

Confucianism and Ritual¹

Hagop Sarkissian
Associate Professor of Philosophy
The City University of New York
Graduate Center & Baruch College

Abstract: Confucian writings on ritual from the classical period (ca 8th-3rd centuries BCE), including instruction manuals, codes of conduct, and treatises on the origins and function of ritual in human life, are impressive in scope and repay careful engagement. These texts maintain that ritual participation fosters social and emotional development, helps persons deal with significant life events such as marriages and deaths, and helps resolve political disagreements. These early sources are of interest not only to historians and Sinologists, but also to philosophers and social scientists; they contain enduring insights into the nature and status of rituals more generally. This chapter surveys classical Confucian theories of the origins and functions of ritual, and summarizes some strident critiques of them from contemporary thinkers in the Mohist, Daoist, and Legalist schools of thought. The aim is to indicate key issues as well as promising strategies for analyzing ritual in Confucian thought and action.

Keywords (5-10): Confucianism; rites; ritual; ceremony; ritual propriety; tradition; etiquette

Introduction

Rituals are a ubiquitous feature of human life, and Confucian writings on ritual from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (ca 8th-3rd centuries BCE) are impressive in scope and repay careful engagement. We have, for example, instruction manuals listing codes of conduct (e.g. what to wear and say on ritual occasions, what emotions to convey) alongside treatises explaining the origins of rituals in human history, together with theoretical accounts of the functional purpose of rituals in human life. Taken together, these sources interest not only historians and Sinologists, but also philosophers and social

¹ This is a draft paper, in preparation for *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism*, edited by Jennifer Oldstone-Moore. Please do not cite without writing first: h.sarkissian@gmail.com

scientists; they contain enduring insights into the nature and status of rituals—a ubiquitous feature of human social existence.

As we will see, the rites were awe-inspiring to these thinkers, who saw them as constituting the means by which sage kings of the past civilized the world. They were concerned that this civilizing effect was disappearing as ritual participation waned continuously during the centuries in question. From their perspective, the decline of ritual coincided with the decline of good will toward others, the erosion of social cooperation, and the removal of protocols that help resolve political disagreements—the very stuff that allows groups of persons to live together in harmony. Put another way, the answers to questions on how to live well invariably invoked rituals. The Confucians therefore saw themselves as preserving and perpetuating an awe-inspiring cultural inheritance—the core of a *dao* 道 or guiding way of life. Because they were so devoted to the rites, the Confucians were motivated to defend them and articulate just why they ought to be esteemed. This forced them to clarify their own understanding of ritual in the face of strenuous and strident criticisms from rival thinkers.

What follows is an overview of some components of the broad—and intellectually fascinating—category of ritual in the Confucian tradition. This includes Confucian theories of how ritual functions, the origins of the rituals as discussed in the tradition, and defenses of ritual against criticisms. Given the variety and complexity of the topic this essay will not be exhaustive, but will indicate key issues as well as promising scholarly strategies for analyzing ritual in Confucian thought and action.

Ceremonial Rites

No single term in English can capture the variety of meanings of *li* 禮 (rites; ritual propriety; ritual decorum) in early Confucianism. Upon first reading the *Lunyu* (論語) or *Analects*, for example, one quickly learns that *li* has a wide semantic range. Perhaps the most concrete, determinate meaning of *li* refers to formal ceremonies that celebrate or commemorate major events in the life of the individual, the family, the clan, or the state. This included ceremonies that marked the solstices, the seasons of planting and harvest, the signing of treaties, proclamations of new leaders, as well as weddings, funerals, and memorials for deceased ancestors.

Ritual qua ceremony was thought to move and transform its participants. “When we say, ‘the rites, the rites,’ are we speaking merely of jade and silk?” asks Confucius

(Kongzi 孔子, ca. 6th century BCE). "When we say, 'music, music,' are we speaking merely of bells and drums?" (Analects 17.11). These are rhetorical questions; ritual and music (here understood as ceremonial orchestrations) were revered because of their salutary effects on people. The pageantry, the sounds, the careful coordination of the various performers, the meaning and emotion conveyed by every move and gesture, each detail was thought to be impactful. We are told, for example, that upon hearing the Shao music (the music of the royal court of the sage king Shun), Confucius is unable to savor meat for three months, so moved was he from the performance (Analects 7.14). Indeed, ceremonial music of this kind is heavily moralized throughout the text (e.g. Analects 3.25 and 15.11).

