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The Characteristics of Rituals and Their Imprint on Chinese Culture

Hu Xinsheng 胡新生

Professor, School of History and Culture, Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China

xinshenghu@sdu.edu.cn

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Abstract

The concept of *li* (rites) in ancient China encompasses three levels of meaning, namely: the rituals and ceremonies themselves, moral ethics, and a system of political hierarchy. While these three levels are related to each other, they each carry specific characteristics. When people today discuss issues such as the origins of rites, they rarely analyze the concept of rites according to these different levels, thus causing the topic at hand to be vague, ambiguous, and inchoate. In most research, both “rites” and the “rituals” refer specifically to the level of the ritual *per se*. “Rites” include both folk rituals and state rituals, the latter of which refers to what is commonly termed the “rituals,” that is, the part of rites with state background and political coercion. The fundamental difference between the rituals and other statutes and institutions lies in rituals’ performative, symbolic, and standardized nature. Their performative and symbolic nature bestowed upon the rites a special significance and publicity function which transcend everyday life. At the same time, their standardized and formulaic nature made these rites highly organized and institutionalized, while allowing them to reinforce the social and political hierarchy. The highly mature rituals in ancient China allowed both characteristics of these rituals to be developed to their fullest, thus giving rise to Chinese culture’s emphasis on performance and form.

Keywords

rites – rituals – the history of the rituals – Chinese culture

Since the emergence since the 1980s of an increasingly active discussion about China's rituals, the research on the history of Chinese rituals gradually has become an important subfield of Chinese history. Currently, the most under-researched area in the field lies in several fundamental questions relating to the rituals. For instance, topics such as the inner meaning of the concept of rites, the definition of the concepts of "rituals and ceremonies," the boundaries of research of the history of the rituals, the fundamental properties and basic characteristics of rituals, as well as the impact of a highly developed ritual system on Chinese culture, have always lacked satisfactory explanations. The aforementioned gaps in the research, from the perspective of research methodology, can be attributed to a lack of conceptual analysis. When ritual scholars during ancient times, as well as modern-day academics, discuss the rituals, their grasp of these fundamental issues is mostly informed by their academic sense and professional experience developed over time, and they generally do not conduct logical analysis of the relevant concepts. Naturally, one can avoid the many problems associated with defining these concepts by such fuzzy treatment of the subject. However, this can also give rise to confusion and ambiguity in the meanings of certain expressions. Based on this understanding, this article will begin by analyzing the multiple meanings and nuances of the concept of "rites," examining in turn the characteristics of rituals as well as the intrinsic connections between those characteristics and the culture of rites in ancient China, thus striving for a systematic discussion of basic issues associated with the system of rites.

1 The Multiple Levels of the Concept of "Rites"

The concept of "rites" in ancient China took shape gradually during China's long history. The continuous extension and accumulation of its connotations eventually gave rise to a concept with multiple meanings.

In the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1046 BCE), the oracle bone character *feng* 豐 (later 禮) was a composite character comprising *gu* 鼓 (drum) and *jue* 珏 (jade), which effectively denoted "ritual" using a combination of music and jade.¹ The composition of the character 豐 indicates that the Shang dynasty had already abstracted the concept of ritual from a large number of patterned ritual acts. However, the word 豐 in the divination texts mostly refers to vessels for wine and liquor, and it is rarely used in the sense of ritual. By

1 Lin Yun 林澐, "Feng feng bian" 豐豐辨, in *Guwenzi yanjiu* 古文字研究 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 12: 183.

the Western Zhou period (1046–771 BCE), the use of the word “rite” to refer to rituals and ritual music was more common, but the Western Zhou people did not yet regard rituals as an important moral and political concept. The *gao* 誥 (announcements) of the early Zhou period in the *Shangshu* 尚書, the Western Zhou poems such as “Zhou song” 周頌 and “*Daya*” 大雅 in the *Shijing* 詩經, and the Western Zhou bronze inscriptions, especially royal edicts, do not mention the idea of following rites and rituals. This indicates that the concept of ritual in the Western Zhou period still mainly refers to rituals and ceremonies but rarely involves other aspects.

