The Fate of our Times is characterized, above all, by the disenchantedment of the world.” 1 This, Max Weber’s 1919 characterization of modernity, presaged what many have come to see as a crisis of meaning in our contemporary world. Some have argued that our “secular age,” with its pluralistic, relativized, and dominantly scientific episteme, fails to supply the sense of meaning that was once ensured through the myths and rituals that bound communities together under the promise of harmonization with sacred, cosmic order. 2 And whether one agrees or not with the characterization of modernity as a disenchanted space threatening moral disorientation and existential doubt, it is clear that formal religious rituals no longer play a definitive role in organizing society at large. Ceremony may seem like a relic of an enchanted past, or the plaything of those who keep up ancient traditions in modern contexts.

But perhaps we are not all that divorced from the power of ceremony and the enchantment of myth, after all. Perhaps “the ceremonial” continues to pervade contemporary life, insofar as modern social life continues to unfold around deeply symbolic, collectively-oriented performances that ensure a profound sense of connection between individuals as well as connection with the world. But how do we go about detecting the presence of “the ceremonial” in practices that are saturated with the rhetoric and values of secularity?

To disclose the ways in which modern “ceremonies” continue to supply meaning, we might look to a classical tradition in which ritual explicitly played a prime function in organizing society and transforming individuals. The Confucianism of ancient China is one such
tradition. Confucian thinkers such as Mencius, Xunzi, and Confucius himself profoundly revered ritual, claiming for it a central place in an elegant vision for human flourishing. We witness in this tradition a special reverence for the power of ceremony to harmonize, order, and animate the world. Understanding something about this vision of the power of ritual can help us to appreciatively detect the ways in which ritual continues to orient and inspire us, even in cases in which rituality is obfuscated by the rhetoric of secularity.

To illustrate the power of the ceremonial in a contemporary context, I will examine “rituals of dissent”: collective performances of protest and occupation that seek to disrupt and reconfigure sociopolitical reality. I deliberately choose political protest not only because of its enduring relevance in the wake of the Occupy Movement and the Arab Spring (as well as the more recent Peoples’ Climate March and the Umbrella Revolution), but also because these rituals of dissent provide a provocative juxtaposition to the extreme Confucian valuation of social order. Confucianism famously values stratified social order above all other social principles, and so acts of protest aimed at disrupting or reconfiguring political and social orders seem entirely anathema to Confucian values. And yet, I suggest that the classical Confucian ideas about the nature and efficacy of ritual help us to understand the power, the enchantment, that acts of protest supply for the people involved.

Ritual Culture and Confucian Thought in Ancient China

The classical Confucian thinkers—Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi—were mainly concerned with questions of human virtue and ethical conduct, and not so interested in metaphysical speculations about the origin and nature of things. Confucius and the masters of his school asked: “What is Goodness?”, “How does one serve his lord?”, and “How does one rule with virtue?”. Thus, the classical Confucianism of the first half-millennium BCE can best be characterized as a system of “virtue ethics”. That said, one area we moderns associated with the category of religion, ritual (ch: 礼), remained central to the constellation of topics that occupied Confucian thinkers. The Confucians loved ceremony, and like all ancient Chinese, they took great care in the execution of rites to honor the ancestors, appease the gods, and preserve society. But while sacrificial ritual is as old as Chinese civilization itself,
the Confucians were the first to value ritual as a method for cultivating personal moral qualities. The Confucian thinkers of the fourth and fifth centuries BCE defined ritual to include both formal ceremonial procedures and also etiquette in a general sense—the protocols and attitudes that could facilitate appropriate relationships between people within a highly stratified society.4 The arrangement of ritual vessels on an offering shrine to the ancestors, the selection of music to accompany worship of the gods, and the correct way to bow to a lord were of equal value as ways of cultivating personal virtue and ensuring natural and social harmony.

Ritual, then, for the early Confucians, was a key feature of a vision of human flourishing that connected ceremonial practices to ethics, spiritual development, and social harmony. For the classical Confucians, ritual was the arena for cultivating personal virtue and for activating a special charismatic influence that could bind a family or a nation together in harmony.