Delight in and a sense of awe towards ritual is a prominent theme of this period in general (Eno 1990), and early Confucians wondered what about ritual made it so powerful. When Confucius is asked about the prestigious Di sacrifice (only performed by kings) he says "I do not understand it. One who understood it could handle the world as if he had it right here," and pointed to the palm of his hand (Analects 3.11). Similarly, Xunzi (荀子, a 3rd century BCE follower of Confucius) marvels at how rituals bring proper balance to a person's emotions during their observance.

Ritual cuts off what is too long and extends what is too short. It subtracts from what is excessive and adds to what is insufficient. It achieves proper form for love and respect, and it brings to perfection the beauty of carrying out yi [what is fitting and right]. Thus, fine ornaments and coarse materials, music and weeping, happiness and sorrow—these things are opposites, but ritual makes use of all of them, employing them and alternating them at the appropriate times. And so, fine ornaments, music, and happiness are that by which one responds to peaceful events and by which one pays homage to good fortune. Coarse mourning garments, weeping, and sorrow are that by which one responds to threatening events and by which one pays homage to ill fortune. Thus, the way ritual makes use of fine ornaments is such as not to lead to exorbitance or indulgence. The way it makes use of coarse mourning garments is such as not to lead to infirmity or despondency. The way it makes use of music and happiness is such as not to lead to perversity or laziness. The way it makes use of weeping and sorrow is such as not to lead to dejection or self-harm. This is the midway course of ritual.²

² Xunzi, *The Complete Works of Xunzi*, tr. Eric Hutton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 209, modified.

Rituals channel, reshape and guide raw and universal emotions into appropriate gestures and expressions, fostering civilized acts and responses that conform to societal norms and role-specific paradigms (Sarkissian 2010a).

Rituals can only be efficacious, though, if individuals approach them with feelings of reverence and awe, which in turn imbue the ritual with a kind of sacred authority (e.g. Van Norden 2007; Sarkissian 2014). By submitting to the power of ritual and ceremony, by bringing to it the appropriate mindset, by being present and attentive to others and minding its details, one not only experiences profound emotion but also signals to others a sense of belonging. Thus, rituals not only transform the self but also bring about greater cohesion in the community at large.

In this way, rituals contribute to good governance. The *Analects*, for example, maintains that governing by coercive mechanisms and threats of punishment makes people evasive (and shamelessly so), whereas governing through impeccable character and observing ceremonial rites prompts people toward goodness (*Analects* 2.3). The “Ritual Movements” (*liyun* 禮運) chapter of the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) similarly maintains that ceremonies are a powerful tool of governing; through ceremonies, the ruler is able to clarify his intentions, reaffirm his status and his values, and leave the population free of questions or anxieties as to whether the government is ruling correctly, or whether the ruler merits fealty.

Ritual Propriety

A poem (#52) from the *Guofeng* section of the *Odes* reads:

Look at the Rat

Look at the rat; it's got its skin
Now look at this person without a dignified demeanor
A person without a dignified demeanor
Though not dead, what are they up to?

Look at the rat; it's got its teeth
Now look at this person without right bearing
A person without right bearing
Though not dead, what are they waiting for?

Look at the rat; it's got its limbs
Now look at this person without ritual propriety
A person without ritual propriety
Why not hurry up and die?³

This ode exemplifies the Confucian attitude to correct conduct. Rituals were seen as the only real basis for normatively correct social functioning. This goes beyond formal ceremonial occasions to encompass everyday manners and etiquette—the less formal and more fluid aspects of *li* that pervade everyday life.

In a well-known passage, Confucius' outstanding student Yan Yuan asks his teacher about *ren* 仁 or humaneness, the foremost virtue of humankind (*Analects* 12.1). Confucius replies, "Overcome yourself and return to ritual. If you are able to do so for a single day, all under the skies will respond with human kindness in turn. Human kindness must come from yourself; how can you rely on the lead of others?" When Yan Yuan inquires about specifics, Confucius replies, "If it doesn't accord with ritual do not look at it... do not listen to it... do not speak of it... do not move with it." Just as weddings and memorials have their own prescribed norms of behavior, so too the various ways in which we come to interact with others on a daily basis.