It was not until the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) that rites began to carry a connotation relating to the sociopolitical hierarchy and ethics, and they were bestowed with an extraordinary importance above that of general moral norms. After the collapse of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the control of the royal family over the feudal lords was greatly weakened, and the downward shift of power and the reorganization of political structures led to unprecedented turmoil and chaos. In particular, the so-called *li beng yue huai* 禮崩樂壞 (the collapse of rites and music) exerted a profound impact on people of the time. These changes prompted the aristocratic politicians of the time to contemplate the fundamental issues of social control and political structure. Reflecting on history, they found that Western Zhou society was stable because of the effective balancing and controlling role of “rites” – an institution and mechanism in its own right – while society during the Spring and Autumn period was chaotic and disorderly because of the destruction of the set of ethics and social and political institutions represented by the rites and music system. As a result, the concept of “rites,” which was not given much attention up to this point, was elevated to unprecedented heights. Voices advocating the upholding of rituals and promoting the rule of rites emerged, thus giving rise to a new and hugely influential trend of thought which attached much importance to rites. Both the core meaning and connotations of rites were greatly expanded, so much so that they went far beyond the concepts of *de* 德 (virtue), *xing* 刑 (punishment), *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) and *you* 友 (friendship) which had gained currency since the Western Zhou period. By this point, rites had become one of the most revered concepts which far surpassed all other general moral norms in their importance.

The idea of ritual as defined during the Spring and Autumn Period consisted of the following three levels of meaning:

- 1) Rites in the superficial sense refers to various procedural ceremonies, rituals, etiquette, and things related to them. It is a generic term for rituals associated with the young males’ capping ceremony, weddings, funerals, sacrificial rites, and various formalities in social settings.

- 2) Rites is an ethical and moral system that includes the moral requirements of filial piety, *ci* 慈 (generosity), *zhong* 忠 (loyalty) and *xin* 信 (trustworthiness), and is the highest morality and ethics that governs the various virtues. This is the rite of propriety and ritualism. Yan Ying 晏嬰 (d. 500 BCE) defined rites as such:

When the ruler commands well, the subject follows. When the father is kind, the son is filial. When the elder brother is loving, the youngest brother is respectful. When the husband is mild, the wife is compliant. When the mother-in-law is kind, the daughter-in-law is obedient. That is in accordance with ritual propriety.²

This refers to rites in the sense of ethics and morality.

- 3) Rites refers to the political hierarchy, political order, and a series of corresponding decrees and regulations. This is rites in the sense of the hierarchy and the polity. When Shen Shushi 申叔時 (fl. 614–591 BCE) of the Chu state talked about the prince's education, he advocated "teaching the rites, so that he is aware of the hierarchy," "understanding the hierarchy to educate him in the rituals."³ Shen Shushi's emphasis is clear – the essence of rites is the hierarchical system. The chapter "Fuguo" 富國 in *Xunzi* 荀子 contains a classic expression of rites on this level: "In ritual, noble and lowly have their proper ranking, elder and youth have their proper distance, poor and rich, humble and eminent, each have their proper weights."⁴

Seen from the perspective of the development of thought, the establishment of the concept of rites encompassing the three aforementioned levels of meaning resulted from the increasing depth, complexity, and richness of people's understanding of rites, a process which began during the Shang dynasty. People first perceived the concept of "ritual" only in the sense of gifts and presents, in particular specific tools, objects, and wines which could be seen or tasted. Later, they gradually synthesized various ritual objects and various worship acts, and abstracted the concept of ritual. Then, they discovered the familial relationship and moral requirements behind the rituals. Finally, they developed a decisive hierarchical structure underpinning the rites and norms.

2 Stephen Durrant et al., trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2016), 1671.

3 *Guoyu* 國語 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1998), 528.

4 Eric L. Hutton, trans., *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 84–85.

Differentiating the various layers of meaning of the concept of rites is of great significance in developing an accurate grasp of rituals in China. Some influential works on the history of the rituals published in recent years lack analysis of the concept of rites, discussing issues such as the so-called “origins of rites” in a vague and ambiguous manner.⁵ I consider this to be inappropriate, because such issues can only be discussed after dividing them into several specific questions such as the origins of rites, the origins of morality, and the origins of the hierarchical system, among others. If we do not make necessary distinctions with respect to the complicated and inchoate concept of “rituals” in the broadest sense, any discussion of the basic questions associated with “rites” is bound to become a futile exercise, since the topic in question cannot be nailed down to allow for meaningful discussion.