While there was general agreement amongst classical Confucians as to the importance of ritual as an arena for the cultivation of moral qualities, different ideas emerged as to how exactly ritual worked to morally rectify and spiritually empower an individual. To convey the scope of interpretations that pre-Han masters brought to their tradition, we can compare Confucius’ observations about the meaning of ritual with the later master Xunzi’s writings on the topic. It seems that ritual in Confucius’ canonical work, the Analects, entails a kind of transcendental reasoning, while Xunzi suggests a social functionalist view of 礼. But while these early Confucians approached ritual differently, they shared a reverence for ritual’s power to order and harmonize people within a social world that was thought to reflect natural and cosmic orders.

Ritual, Virtue, and Rulership in the Analects

The Analects of Confucius purport to record remarks made by Master Kongzi (the master’s Chinese name, later Latinized to Confucius, 551–479 BCE) to his various students. In these remarks can be found several essential conceptions of ritual.

To begin, Confucius looks to the experiential dimension of ritual, outlining the proper attitudes and experiences that a “gentleman” could gain from proper execution of ritual in its general sense, both as ceremonial procedure and as a code of etiquette. This experiential dimension of 礼 includes a sense of “balance between ease and regula-
“flowering of goodness and kindness” (VI.22), and a sense of harmonious propriety, or “taking one’s place” (XX.3). Whether someone was conducting ancestor worship, participating in seasonal rituals, or inviting someone into the home, proper ceremonial etiquette was, in the Confucian view, a matter of achieving a formal ease and natural elegance that could powerfully communicate a sense of propriety.

In addition to these experiential qualifications, ritual was thought to be a principal vehicle for the development of moral qualities. Confucius understood the value of ritual—whether referring to formal ceremony or to perfect etiquette—to lie in its ability to shape the ethical profile of a gentleman. Confucius defines the gentleman as one “learned in culture and restrained through the rites” (VI.27). The strictures entailed in 〈lǐ〉 and ultimately canonized in the Book of Rites—from how one should arrange sacrificial vessels, to how one must fold a robe, to how a guest is invited into the home—were imagined by Confucius to be a discipline that shaped a person into a suitable container for the expression of “human goodness” (rén, 仁). For Confucius, “the complete person” was “wise, free of desire, courageous, accomplished in the arts, and acculturated by ritual” (XIV.12). Through the disciplined decorum mandated in the expert practice of 〈lǐ〉, sensuousness 〈lǐ〉 was restrained, rigidness was overcome (I.12), and the gentleman could obtain a special Charismatic Virtue, or Dé (德).

The key to Confucius’ view of ritual efficacy lies in this notion of Charismatic Virtue. This is a concept that knows no specific analogue in English, but is essential to ancient Chinese conceptions of governance. Often translated merely as “power,” Dé in the context of Confucius’ thought is a metaphysical concept linking a ruler’s influence to his personal qualities. If a ruler could perfect his general sense of virtue through ritual expertise and flawless decorum, people would spontaneously bend to his will, the natural elements would stay balanced, and harmony would be brought to his kingdom. Confucius writes: “The Virtue (Dé) of the gentleman is like the wind. The virtue of the small person is like grass. When the wind blows, the grass moves” (XII.19). According to the Analects’ decidedly non-legalistic rhetoric, the gentleman could “guide with Virtue, and rectify the people with ritual” (II.3). In other words, Charismatic Virtue, attained and expressed through ritual propriety, was the key to securing moral authority and to deploying effective rulership. And so, in the Confucian tradition, ritual propriety was thought to generate political advantage: “When a
ruler loves ritual propriety, none among his people will dare to disrespect him.” (XIII. 4). Ritual, for Confucius, was something to be both experienced and deployed. In the full practice of li, emotional sincerity grounded the cultivation of personal virtue in ceremonial protocols, resulting in charismatic influence that could be deployed in ruling.

In the Analects, it seems that Dé, or Charismatic Virtue, operates metaphysically, as the innate trajectory of human nature towards Virtue opens the possibility for a natural harmonization between the ruler, society, and nature. “The sage-king Shun ruled by making himself reverent and taking the proper ritual position facing south, that is all” (XV.5). Because he was already perfected in all the virtues, and because his sincerity and goodness were already maximized, by simply executing an action in the proper way, the sage-king was able to express his moral sovereignty and to secure authority. And in the ancient Chinese view, since the structure of society was correlated to natural principles, authority over people implied harmony with the nature of things altogether. Therefore, “one who understands sacrifice holds the world in his hand” (III.11). Also: “One who rules through the power of Virtue is analogous to the Pole Star: it simply remains in its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars” (II.1). These statements suggest that ritual knowledge and the fruit of its perfected execution, Dé, could empower a ruler to govern through a special charisma that harmonized his rule with the nature of reality and with the will of his people.