Familial and social roles bring this into focus. Consider the routines that constitute a person's life as it progresses over the years--what it means to be not just a child but a good child; not just a sibling but a good sibling; not just a student but a successful one that elicits appreciation and gratitude from one's teacher. According to the early Confucians, all roles, whether friend, neighbor, teammate, worker, teacher, supervisor or any other, have ideals that ought to be modelled. Terms connected to roles have a descriptive meaning (referring to anyone who falls under the category) and also a normative one, evident when we describe someone as a "true teacher" or a 'great ruler.' These roles are often comprised of dyadic pairs (e.g. teacher-student, ruler-minister), and provide concrete guidance on how to excel at them. It is in these roles that ritual finds its all-pervading presence in human life, where we must be attentive to our conduct in the ever changing roles we occupy, and reflect on how we would feel if we were the recipients of our own treatment.

³ Arthur Waley and Joseph Roe Allen, *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 43, modified.

Beyond role specific guidelines, everyday ritual concerns comportment more generally: wearing clean clothes, being amicable, honoring others' privacy, not flaunting one's good fortune, supporting others during hardships, and so on. Each of these may have ritualized aspects, though they can be more individualistic than what formal ceremonies demand and thus more conducive to personal style (Kupperman 1968; Kupperman 2010; Olberding 2007). Indeed, as noted above, merely complying with the formal aspects of ritual was considered inadequate. Yan Yuan cannot simply ape ritual's dictates but must himself embody their spirit and give them a human face.⁴

When we observe ritual decorum we signal to others that they matter, that they are affirmed and respected. Rituals convey respect and fellow-feeling in easily discernible ways, forestalling conflict and protecting individuals from offending, shaming, or insulting one another (Haines 2008; Olberding 2015; Olberding 2016; Sarkissian 2010b). Rituals enable one to signal emotions in predictable, discernable ways. Without such shared conventions, society would lack a 'cultural grammar'--shared norms and rules with which to structure social life (Li 2007). With such shared conventions social existence can have a magical, almost sacred quality (Fingarette 1972; Sarkissian 2010a).

Along these lines, Youzi's statement on ritual from Book I of the *Analects* provides perhaps the best summary of the Confucian position:

1.12 Master You said, "When it comes to observing rites, harmony is most valued. It is such harmony that made the Way of the Former Kings so beautiful, and great and small followed it alike. There's something that doesn't work, though: you recognize harmony and try to harmonize, yet without regulating yourself by the rites--this will not work either."

Rituals are indispensable, then, to forming, shaping, perfecting, and signaling human affect in vivid, easily interpretable fashion. Communities of individuals thereby form networks of associations that foster widespread societal cohesion (Sarkissian 2018).

The Origins of Ritual

The Confucians believed that with the decline of ritual observance came the breakdown of trust and the seeds of socio-political disorder. But where did ritual come from in the first place? How did ritual take hold as a part of civilized society? If rites were introduced at a

⁴ See, e.g., Paul Rakita Goldin, *Confucianism* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 22-23.

particular point in history, there must have been a time before rites. How do we get from a world without rites to one with them? Classical sources give two broad categories of explanations, which, for present purposes, might be labelled “constructivist” and “naturalist.”⁵

The Constructivists

Some early commentators maintained that sages-- uniquely talented historical persons-- established the rites for the benefit of humankind. Though having the same nature as other persons, they were driven by a desire to escape chaos and bring order to human society. To do so, they developed rites to structure and order human emotions. Rites, in this sense, are a form of technology aimed at taming, cultivating, and shaping raw human emotion.

A canonical passage from the *Xunzi* expresses this perspective clearly.

From what did ritual arise? I say: Humans are born having desires. When they have desires but do not get the objects of their desire, then they cannot but seek some means of satisfaction. If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. If they struggle with each other then there will be chaos, and if there is chaos then they will be impoverished. The former kings hated such chaos, and so they established rituals and *yi* in order to divide things among people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking. They caused desires never to exhaust material goods, and material goods never to be depleted by desires, so that the two support each other and prosper. This is how ritual arose.⁶

The “Ritual Movements” chapter of the *Record of Ritual*, while downplaying struggle and chaos, also maintains that before the creating of rites people led a very primitive existence, sustaining themselves with raw foods, living in caves during winter and in nests during summer. They lacked civilization. The sages, though, changed everything. They created civilization:

They harnessed the benefits of fire, they smelt metal, and they shaped clay. By means of these things they constructed platforms with roofs, as well as palaces, houses, windows, and doors. They were able to grill, roast, boil, and cook [their

⁵ There is ongoing debate about how to interpret individual thinkers and texts. See, for example, Ivanhoe (1991), Hutton (2007a, 2007b), and Hagen (2007) for a debate about Xunzi and to what extent he might be considered a constructivist as understood here.