2 Ceremony and Ritual

The first layer of rituals, that is, the superficial ceremonies and related systems, are the main subjects of research in the history of Chinese rituals. Ceremonies are related to politics, the economy, the military, the legal system, and morality, but they are different from any of them, and have their own unique content and nature.

Rituals on this level are generally referred to as ceremonies or rituals. Ceremonies or rituals can be regarded as having an inclusive relationship: ceremony is a broader concept which can refer to all the ceremonial rites as well as the associated systems, whereas a ritual is merely a part of ceremony. Ceremony encompasses folk ceremony and state rituals; state rituals refer to the official system of rituals. In other words, rituals can also be referred to as ceremonies, but they are politically institutionalized rituals enacted by the state.

Both folk ceremony and state rituals possess the unique essential attributes of ceremony. It is precisely based on these characteristics of rituals that people are able to differentiate between ritual activities and non-ritual activities, as well as ritual systems of the state and other state policies. What needs to be discerned now is, what are the distinctive characteristics of ceremony and ritual? What are the unique characteristics that define ceremony (ritual) rather than something else?

There is now a wealth of research on ritual issues in the field of cultural anthropology, in addition to a relatively mature system of ritual theory. Some

5 Chen Shuguo 陳戍國, *Zhongguo lizhi shi: xianqin juan* 中國禮制史·先秦卷 (Changsha: Hunan jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 9–15.

monographs have pointed out that “ritual is used to indicate an organic composition of a series of different acts or representations performed by performers, formal, continuous and non-fully coded”; “ritual is a performance performed according to a plan or improvised, through which a transformation is formed, that is, the transformation of everyday life into another connection”; “ritual refers to an arrangement or procedure that brings together a series of symbolic acts according to a certain cultural tradition.”⁶ These expressions emphasize the performative, symbolic, and procedural nature of rituals. In understanding and summarizing the characteristics of rituals in ancient China, we can do well to draw on the discourse of cultural anthropology on “rituals.”

Comparing the duties of ancient Chinese ritual officials and the contents of ritual literature, it is apparent that the essential properties and main characteristics of rituals include two aspects: one is performative and symbolic, and the other is formulaic and standardized. The so-called ceremonies are a series of performative and formulaic acts that constitute a system of social and political behavior. The so-called ritual is a series of regulations and systems established by the state for performative and formulaic behaviors and related things.

All ceremonies simultaneously possess two kinds of characteristics – the performative and the formulaic. Inversely, all social and political activities which possess two kinds of characteristics – the performative and the symbolic, as well as the formulaic and the standardized – qualify as rituals. The factors distinguishing ritual activities from non-ritual activities are: whether the activity in question is performative (symbolic) in nature; and whether it has been stylized and standardized.

Since any ritual must be both performative and formulaic, and given that both characteristics are related to each other, when determining if a given action or system qualifies as a ritual or belongs to the system of rites, or when defining the boundaries of the research of the history of rituals in China, one must give due consideration to both characteristics. An action or system which is formulaic but not performative, or performative but not formulaic, does not qualify as a ritual and, by extension, also does not qualify as a subject of research in the history of the system of rites. For instance, while such systems as the official system, land system, tax and corvée system, military system, education system, criminal law system, and lineage system described in the *Zhouli* 周禮 are highly formulaic, hierarchical, and institutional in nature, they are not performative or symbolic activities of a specialized nature and should not be regarded as being part of rituals. (Some generalized works on the study of

6 All of the above definitions are cited from Peng Zhaorong 彭兆榮, *Renleixue yishi de lilun he shijian* 人類學儀式的理論和實踐 (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2007), 16, 14.

rituals include discussions on “feudal officials,” “taxation and rent,” “military system and military tax,” “school system,” and “criminal law system,”⁷ which actually fall beyond the scope of the system of rites.) The focus of the research on rituals is on the rituals associated with these systems as well as the symbolic methods used to present these systems, for instance the appointment ritual associated with the system of state officials and the symbolic methods of expressing these systems, such as the ordination rituals related to the official system, the system of chariots, state robes, ribbons, and vessels, the system of mourning rituals related to the patriarchal system, the ancestral temple system, and the system of mourning dress. Most of the documents describing the ritual system in the past dynasties, such as *Lizhi* 禮志 and the *Tongdian* 通典, adopted such an approach.