This vision for charismatic rulership can be characterized as a harmonic metaphysics of power, a quasi-magical mechanism for consolidating power through the cultivation of moral and spiritual qualities. Arthur Waley observes that ritual in ancient China could never separate itself from the magical thinking at the basis of early Chinese religiosity. Thus, “that countries could really adopt with success a home policy of government by the magic of ritual… is a fundamental part of Confucius’s way.” Ritual was the arena for moral, bodily, and spiritual cultivation, and we are given a picture of the gentleman-ruler that involves sincere intent, restraint through ritualized propriety, the flowering of exalted ethical qualities, resonance with cosmic order, all resulting in influence over the social world.

Further evidence for the conviction that sagely rulership involved something more than the mere deployment of law is seen in Analect XI.26, a story in which Master Kongzi praises a student who, when asked what he would do if given authority over a state, mysteriously replies, “I should like to assemble a company of five or six young men
and six or seven boys to go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master’s house.” The commentator Li Chong explains, “Only [this student] has transcendent aspirations, only he is able to stir up the sounds of Virtue… His words are pure and remote, his meaning lofty and fitting, and his diligence is certainly something with which one with sagely Virtue would feel an affinity.” We see here that Charismatic Virtue exceeds conventions, expressible not only in refined ritual conduct, but also in spontaneous aesthetic play. To reduce Charismatic Virtue to a mere social organizational principle would miss its essence as a metaphysically harmonic axis around which social relationships and standards for meaning were sanctioned.

Xunzi’s Social Functionalism

While the Analects paint a picture of ruling as a harmonic correspondence between the qualities of the ruler, the will of the people, and the nature of reality, later sources take a more functionalist approach to defining the mechanics of ritual. The Confucian master Xunzi (312-230 BCE), writing nearly two hundred years after Confucius, also valorized ritual as a key tool for optimal governance. But whereas the Analects suggest a metaphysical harmonics of virtue, ceremony, ritual magic, and authority, Xunzi was far more mechanistic in his view of ritual. Famous for disdaining superstition and for his assertions about the apparent badness of human nature, Xunzi held ritual in great esteem as the one arena in which man’s appetitive drives could be overcome and the gentlemanly virtues perfected. Xunzi writes: “Man is born with desires. He will inevitably fall to wrangling with other men. From this comes disorder. The ancient kings hated disorder so they established ritual principles to curb it.” Lǐ, or ritual, for Xunzi, is an ordering force, specifically conceived by the sage-kings of the mythic past to assist people in rectifying their morality against the background of their disordered nature. For Xunzi, rites were not acts possessing any supernatural efficacy, but were purely a human invention designed to organize the social life of man. This is not to suggest that Lǐ did not entail an aesthetic dimension, or even joy. “Rites begin in simplicity, are carried out in elegance, and end in joy.” Thus, in Xunzi’s view, “rites are a means of satisfaction,” standing in opposition to the desire and wantonness associated with man’s innately disordered nature.
But beyond the personally rectifying nature of ritual, Xunzi’s main contention is that ritual “preserves distinctions.” “The gentleman is careful about the distinctions to be observed. What do I mean by distinctions? Eminent and humble have their respective stations, elder and younger their degrees, and rich and poor, important and unimportant, their different places in society.”¹⁴ According to Xunzi, it is through ritual practice (which is understood to include etiquette) that social ordering is remembered, embodied, and preserved. There is little to suggest that this entails any of the transcendental thinking implied in the Analects. Xunzi seizes upon the injunctions found within the *Book of Rites*, the ancient classic book of ritual conduct, to interpret *lĭ* as a force for social ordering. Everything from the number of ancestors that can be propitiated, to the thickness of the burial coffin, is determined by one’s rank within a totally stratified society. “Rites distinguish and make clear that the exalted should serve the exalted and the humble serve the humble. Great corresponds to great and small to small.”¹⁵

