder in defiance of a Yulin government call in 2017 to curb extravagant weddings and funerals in rural areas. The funeral ritual and feast were said to cost 10 million yuan (U.S. \$1,5 million), which included feeding and offering the guests such luxuries as *Maotai* grain liquor, giant crabs that each filled a whole plate, roast duck, and large packages of *Zhonghua* cigarettes²³. This feasting and gift-giving incurred considerable online discussion and debate between supporters and critics. Supporters argued that the money expended was earned honestly, the host was filial towards his elder/father, and did not use the ritual event to solicit gifts from guests to enrich himself. They also claimed that this ritual consumption contributed to stimulating the local economy, which was a social benefit. Detractors often followed this logic:

23 “陕西花了一千万的葬礼？知情者：茅台酒、中华烟，花的钱太多了” (“They spent 10 million yuan in Shaanxi? Participants say that the Maotai liquor, Zhonghua cigarettes all cost too much”), in *Sohu.com*, May 15, 2022. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/547129245_120656890 (accessed June 20, 2022).

Filiality towards elders should be expressed while they are still alive, and not after they are dead. When you organize a big banquet after their death, the elder cannot come down to enjoy it.

Here, there seems to be a discrepancy between the ritual action of exaggerated funeral generosity and the discourse either justifying or criticizing this action. Discursively, both sides of this debate do not escape the hegemonic logic of modernity, nor do they provide an exit from the profane world in which we moderns are immersed. My article proposes another way, via Georges Bataille, to understand the significance of contemporary Chinese culture's continued ritual excess and generosity, which connects it to both archaic China as well as to the Northwest Coast cultures on another continent.

CONCLUSION

This article has tried to address three major questions. First, why explore possible cultural connections between the archaic Chinese Bronze Age and Northwest Coast cultures on another faraway continent? Second, what does Bataille's theory of the gift and sacrifice offer over Mauss' more widely recognized classic, *The Gift*? Third, what meaning and lessons can we moderns derive from studies of the Shang and Zhou ancestor rituals and Northwest Coast potlatches? Let me try to answer each of these questions while summarizing the article.

There have been many valuable sinological works comparing ancient China with ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt, probably due to the fact that most of these scholars come from Western contexts. However, there are virtually no studies investigating contacts and similarities with the New World, which is closer than those areas to northeast-central China, in terms of migration routes. The many similarities and cultural resonances between the Chinese Bronze Age and Northwest Coast cultures discussed here will hopefully trouble any arguments of completely random independent invention. The symmetrical flattened bifurcated animal and humanoid art motifs, the importance of ancestor worship, the cultural emphasis on community feasting and gift-giving, the ritual generosity and destructive impulse as revealed in burning and breaking of ritual properties, the ritual importance of animals (although we still do not quite understand their role in ancient China), the clan and lineage modes of

organization, the importance of social rank and hierarchy, and even slaves and human sacrifice, all suggest deep historical connections. At the same time, we also recognize the obvious differences: the Northwest Coast cultures were not state formations like the Shang and Zhou, and they were matrilineal rather than patrilineal. Indeed, the Northwest cultures may derive from north Asian groups who fled Shang colonialism, as suggested by Pierre Clastres' (1987) important anti-evolutionist argument that the multitude of non-state tribal egalitarian societies in pre-European South America was *not* due to their inability to invent the state, but because they invented social mechanisms to *ward off* the state from rupturing their societies. This article does *not* suggest that the Shang or Western Zhou people actually migrated to the Northwest Coast, *nor* directly exported their culture intact, as Lévi-Strauss suggests in the epigraph. Rather, I see threads and streams of culture that emerged from the late Neolithic, tribal, and agrarian state matrix in northeast Asia that at different times moved across the north Pacific. Shang and Western Zhou cultural strains were likely transformed and attenuated by intermediary cultures in a series of movements that could have occurred in late Neolithic, Shang and Zhou, or later times.