3 The Performative and Symbolic Nature of Ceremonies

Most ritual activities, including various actions performed during ceremonies, are performative in nature, while most of the various tools and utensils involved in ceremonies are symbolic in nature. Being performative and symbolic in nature, ceremonies are detached from the practical aspects of everyday life. This characteristic is the most important indicator distinguishing ceremonies from other sociopolitical actions as well as their associated systems.

We may analyze the performative and symbolic nature of rituals from two angles. First, ceremonies are different from daily actions as well as sociopolitical activities which are performed naturally. Ceremonies are specially choreographed to emphasize the significance of a certain event and to create a solemn atmosphere. Ceremonies are intended to express and reinforce such things as actual social relations, political systems, diplomatic relations, military aspirations, and conceptual beliefs, which are closely related to the content being expressed but are not the content itself. Owing to their emphasis on expression and form, rituals are deliberately decorative, aesthetically pleasing, imitative, virtual, performative, and symbolic. Second, ceremonies are distinct from individual or private behavior, and they involve activities with a special significance for a group or society as a whole. Given that a performative or symbolic action must be undertaken with public knowledge so that others can see and feel them, rituals must be public and demonstrative in nature.

7 Qian Xuan 錢玄, *Sanli tonglun* 三禮通論 (Nanjing: Nanjing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1996), 325–434.

A ceremony is a special set of actions performed according to social traditions or state regulations. Once individuals participate in a ceremony or ritual, they must do what is specifically required of them, thus entering a serious, solemn, and passionate situation and atmosphere that is different from everyday life, and they can only return to their daily lifestyle upon the conclusion of the ceremony. The intention of holding rituals is to transcend the ordinary and showcase the special; therefore, it can be said that it is the nature of ceremony to enhance certain emotions and behaviors. The “five rites” (*wuli* 五禮) described in the chapter “Dazongbo” 大宗伯 in *Zhouli*⁸ and the rituals recorded in *Da Tang kaiyuan li* 大唐開元禮⁹ invariably constitute performative and symbolic actions, and are clearly different from non-performative regulations and systems. For example, the field ceremony held by the Zhou king every spring mainly involved performative farming by aristocrats and officials, which was different from usual agricultural activities; the ceremony of courtesy was merely a reception ritual and performance in diplomacy, with most of the actual diplomatic negotiations taking place behind the scenes; the ceremonies of drinking in the countryside as well as banquets hosting feudal lords and court officials involved performative drinking; and the district archery contests (*xiangsheli* 鄉射禮) and royal shooting contests (*dasheli* 大射禮) involved performative archery. Among ancient ceremonies, the auspicious rites (*jili* 吉禮) of sacrificing to heaven, terrestrial spirits, and human ghosts as well as the inauspicious rites (*xiongli* 凶禮) or funeral rites specifically conducted to honor the deceased, as described in the chapter “Dazongbo” of the *Zhouli*, were rituals created from religious beliefs that were more distant from daily life and were more performative.

The performative nature of ceremonies also manifested in the fact that participants had to conform to certain special requirements in terms of their grooming and appearance. Ritual texts during the pre-Qin (Paleolithic–221 BCE) era are replete with descriptions of participants’ “ritual movements” (*lirong* 禮容) which involved the facial expression, posture, and demeanor during the ritual. According to *Shiji* 史記, Xusheng 徐生 was an expert in rituals during the Western Han dynasty (206 BCE–8 CE) who was unfamiliar with the Confucian texts describing rituals, but specialized in the required “ritual movements” – the school headed by him in fact consisted of professional

8 Sun Yirang 孫詒讓, *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義, comp. Wang Shaohua 汪少華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2015), 33, 34:1557–1661.

9 Xiao Song 蕭嵩 et al., *Da Tang Kaiyuan li* 大唐開元禮, vol. 646 of *Wenyuange Siku quanshu* 文淵閣《四庫全書》 (Taipei: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1982–1986).

actors.¹⁰ The “Rongjing” 容經 chapter in Jia Yi’s 賈誼 (200–168 BCE) *Xinshu* 新書¹¹ comprehensively describes various kinds of rituals and the cultivation of manners and gestures. The fact that the study of expression and grooming could become a kind of ritual for a period of time was uniquely derived from the performative nature of rituals, and it was unlikely to occur in political, military, or legal fields outside of the ritual system.