This is not to say that Xunzi’s functionalist vision of ritual lacked profundity. Even though Xunzi returns again and again to the ordering function of ritual without regard for any metaphysical agency per se, the principle of order itself takes on cosmic significance:

“Through rites Heaven and earth join in harmony, the sun and moon shine, the four seasons proceed in order, the stars and constellations march, the rivers flow, and all things flourish. Men’s likes and dislikes are regulated and their joys and hates made appropriate. Those below are obedient, those above are enlightened; all things change but do not become disordered; only he who turns his back upon rites will be destroyed. Are they not wonderful indeed?”¹⁶

This is Xunzi at his most poetic, and we may wonder whether these remarks really imply that Xunzi thought that ritual “made the sun and moon shine,” or if they reflect ingrained assumptions concerning the correspondence between cosmic and social order.

**Different Agency, One Vision**

Despite some fundamental differences between Confucius and Xunzi’s conceptions of ritual, we should not ignore the ways in which these two figures participate in one tradition. Confucius and Xunzi both see ritual as the arena in which ethical cultivation, emotional rectification, and social ordering can take place. Both visions of ritual emphasize
disciplined balance between sensuousness and rigidity. And both value personal and social harmony as the goal of self-cultivation. Despite differences in the ideas concerning the agency of virtue and the source of authority, there is no doubt that Xunzi participated in the tradition founded by Confucius. It is interesting that the early tradition could accommodate such different interpretive approaches to one of its most central topics. But in the end, the reverence for *li* and for the power of Virtue to harmonize the world garners awe from both philosophers. Xunzi, usually the rationalist, writes: “The meaning of ritual is deep indeed. He who tries to enter it with the kind of perception that distinguishes hard and white, same and different, will drown there. The meaning of ritual is great indeed. He who tries to enter it with the uncouth and inane theories of the system-makers will perish.”

Perhaps it was reverence for the seeming mystery of ritual, regardless of what stood behind its potency, that united these authors in their quest to see the sacred within the world of men.

“The Ceremonial” in Modern Contexts: Rituals of Dissent

When several thousand protestors gathered, and stayed, in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan between September 17 and November 15, 2011, critics asserted that the movement known as Occupy Wall Street (OWS) lacked a coherent set of goals. Indeed, this occupational protest—perhaps the most significant in America since the university sit-ins of the 1960’s—coalesced through the efforts of several initially unrelated groups and diversified through the course of the protest into an array of sub-groups, each with a unique angle on the dissent at hand. While some people, including organizer and anthropologist David Graeber and critical theorist Judith Butler, dismissed the idea that the movement needed to articulate a clear set of goals, a governmental model did eventually emerge through which participants attempted, through consensus, to articulate a unified set of demands.

This attempt, however, came relatively late in the course of the occupation, and it is arguable that the movement, while perhaps successful in bringing widespread attention to the issues of wealth disparity and corporate corruption, failed to lead to substantive changes in government or corporate policy.
But, as Sheehan Moore observes in his account of the McGill University student protests of 2011, the exclusive focus on demands and goals—only the “whys”—of a protest is insufficient in as much as it “obscures [the protests’] material nature and erases the physical bodies of participants.” Moore asks, “What would it mean to treat forms of protest like occupations not only as declarative—i.e. as political statements—but also as embodied and spatial practices?” or, as I would suggest, as rituals. Moore looks to critical anthropologists like Ghassan Hage and Miriam Ticktin to explore how the resonance of occupation hinges on the embodied experiences of participants and the spatial interactions that articulate disruption and reorganization—the disruptive staying, sitting, or living in a contested space with symbolic significance—and not so much on the assumption that their political demands will be immediately met. Perhaps, as argue Judith Butler and Edward Soja, the bodily practice of occupation works to create an alternative political imaginary, a haunting sense of possibility, what Hage characterizes as an “animation of social forces and potentials that lie dormant in our midst.” Occupation is, above all, a mode of “performativity,” in which an alternative reality opens up—in the case of OWS, a reality in which the machinery of corporate influence and inequity could be interrupted—and in which participants can experience themselves as ethical agents in an imagined reordering of society. As Moore writes, “The performative capacity of bodies is key to understanding the material aspects of occupation. It is performativity that disruptively opens up [the alternative space of political possibility] by redefining, if only for minutes or days, the limits of politics [that operate via the creation and maintenance of old orders].” So occupational protest—clearly a type of ritual for reasons I will specify—is an intervention, a geographic reconfiguration, and a performance that becomes meaningful in the experience of participants for the way that it awakens landscapes of possibility—what Butler, in commenting on the occupation of Tahrir Square, characterizes as a fresh animation of physical, social, and cultural spaces. Moore nicely summarizes:

