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## Introduction: China's Ancient Rites and Rituals

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Understanding rites and rituals is one of the most important keys to understanding ancient China. According to the twentieth century scholar Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990), rituals are at the heart of Chinese culture. The entire system of rites and protocol in ancient China was both practical and transcendental. It guided governmental administration on a national level and it informed the spiritual lives of the Chinese people. For more than two millennia, *lixue* 禮學, the specialized study of Chinese rites and rituals, has been one of China's richest areas of study.

Following the twentieth century collapse of the imperial system and the subsequent radical changes in China's social structure, the traditional system of rites and propriety was often blamed for China's backwardness. The discipline of *lixue* itself also lost favor in academia. With the resurgence of China's strength and influence, however, research in the last few decades on China's cultural identity has led to a reassessment of the value and importance of *li* 禮.

China has experienced a cultural renaissance both in society and in academia. Within this renaissance, the study of *li* has taken a central position. Scholars from different backgrounds such as history, documentology, philosophy, and sociology have contributed many new perspectives on this old discipline. The current issue of our journal has chosen four articles with valuable contributions to this field, with the hope of representing at least a part of the current state of modern research of *lixue* in China.

In his article, Hu Xinsheng 胡新生 discusses the definitions and characteristics of *li*. He explains that among all the manifestations of Chinese *li*, its ceremonial aspect is the most important. Hu goes on to declare the two most

definitive characteristics of Chinese *li* are its performative and procedural features. Such characteristics have left indelible marks on Chinese culture, spreading even to the larger East Asian cultural sphere.

One concept that sometimes stands in opposition to *li* is *su* 俗, which encompasses the ideas of vulgar, common, unrefined. Zhang Shishan 張士閃 explores the complex relationship between *li* and *su* in Chinese society, with the two sometimes at odds and sometimes influencing each other and growing in tandem. Together they form the foundation of Chinese societal structure, both in ancient times and today. Zhang uses this perspective to achieve a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Chinese state and society.

Gu Tao 顧濤 explores how Chinese *li* evolves when exposed to a challenge from an outside culture. Since the middle ages, culture imported from foreign lands, especially Buddhist culture, has had an undeniable impact on China's traditional customs. Gu's article takes an interesting example as a starting point—sitting postures—to demonstrate how Chinese customs were influenced by Buddhist culture. In the end, Chinese society adopted the use of chairs and tables as opposed to the traditional custom of sitting on mats, which demonstrates the flexibility of China's *li*.

One important benchmark in the history of Chinese rites and rituals was when much of the *li* culture was reformulated in the Song dynasty (960–1279). Similar to Gu Tao's article on sitting positions, Lu Minzhen 陸敏珍 discusses *li* from the perspective of daily life. In particular, Lu investigates how Confucian scholars attempted to create a "Confucian lifestyle," or *jiali* 家禮 (household rituals), and spread it throughout the common people in an effort to ensure a position of orthodoxy for Confucianism. This campaign contributed greatly to China becoming an undeniably Confucian country.

The four articles presented here are by no means an exhaustive picture of China's *lixue*. They give us an idea of how to approach this large subject from a variety of perspectives. They show that, like the rest of Chinese culture, it evolves over time. A truly complete review of China's rites and rituals would not be restricted to ancient times, but would also include which and how certain customs have survived to today. The study of Chinese rites continues to be one of the central keys to understanding Chinese culture.