Most of the ceremonial costumes and artifacts in the ceremonies were not actually used in daily life, but were instead specialized items used during ceremonies. The so-called “six costumes” (*liufu* 六服) of the king and other ceremonial costumes recorded in the “Sifu” 司服 chapter of *Zhouli*,¹² the mourning dress recorded in the chapter “Sangfu” 喪服 of *Yili* 儀禮,¹³ the combination of the Nine Tripod Cauldrons (*jiuding* 九鼎) which symbolized supreme authority and objects which represented the status of aristocrats, various custom-made burial objects, the seals and ribbons used by the emperors and officials at all levels after the Qin (221–207 BCE) and the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) – all of the above are iconic objects or ceremonial items. They are integral parts of rituals and ceremonies, possessing a performative feature which transcends everyday life. The only difference lies in the fact that the performance is conducted via a symbolic object as opposed to a certain action.

The performative nature of ceremonies also suggests that ceremonies are invariably public activities, which even carry a propagandistic element. Private acts do not qualify as rituals. Some actions, for instance fasting before important rituals, might appear to be conducted in private. In fact, its requirements in terms of venue, time, and conduct of the participants conform to societal norms and conventions. When one commences a fast, it is akin to announcing to others that one is about to enter or has entered a special phase; therefore, it is effectively a public activity. Such fasting comprises part of the ceremony, and belongs to a unique form of performance. Fasting out of individual motives, which is unrelated to public activities (for instance, fasting conducted by individual followers of a religion), belongs to individual actions instead of the realm of ceremony.

10 *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 121.3771.

11 Jia Yi 賈誼, *Xinshu jiaozhu* 新書校注, annot. Yan Zhenyi 閻振益 and Zhong Xiaoxiao 鍾夏校 (Beijing: Zhonghuashuju, 2000), 227–46.

12 Sun Yirang, *Zhouli zhengyi*, 40.1953–2000.

13 Hu Peihui 胡培翬, *Yili zhengyi* 儀禮正義, coll. Hu Zhaoxin 胡肇昕 and Yang Dayu 楊大堉 (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2018), 21, 1747–2165.

4 Transformation of Ceremonies into Formulaic and Standardized Actions

Far from being random and haphazard acts, ceremonies are organized behaviors which conform to certain rules. This characteristic is interrelated with the performative and symbolic nature of ceremonies. In other words, a ritualized performance is not a spontaneous or arbitrary performance, but rather a formulaic performance. It involves a set of fixed patterns of performance and symbolism that have been handed down from generation to generation or designed in advance.

The transformation of ceremonies into formulaic and standardized actions mainly manifests in the following four areas. 1) Fixed procedure. Ceremonies generally involve a relatively standard process with a clear chronological sequence. *Yili* and other similar books on rituals mostly narrate the entire process according to chronological order, beginning with preliminary preparations, followed by the core ceremony itself, before concluding with post-ritual ceremonies. These ceremonies include both opening and closing parts, and consist of clearly defined and sequenced actions. 2) Fixed venue and orientation. This characteristic bestows upon the ceremony a clear spatial dimension, since the venue of the ceremony, the position and orientation of participants, the position and orientation of objects, and the route taken by the participants all conform to the relevant guidelines or conventions. Ritual in ancient China places the greatest emphasis on the significance of the “position.” Is the left superior to the right, or vice versa? Should the procession face south or north? How should the seats be arranged? Should there be dedicated seats? All of the above are extremely important questions in the ritual which cannot be taken lightly. 3) Fixed model of speech and actions. There are rules for cupping hands, standing rules for ascending and descending, a fixed routine for singing, a specified order for crying and dancing, a special method for drinking, and an archery ritual for shooting. The rhetoric in the ceremony also often follows a fixed pattern. 4) Fixed artifacts and costumes. The type, size, and quantity of artefacts, the type of ceremonial costume worn, and the type of banner and chariot used all conform to a certain class and specification. In societies with developed rituals, “ceremonial artifacts” invariably form a neat sequence. The more developed the system of rituals, the more detailed the regulations on artefacts and clothing. The characteristics above transform rituals into a solemn and well-sequenced activity.

Looking at a specific ritual, we find that its transformation into a formulaic and standardized action was gradually completed over a long historical period. When a certain ritual first took shape, it invariably contained many elements of casualness and spontaneity. It was only during the following period

that people imposed an increasing number of regulations which grew stricter with time, after which the various procedures gradually stabilized and became fixed. The process of forming a ritual is a gradual process of perfection and maturation of the relevant formulae, which finally became established.