Thus, this article is in line with archaeologist K.C. Chang's suggestion of a major contrast of the *longue durée* between the "Maya-China continuum" (亞美連續性) and the ancient "Near Eastern breakout" civilizations of the West (西方破裂性) (1986, p. 418-422; Zhang, 1987). In the former, which straddles northeast Asia and the New World, ritual and politics pushed early civilizational development, while preserving deep continuities with archaic animal-oriented shamanism and kinship. In the latter civilizations of the Near East, the "breakout" or "rupture" (破裂性) refers to the disruption of this pattern so that technology and trade become the prime movers of history, and a gulf develops between humanity on the one side, against nature and divinity on the other, as seen in the Abrahamic religions. More recently, in comparing religious genealogies, the historian Prasenjit Duara has made a similar contrast between the "radical transcendence" of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions of the Middle East, with their "absolute notion of the creator God", and the "dialogic transcendence" of Asian religiosities, where "transcendence is interwoven with immanent, polytheistic, pantheistic and plural religious practice" (2015, p. 14). Thus, if there is indeed a cultural link and overlapping cultures between the ancestors of the Northwest Coast peoples and the Shang people in China, then scholars of China must pay

attention to Mauss and Bataille, who were inspired by the gift and banquet cultures of the Northwest Coast.

Mauss recognized that the Northwest Coast potlatch form of gift-giving was unique among the cultures of the world he surveyed, in that it was on the extreme end of rivalry and antagonism (1967, p. 4-5). Although Mauss insisted on the agonistic nature of gift-giving as a sort of war without violence, nevertheless, he tended to encapsulate it within his dominant trope of reciprocity. It was Bataille who, by insisting on the expense of rituals and sacrifices, fully accounted for the exaggerated generosity and Dionysian ritual consumption of potlatches. Bataille highlighted the excess of potlatches and other ritual expenditures, and their will to induce *non*-reciprocity on the part of their recipients. Bataille also undertook to thematize the “wasteful” and destructive impulses of the potlatch, shining a light on their religious, spiritual, and cosmological dimensions. He theorized that the ritual wastefulness in archaic societies was a social mechanism that kept instrumental reason in check, so as to restore the “lost intimacy” of being one with divine realms, or accessing it periodically (1989b). In a counter-intuitive way, the more we developed our technologies of production, the more we made ourselves their “things” or instruments. Thus, ritual excess and ecstatic miraculous moments produced “a life [that] is liberated from the servility in the world of work and reason” (Lingis, 2015, p. 143). Bataille showed how archaic cultures offered an alternative economy to our modern one, an economy not dedicated to full-time non-stop production, but one in which the surplus wealth and energies that a society produces over and above what is needed for its population’s subsistence, is used up and consumed properly in non-productive pursuits. Through ecstatic ritual expenditures, energies, wealth, and labor “are discharged, imprudently, without calculation, without recompense” (Lingis, 2015, p. 143) to attain spiritual transcendence.

Having seen the horrors of modern industrialized warfare as a foot soldier in World War I and living through World War II, Bataille also proposed a novel inverse relation between ritual expenditure and warfare (1989a). The more wealth a society devoted to religious expenditures, the less it had left for expenditures of warfare. In his book, *The Accursed Share*, vol. 1, he built a case for the dangerous and explosive nature of unspent wealth. The combined energies from the sun shining down on all life on earth, plus the surplus accumulated wealth produced by human labor, became a risky combustible force, and needed to find outlets of expenditure. If a significant intensity of this concentrated

energy were not diverted to religious pursuits, then it would find a much worse outlet: the ultimate wasteful explosion of warfare. Bataille was a keen observer of the relation between the decline of ritual expenditures in Europe, beginning with the Protestant Reformation, and the subsequent exponential increase in war expenditures. In both Bronze Age China and the Northwest Coast, we can find examples of this inverse relation between ritual and warfare.