“Occupations and similar forms of protest, as physical manifestations of bodies into contested spaces, rewrite the parameters of those spaces and allow us to participate, feel, and hope differently, even if only briefly. When it is over, we might be ‘haunted,’ to use Hage’s word, by what was made possible during those minutes, days, or months, even as the immediate causes of the occupation fade from memory.”
In the performative dimension of protest—that is, in the spatial interactions and bodily engagements involved in disruptively occupying a significant place—we can see the features of ritual. Now it is true that contemporary theorists of religion would have an easy time showing that occupational protests—with their reorganizations of social and physical space, their deployment of symbolic media, and their rhetoric of renewal—constitute ritual activity. But recall that I want to rely on Confucian conceptions of ritual to evoke the sense of transformative power and elegant vision of human flourishing that is included in Confucianism’s appraisal of ritual. This is important because rituals of dissent—occupational protest, in particular—open up an enchanted space of political possibility, and the harmonic magic and awesome capacity of these performances to ethically orient their participants find voice in classical Confucian conceptions of \( \text{li} \).

Ritual as the Arena for Ethical Cultivation and the Actualization of Ideal Society

Recall that ritual, for Confucius and Xunzi, was foremost an arena for the cultivation of virtue. Of course any characterization of virtue is essentially normative, reflective of the values of a specific culture situated within history. So Confucius’ vision for ritual as a way to perfect “gentlemanly” virtues reflects the ethics and etiquette that were important in aristocratic settings in ancient China. But we can generalize this conception to understand ritual as an occasion for the imaginative and disciplined activation of an ideal moral world. So in performances of political protest aimed at disruption and sociopolitical reformation, participants act out their own membership in an idealized community that is based on the ethical principles undergirding the new politics that the protest is trying to facilitate. For Occupiers at Zuccotti Park, an alternative political economy of consensus government and resource sharing was activated in expression of the protesters’ ideal ethical vision—a vision which, while containing many variations on radical politics, could generally be characterized as an egalitarian ethos of fair resource distribution, true democracy, and communality. And while the protest unfolded spontaneously over the course of two months without anyone really knowing how the occupation would end or what it would amount to, the whole enterprise did entail a set of social and cultural “disciplines.” A relatively well-organized local society emerged
that included protocols for governance, the maintenance of educational resources such as a “People’s Library” of over 5,000 books, and the creation of networks for communication within the encampment, all indicative of organizational discipline in service of a vision of ideal community. In addition to these instances of “social discipline,” certain “cultural disciplines,” or unspoken standards of discourse, physical interaction, and even dress, were, of course, apparent, although it must be admitted that OWS ultimately incorporated a broader socioeconomic, political, and cultural spectrum than one might have expected. But this diversity makes sense in light of the inclusivity implied in the protest’s egalitarian ethos, and the acceptance of diverse voices amounted to an iteration of one of OWS’s prime cultural disciplines.

At any rate, it seems that the Zuccotti Park occupation, despite its anarchistic appearance and inspiration, entailed a disciplined performance of an ideal community that stood on a foundation of a specific egalitarian ethics. In other words, the occupation became an arena to actualize, experience, and train in an ideal ethical vision, not unlike Confucian ceremonies that stood at the center of a system of self-cultivational practices aimed at moral rectification in the service of an ideal society.