How should we judge if a ceremony was formulaic to a large degree and if the relevant regulations were supported by political entities and political authorities? This is a difficult question for scholars who attempt to discuss the origins of the system of rites. Pending the emergence of more reasonable and operable criteria, I am inclined to date the formation of the ancient Chinese state and ritual based on two traditional criteria, that is, the emergence of bronze vessels and the development of writing. Other criteria are unable to replace the emergence of bronze vessels and writing as the gold standard in this regard. (Some monographs have employed criteria used in historical research, such as the emergence of social division of labor or the patriarchal family,¹⁴ but such criteria are inapplicable to the research of the prehistoric period.) A society that uses pottery ritual vessels and bone tool ritual vessels in large quantities is likely to have relatively low productivity and a relatively simple political organization; such a society would neither place much importance on complex rituals and ceremonies, nor attach legal significance to them. A society which uses jade artifacts for its rituals is likely to imbue its rituals with an unfettered “shamanism” flavor; such rituals are likely to have a low level of institutionalization and lack sustainability. I do not agree with expressions such as “the ritual during the Longshan period.”¹⁵ While it is true that the size of burial sites as well as the quantity and combination of burial objects were relatively fixed by the Longshan 龍山 period (ca. 2500–2000 BCE), and that those burial sites share historical connections with the ritual during the Shang and Zhou (ca. 1046–256 BCE) dynasties, we can hardly argue that it constituted a ritual which was mandated by a political authority.

The formulaic and standardized nature of rituals is key to the upholding of the hierarchical order as well as the maintenance of the unity and authority of cultural traditions. The key function of standardization is to uphold and reinforce orderliness, while orderliness is mainly dependent on the hierarchical order. Seen in this light, standardization is suggestive of the establishment of a hierarchical order. Hierarchy comprises the cornerstone of “rites.” Following the emergence of rites, the relationships between the senior and the junior as

14 Tian Changwu 田昌五, *Zhongguo gudai shehui fazhanshi lun* 中國古代社會發展史論 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1992), 4.

15 Gao Wei 高煒, “Longshan shidai de lizhi” 龍山時代的禮制, in *Qingzhu Su Bingqi kaogu wushiwu nian lunwenji* 慶祝蘇秉琦考古五十五年論文集 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989), 235.

well as the superior and the inferior became condensed into various formulae, so much so that rituals are really concentrated manifestations of sociopolitical hierarchies as well as the associated moral requirements.

5 The Impact of Rituals on Traditional Chinese Culture

Qian Mu 錢穆 (1895–1990) once told a foreign scholar, “To understand Chinese culture, one has to stand higher to see the heart of China. The core idea of China is ‘ritual.’”¹⁶ Not only are Qian’s words an accurate reflection of historical reality, they are also akin to a formula in their conciseness and impact. We would do well to view them as a key to understanding the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture.

Ancient China’s deep love of rituals, their sophistication, and the richness and complexity of its ritual literature are unmatched by any country or nation in the world. The seventeen chapters of the *Yili*, which detail the rituals of the nobility in the 5th century BCE, are trivial and dull, but the Chinese state has always mandated the study and research of those classics since the Han dynasty. The state’s designation of texts that are as trivial and dull as *Yili* as classics is certainly a rare and curious phenomenon in the cultural history of the world. The sophistication of ritual literature reached unprecedented levels during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty 梁武帝 (r. 502–549) of the Southern dynasties (420–589), and in fact remained unmatched in later ages. During that period, several ritual experts compiled “annotations of the rituals” based on the *wuli* 五禮 (five types of rites), totaling 1,176 volumes and 8,019 articles.¹⁷ Without an extreme preference for complex rituals and customs, it is hardly imaginable that both the emperor and court officials of the Liang dynasty (502–557) could have mustered the passion and endurance required for such an undertaking. Du You’s 杜佑 (735–812) *Tongdian*, compiled during the Tang dynasty (618–907), was intended to trace the evolution of regulations and systems of successive dynasties preceding the Tang. The entire book consists of 200 volumes, of which as many as 100 recorded rituals.¹⁸ All of these phenomena show a strong Chinese character.