With the decline and then collapse of the Shang and Western Zhou's ancestor sacrifice cultures of "total prestation", starting from about the 8th c. BCE, China moved into an era of social unrest. As states and polities detached themselves from ritual and kinship ties to the king, they armed themselves to engage in warfare and swallow up weaker polities, ending with the vicious era of the Warring States (475-221 BCE). This was the end of the Bronze Age, when the archaeological record shows decreasing bronze vessels, and the rise of a new metal, the harder substance of iron, which was used in manufacturing military weapons, fixtures for plowing animals, and agricultural implements. This led to the intensification of large-scale irrigated agriculture, supporting expanding populations involved in unprecedented scales of warfare (Shelach-Lavi, 2015, p. 296-297).

In pre-Contact Northwest Coast, warfare was tied in with ritual, was small-scale, and had the nature of feuding and revenge ambushes. "War" consisted of raiding parties that killed an occasional one or two victims from a rival group or took a prisoner as a slave (Codere 1950:98-112). This kind of warfare had no economic motive, and natives were regarded as relatively peaceful, unlike the 18th century predatory European fur traders who started a series of shocking violence against natives to dominate the trade. Later, the natives came under the authority of the Canadian colonial state monopoly of violence. Due to colonial assertions of law and order, and also due to the demographic decimation the natives suffered after 1865, they could no longer pursue their past small-scale warfare (Codere, 1950, p. 112-113). Instead, anthropologists have commented on how, during post-Contact times, there was actually an efflorescence and intensification of ritual life, and an explosion in the amount of potlatch gift-giving and production of ritual art, despite white prohibitions (Codere, 1950, p. 89-97). Here we see a different inverse relation between ritual and war which still affirms Bataille's insight. A reduction in war, even of the traditional ritual kind, and the initial introduction of a money economy served ironically to expand ritual expenditures for a time.

At the beginning of the 21st century, what significance can we derive from the stubborn persistence of ritual generosity in banquets and death rituals on both sides of the Pacific in the capitalist age of savings, accumulations, and consumerism? Our modern values no longer permit us to go back to the human sacrifice, slaves, and hierarchy of archaic societies, although we still have a tolerance for class ranking. Many of us urban or educated types are highly secularized, do not communicate with divinities or ancestors, and barely participate in secular rituals. Bataille allows us to appreciate the transgressive nature of indigenous, rural, peasant, and small-town people, like my Chinese fieldwork subjects in Wenzhou and Northwest Coast descendants today, who have revived traditional ritual expenditures, “wasteful” religious festivals, and lavish funerals and burials. Perhaps the Chinese media sentiment that the Yulin funeral feast was useless because we should feed the ancestors while they are still living, misses the point? Perhaps such “waste” of resources on death instead of life is a willed assertion of the value of a spiritual connection with the mysterious world beyond, and a direct challenge to the modern total immersion in profane life? Perhaps they are a determined effort to retrieve and hold on to the category of the “sacred”, in modern life, just like Bataille and his Collège de Sociologie?

We now live a life that has condemned us to an incessant grindstone of production, and a way of thinking that is about rational-utilitarian maximization. Today, modern states often spend much more on building up military stockpiles than on ritual and educational efforts to strengthen social cohesion and spiritual transcendence. Some of us fear an impending World War III. This endless expansion of work and industrial productivity is ultimately unsustainable, as environmental degradation, labor exploitation, and global climate change threaten our planet. Our consumer economy coupled with economic nationalism together produce a new kind of consumption that only feeds back into investing and further expanding production. Perhaps we need to expand Bataille’s notion of transgressive “waste”, in ritual expenditures into a will to “waste”, in non-productive activities and expenditures, such as expanding the acreage of national parks and nature preserves, our new spaces of spirituality? The modern world enjoins us to thrift, productivity, and maximization, but offers very little in the way of destructive release through ritual and festival to transcend this profane world.

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