Ritual as Preservation of Distinctions

While Xunzi and Confucius stand in agreement as to the capacity of ritual to ethically mold a person, Xunzi emphasizes the role of ritual in maintaining social distinctions. Even though the Occupy Movement positioned itself as a retaliation against the kinds of social stratification perceived to inhibit human flourishing, the movement nonetheless invoked a sense of social distinction and class identity through the rhetoric of the “99%.” While this rhetoric of the 99% was based on IRS and Congressional Budget Office income distribution data as represented by the economist Joseph Stiglitz in early 2011, the “We are the 99%” slogan came to stand as the central signifier of identity for the Occupy participants. By claiming membership in the 99% of the population who have failed to benefit from the exponential increase in wealth enjoyed by the top-earning 1%, participants located themselves within a specific model of socioeconomic (and cultural) reality. As a performance, the chanting and display of the 99% slogan served to crystalize a specific picture of social and cultural reality in which participants could maintain their positionality. This slogan, of course, became the
most enduring symbol of the Occupy movement altogether, as it became a rallying cry and identity marker for left-wing (and occasionally extreme right-wing) activists across the country. It is significant, then, that the enduring signifier of the movement was not a specific political demand, but rather a statement of identity. All told, this slogan became a powerful symbol that could be deployed in locating oneself and others in a specific interpretation of social, economic, and cultural reality. As such, “We are the 99%” was a ritual tool for the configuration and maintenance of distinctions, to use Xunzi’s terms, and its “performance” evidences the ceremonial nature of this kind of protest.

To regard the 99% slogan and its efficacy in positioning participants in a stratified vision of reality as a ritual tool resonates with Xunzi’s “social functionalist” model for ritual, and is also reminiscent of the late Catherine Bell’s theory of ritualization. Bell uses the term “ritualization” to describe a field of subjectivity-generating activity situated within a web of other social practices. Bell imagines ritual as a tool for the ongoing construction of power relations through the configuration of social bodies that “maintain complex micro-relations of power.” So ritualization, for Bell, does not merely generate coercion by crafting social bodies within power schemes imposed from above, but rather functions to generate power through mutual negotiations of horizontally localized forces, a process which then masks itself as representing apriori orders of experience. Ritualization is a negotiative process in which subjects are produced through their participation and ultimate consent in replicating localized, horizontally dispersed
power relations. So while Xunzi’s model for ritual does not explicitly entail horizontal or consenting negotiations of power relationships, it does work to replicate social orders that were discursively naturalized to correspond to fundamental realities. Likewise, the rhetoric of the 99% was a performative tool designed to articulate a set of power relations—depicting the overconcentration of power in the 1% and the lack of representation for the 99%—that were internally and mutually developed (“horizontally negotiated,” to use Bell’s terminology) rather than imposed from above. In fact, a few of the OWS protesters openly self-identified as belonging to the 1%, indicating their willingness to adopt the subjectivity that was being ritually constructed in Zuccotti Park. As a ritual act, the performance of the 99% slogan was a repeatable way to articulate and configure a subjective reality commensurate with the ethical vision shared by the protestors. In the “ritual space” of Zuccotti Park, protestors could define themselves through the semiotic act of “performing” the 99% slogan, thus generating a specifically defined subjectivity that could interface with the various other practices taking place within the Occupation. This is a case of performative utterance, a feature common to all ritual activity, and a case of social ordering and positioning—the maintenance of distinctions—that Xunzi sees at the heart of ritual practice.

Moral Harmonics, Power, and Play

Most striking in Confucius’ vision for ritual is the notion of Charismatic Virtue, or Dé (德). As mentioned, this concept knows no analogue in English, as it refers to the divine correlation between the will of a ruler, the needs of his people, and cosmic order. The meaning of Dé in the context of ritual has to do with a kind of metaphysical influence obtained by the ruler through ethical perfection—a perfection achieved in the proper execution of ritual. So, from this point of view, the proper elegance through which a ruler folded his robe or arranged offering vessels on the sacrificial altar could endow him with a cosmically resonant moral authority, through which he could naturally and beneficently rule his world.