16 Chen Yong 陳勇, *Qian Mu yu 20 shiji Zhongguo shixue* 錢穆與20世紀中國史學 (Beijing: Jiuzhou chubanshe, 2017), 247.

17 *Liangshu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 25:382.

18 Du You 杜佑, *Tongdian* 通典, annot. Wang Wenjin 王文錦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 40–140, 1119–3586.

The highly developed status of rituals is bound to give full play to the two inherent properties of rites, namely, their performative and formulaic nature. This would in turn leave a distinct imprint on traditional Chinese culture which emphasizes performance and standardization.

Appropriate grooming and performance in one's conduct is a form of restriction and regulation of people's physiological desires or animal instincts, and is a requirement of social life and a manifestation of human civilization. Proper etiquette implies self-restraint, calmness, grace, and refinement, and reflects a good upbringing and the demeanor of a noble gentleman. The essence of etiquette is respect, modesty, gentleness, and tranquility, which denies and rejects unbridled indulgence, barbaric behavior, and vicious competition. Through the advocacy of Confucianism, the beauty of ritual and the solemnity of the ritual system are deeply ingrained in people's hearts, and the demeanor of being gentle, respectful, and frugal has become a common paradigm respected by the whole society, which undoubtedly had a significant impact on shaping the Chinese cultural character and the spirituality of the Chinese people.

A culture under the influence of rituals advocates peace and elegance. The ancient Chinese ritual system experienced major changes during the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Ritual during the Shang dynasty retained a strong "shamanism" flavor and carried distinct elements of witchcraft, so it showed more characteristics of mania and restlessness. Following the establishment of the Western Zhou dynasty, Chinese ritual gradually shed the influence of primitive witchcraft and developed in a more humanistic and moralistic direction. After the formation of the Confucians, Confucius and his followers consciously rejected the "strange occurrences, feats of strength, rebellion, and gods" (*guai li luan shen* 怪力亂神) and from then on, the manic, vulgar, and barbaric elements of the rituals diminished even further. The ritual life, with its emphasis on performance and grooming, was generally a quiet, elegant, and civilized life. The ceremony performers may have had their own personalities, but when they performed ceremony, they would purge impulsiveness, irritability, wildness, barbarism and other negative traits (at least temporarily), and become a calm, gentle and courteous person.

Cultures under the influence of rituals revere humility and courtesy. Self-humility and respect for the other person (human or divine) is the driving force behind the occurrence of ritual ceremonies and is the essence of etiquette. One hardly comes across advocacy of high profile or arrogant behavior in traditional Chinese thought. The promotion of modesty and the rejection of pride can be said to have been the consistent creed of Chinese life for three thousand years. The establishment of such values goes hand in hand with the highly developed ritual system.

The culture under the influence of the ritual system reveres solemnity, discipline, subtlety, and introversion. It is the character of rituals and the value of traditional Chinese culture to pay attention to conventions and norms, to esteem solemnity, seriousness, and implication. What is casual, spontaneous, new, frivolous, and unsophisticated only belongs to the second or third class in traditional Chinese culture. Among first-class works of art, the solemn and somber style seems to be more respected than the dashing and elegant. This orientation is perfectly consistent with the character of the system of rites and the image of the gentleman in the Chinese mind.

The developed ritual system largely replaced the function of religion, allowing Chinese culture to consistently maintain its cultural characteristics of being highly affirmative of secular life, in addition to a strong emphasis on practicality and pragmatism. The dominant religion in ancient China was a “diffused religion” centered on ancestor worship,¹⁹ and the Chinese were not generally interested in transcendental religious theories. Instead of dividing the world into a binary world of secular and transcendental opposites, the Chinese were more accustomed to infusing solemn and sacred emotions into humanistic life centered on rituals. This kind of life centered on rituals is secular and sacred at the same time; it is not an institutionalized religious life, but it contains many religious emotional factors. It is in this sense that the American scholar Herbert Fingarette (1921–2018) referred to rituals as “Holy Rite.”²⁰ Traditional Chinese rituals have actually played the same role as religion in terms of satisfying people’s spirit, upholding traditional morals, and uniting ethnic groups.