While this concept may be entirely foreign to our secular democratic culture, especially in the context of political protests premised on a vision of deep egalitarianism, we should recognize that this Charismatic Virtue entails, at its root, a conviction in an inherent socio-natural harmony that can be discovered and activated through human
practice. We can then see how rituals of dissent entail a similar orientation towards harmonization with a high moral order, directed towards a vision of human flourishing. In activating this vision through occupational protest, participants may experience enhanced connectivity with fellow human beings, a powerful sense of rectitude, and may find themselves swept up in the transformative power of community and personal agency. And there is a sense that the protest will ignite change in some undeterminable way. There is a conviction that the images and discourses generated from within the “ritual space” of the protest will resonate outward and transform the views of the public in ways that are commensurate with the moral order that the protestors wish to instantiate. We see here that occupational protest is meant to produce a kind of influence that overflows the boundaries of the occupied space and harmonizes the world with the intentions of the participants, a collectively-activated Dé of sorts. There is conviction on the part of the participants in the power of their performance to influence and harmonize society in a way that captures their vision of human flourishing. As Ghassan Hage so nicely articulates in his description of the outcomes of “critical anthropology” (an academic dissent practice), the opening of an alternative political imaginaire is powerfully transforming and enduring, and participants are left “haunted” by what they experienced of themselves while engaging in disruption. Hage characterizes such practice as “akin to the shamanic act of inducing a haunting; it encourages us to feel haunted at every moment of our lives by what we are/ could be that we are not… we are invited to become aware of and to animate certain social forces and potentials that are lying dormant in our midst. It incites what was not causal to become so.”²⁹ So there is transformative magic produced in the disruptive occupation and reimagining of physical and social space. And this is why Butler and Gaeker insisted that the Occupy movement did not need to articulate coherent political demands. The performance of dissenting embodiment—the actual disruption, transformation, and re-inhabitation of a contested physical (and therefore social) space—is enough to induce a powerful transformative kinesis without relying on the second-order conceptualizations and abstractions involved in articulating political demands within “normal” lines of redress. I see this as analogous to the logic of Dé in as much as there is conviction in the capacity of performances themselves to produce and emanate a transformative power, just as the sage king Shun was able to rule by “becoming reverent and taking his seat facing south. That is all” (Analect XV.5).
All this talk of magic and idealization is not meant to minimize the potency, and thereby the dangers, of political dissent. Multiple occurrences of illegal police violence were documented on the streets surrounding Zuccotti Park (and in other cities in which occupiers set up camp). Declassified documents also show that federal intelligence agencies closely monitored the protests through a Joint Terrorism Task Force. Clearly, these acts of official surveillance and police violence indicated that whatever was happening in and around the occupied spaces was regarded as threatening. This is despite the fact that the occupiers were simply staying in a contested space and were arguably doing nothing illegal and applying no real political or economic pressure to the entities against whom they were engaged. So these “rituals of dissent” really do involve the production and emanation of a transformative power through enacting (rather than just articulating) a specific moral vision and imagination of possibility. The authorities seemed to have recognized this fact, and their disproportionate response actually demonstrates the potency of what can be produced through performativity, or “the ceremonial” in dissent practices. 

Finally, recall Analect XI.26, the story of the young Confucian who, having been granted authority over a principality, rather than immediately attend to governance, elected to “go bathe in the Yi River and enjoy the breeze upon the Rain Dance Altar, and then return singing to the Master’s house.” Confucius praises this student because “Only he has transcendent aspirations, only he is able to stir up the sounds of Virtue… his diligence is certainly something with which one with sagely Virtue would feel an affinity.” This enchanting passage reminds us of how the power of Virtue is communicated through aesthetic play. Whereas the self-serious work of governance unfolds in a disembodied space of discourse, embodied performances entailing artistry and play are more directly connected to the production and communication of Virtue. There is no question that the Occupy movement included a profound playfulness, despite the seriousness of the inequities against which it stood. In fact, the very inception of the movement is attributed to the Canadian magazine Adbusters, known for its outlandishly satirical and design-inspired leftist content. In the summer of 2011, Adbusters ran content suggesting that “America needed its own Tahrir”, and published a poster of a ballerina posing on Wall Street’s iconic Charging Bull statue. (Ironically, the caption on the poster reads: “What is our one demand?”) Then, in August of 2011, 49 nude artists (three of whom were arrested when they were unable to put their
clothes back on before being caught by police) participated in a street performance called “Ocularpation: Wall Street,” meant to comment on the lack of transparency in Wall Street dealings. And when the occupation of Zuccotti Park materialized in earnest one month later, musicians, artists, actors, and celebrated academics joined together to participate in a spectacle that included music, artwork, puppetry, poetics, and a general leftist aesthetic. As in all protests, a certain theatricality was inextricable from the act of dissent. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a protest, at least on American soil, that does not involve some sort of theatrics, art, and music. This is significant because it indicates that the heart of protest lies not just in the declarations, arguments, and demands that a group of people place on the powers that be, but rather in the very humanity—expressible through artistry and play—of the participants as they craft an aesthetic space out of which the influence of their ideal vision can directly flow. The spectacle of the Occupy movement—not to mention images from Tahrir Square, or Hong Kong’s Umbrella Revolution—are deeply memorable; footage of congressional committee meetings and city council sessions are not. Only through the artistry, imagination, and earnest commitment to a moral vision do protests succeed in becoming memorable events that promise transformation—a haunting, as Hage says it—for all those involved.