The well-developed ritual also played a special role in strengthening cultural identity and ensuring the long-term continuation of Chinese civilization. Objectively speaking, the standardization of rituals facilitated national and cultural unity and the long-term continuity of culture. The numerous rituals in ancient China inculcated every individual with values and morals passed down from generation to generation, and served as an important channel for moral education and cultural inculcation. The wider the variety of rituals and the more frequently the rituals were conducted, the deeper their influence on members of society. Even in times of national cataclysm and social upheaval, the displaced survivors still clung on to the ancestor worship, funeral, and marriage rituals and other rituals that have been passed down from generation to

19 C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961).

20 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1998).

generation. As a result, they succeeded in passing down their traditional morals and values by resuming ritual life, in spite of these tribulations. The reason why Chinese civilization has endured through all the hardships is certainly closely related to the idea of “emphasis on rituals” advocated by Confucianism and the consequent continuity of ritual life.

A distinctive feature is often both a strength and a shortcoming. The results of the developed ritual system were not only positive, but the aberrant development of the performative and formulaic attributes of rituals also deeply scarred Chinese culture.

The performative nature of ceremony will inevitably bring about the question of whether the performance matches the true feelings. Ceremonial performances are easily disconnected from true feelings; this problem is prominent especially in the era of changes in the social structure. People who live in environments where rituals are highly developed and performative rituals in particular are especially fanciful cannot help but modify their behaviors to suit societal expectations. Excessive politeness, insincere humility, inordinate emphasis on “face,”²¹ even pretentiousness, hypocrisy, and dishonesty are all negative traits which are virtually omnipresent among the Chinese people, who have been immersed in rituals and conventions for millennia. The formation of overly pretentious habits in society can be attributed to the emulation of those habits, commonly practiced by the leadership, by those in subordinate positions. If the ruling classes were overly concerned with ritual and obsessed with frequent and meaningless political performances, the masses would inevitably embrace hypocrisy and pretentiousness.

The development of the ritual system also created a cultural trait that placed special emphasis on formality and standardization. Ancient Chinese rulers seem to have been fixated on the formality and standardization of rituals and showed a high degree of fascination with standardization and all things related to it. In terms of ritual design, the Confucian design of the weeping ritual in mourning was arguably one of the worst excesses of ancient Chinese rituals. This kind of funeral stipulated clearly when participants ought to remain silent, and when they ought to beat their chests and wail loudly (the chapter “Jixi” 既夕 in *Yili* mentions “the order to cry” [*ming ku* 命哭]²²). At first glance, such a weeping ritual might seem to emphasize restraint and order. Yet, it completely destroys the solemnity in a funeral, is replete with hypocritical

21 Arthur H. Smith, *Chinese Characteristics* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1986); J. Macgowan, *Men and Manners of Modern China* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1992); Chester Holcombe, *The Real Chinaman* (London: B. F. Stevens, 1895).

22 *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1146.

performances by the living, and lacks reverence for the souls of the dead. The emphasis on standardization in rituals was originally intended to prevent excesses in individual behavior, but crudely designed rituals, when taken to an extreme, only serve to suppress and stifle the best of human nature. This is certainly a tragic result of the mature development of the system of rites.

The essence of standardized rituals lies in the maintenance of the hierarchical system, and the custom of attaching great importance to formulaic rituals has greatly strengthened the sense of hierarchy. From top to bottom, Chinese society is fixated with the details that mark differences in status, such as sitting and standing, as well as acting in sequence, and follow them meticulously and religiously. After following these rituals for a prolonged period, participants internalize them as well as their underlying values, thus becoming automatically inclined to follow established norms and defer to authority. When forced to abandon the prescribed path, many people feel lost and disoriented. A concomitant development of this sense of hierarchy is the arrogance of superiors as well as subservience and bootlicking among subordinates. This certainly represents a pathological state in the cultural realm.

Finally, it should be noted that the performative and formulaic nature of rites had a multifaceted impact on culture, which also became evident in the cultures of neighboring countries as Chinese culture spread. Under the influence of traditional Chinese rites and rituals, a “ritual culture sphere” took shape in ancient East Asia. As long as there was a well-developed ritual system, the performative and formulaic nature of rituals – both essential attributes – would be given full play, thus leaving a cultural imprint of emphasis on performance, symbolism, standardization, and conformity to norms. In this sense, revealing the two attributes of rituals not only helps to offer a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, but also provides a new perspective to fully understand the cultures of other countries and nations in the “ritual culture sphere.”

Translated by Zhong Yi-Ming

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