Conclusion

The question remains as to why we would make any effort to interpret political protest—what I call “rituals of dissent”—as a type of ritual or ceremonial activity. These protests take place irrespective of how the participants define their activities. Participants are presumably motivated by real frustrations and the desire to do something about the inequities they perceive in society. But recall how the Occupy movement was lambasted for lacking coherent aims. Participants were sometimes characterized as confused reactionaries, or as freeloading miscreants: starry-eyed idealists uninterested in taking up “proper” lines of political recourse. Failing to make coherent arguments or to stay within “normal” protocols for redressing dissent, the Occupy movement suffered from what was essentially a failure on the part of the public to recognize and take seriously the ceremonial dimensions of the movement. Even if the ceremonial nature of these protests, with their performativity, aesthetic play, and moral idealism, were to be disclosed, the oc-
ocupational tactics could still be derided as ineffective and wasteful. So in showing how the performances, practices, and discourses of occupational protest take up the elements of ritual that were so important to a classical tradition, we see that something profoundly human is actually taking place. Just as people in pre-modern societies looked to ritual to organize social life and to orient, rectify, and empower themselves, so our secular world retains, usually in unacknowledged ways, a definite ritual impulse.

Nothing could be more distant from the social values of Confucianism than anarchist-inspired political protests like the Occupy movement. And the hierarchical social stratification that was naturalized and valorized by classical Confucians is precisely what the Occupy movement tried to dismantle through disrupting (at least in an imagined way) the political economy on which such stratifications hinges. But reinterpreting occupational protest with attention to the embodied, imaginative, and performative dimensions, over and above strict attention to the declaration of “real” political goals, highlights that these practices very much hinge on the power of the ceremonial. Acknowledging the presence and the power of the ceremonial within an entirely secular situation not only calls into question the distance that we tend to place between the secular and the sacred, but it also reveals something profoundly human in how we construct self and society. Perhaps the ceremonial is an inescapable feature of human life, and if so, why not look to a tradition that was revered for its power to inspire, edify, and transform individuals within a vision of human flourishing? But most important to consider is the possibility that our Weberian disenchantment is unfounded; practices and performances that invoke ideal moral worlds, organize social reality, and overflow with transformatively harmonic power—all features of what the Chinese would call lǐ, ritual—promise a sense of enchantment that may still be harnessed in service of a vision of human flourishing.

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Notes


3. Philip Ivanhoe, in Ethics in the Confucian Tradition, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002) suggests that the Confucian tradition is best understood as a tradition of “virtue ethics” in as much as it defines its ethics around concepts of universal virtue rather than pragmatic or legalistic criteria.


6. Rén (仁) has been translated by some scholars as humaneness or humanity, referring to the kind of virtue that represents the best of human emotions and morals. I will here go with “human goodness” in light of the picture I am depicting of the Confucian vision of human flourishing.

7. I will capitalize Virtue when referring to Dé to distinguish it from the other cultivational virtues of humaneness, justice, kindness, and so forth.


11. Ibid., 8.

12. Ibid., 89.

13. Ibid., p. 89

14. Ibid., 90.

15. Ibid., 91.

16. Ibid., 94.

17. Ibid., 95.


20. Ibid., 12.

21. Ibid., 7.


26. Statistics from a Fordham University survey of OWS participants found 80% self-identifying as slightly to extremely liberal, 15% as moderate, and 6% as slightly to extremely conservative. Cited on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street.

27. Joseph Stiglitz, “Of the 1% by the 1%, for the 1%,” Vanity Fair, May 2011.