⁶ Xunzi, Xunzi, 201.

food]. They were also able to make various seasonings. They gained control over fibers so as to produce hemp and silk [for clothing]. By means of these things they nourished the living and tended to the dead. They were able to serve the spirits of the world. All [ritual] follows from this beginning.⁷

Further discussion of the creation of the rites is sparse. History records the bare fact that rituals were created, not how. Those details are lost. Nonetheless, the rites remain, at their core, the result of human artifice (*wei* 偽) (see Puett 2001).

Constructivists did not hold, however, that any set of rituals would be as effective as any other. The rites were created to cope with human emotions. Whether lust, envy, elation, soul-crushing sadness, the rites were constructed to help humans work through basic emotions while living in harmony with others. The rites, in other words, are responsive to and must deal with human nature. The “Record of Music” 樂記 chapter of the *Record of Rites*, for example, explains that the ancient sages constructed rituals by “taking persons as their standard” (人為之節), implying that we can identify normal or typical human reactions from abnormal, atypical ones.⁸

With this in mind, consider a passage from the *Analects* in which the student Zai Wo (elsewhere compared to a wall of dung) complains about the three year mourning period ritually required upon the death of a parent. He notices, sensibly, that prolonged ritual asceticism would hinder one’s progress in other worthy pursuits such as self-cultivation. What’s more (and once again sensibly) Zai Wo notices that the progression of the four seasons may symbolize a cycle of life, so a single year of mourning could represent the beginning and end of an entire person’s life cycle. Confucius’s response suggests that rituals are responsive to anticipated (i.e. normal) human emotional episodes, and so their form (in this case, the length of three years) are keyed to this normative conception of natural human grief. One year is simply insufficient. If one such as Zai Wo doesn’t feel the loss, well, there’s a deeper problem; he seems not to be humane (*ren* 仁). So there seems little point insisting on it.

Constructivists, then, think that rituals were created in response to these raw emotions, constraining what forms they can take.

⁷ Michael David Kaulana Ing, *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 108-109

⁸ Ing, *Dysfunction*, 26.

The Naturalists

The constructivist has a problem, though: if humans were initially uncivilized, whence the impulse to civility? If human nature is naturally disordered and uncultured, how can it produce the impulse to achieve order and create culture?⁹ Maybe the emotions themselves contain the seeds of an answer. If formal rituals correlate to basic emotional occurrences in people, then perhaps the emotions themselves are attracted—spontaneously and of themselves—to one course of action or other. From this view, the rites are not invented or created in response to human nature, but are instead expressions of it. Certain paradigmatic situations elicit certain paradigmatic (we might call them instinctual) responses, and these responses have within them the beginnings of a course of action that then forms the basis of a ritual.

Mengzi (孟子, or Mencius, ca 4th century BCE) claims, for example, that certain instinctual responses give rise to certain coping mechanisms. He sees ritual as a natural phenomenon, arising as individuals coordinate their responses to momentous happenings that are a part of the general human experience. In a much-discussed passage (3A5), Mengzi defends the lavish funerary rites for one's parents as a natural emotional reaction, something that even critics of extravagance such as Yizhi (a rival Mohist) find it difficult to avoid doing. Mengzi explains that Heaven affords humans a normatively correct common root in human affect and inclination, which expresses itself in very particular ways. One can try to go against these inclinations, but this would create internal tension, leading to confusion and incoherence. "Does Yizhi believe that a man's affection for his brother's child is just like his affection some neighbor's child?" The answer is so obvious as to be left unsaid. Natural human affect varies systematically, and so too should burial rites. Thus, frugality cannot match up with emotional demands of grief at the loss of a loved one. What follows is a fascinating account of the origins of ritual.

Now, in high antiquity there were some who did not bury their parents. When their parents died, they picked them up and cast them into a ditch. Another day, when they passed by, they saw that they were being devoured by foxes and wildcats and bitten by flies and gnats. Sweat broke out on their foreheads, and they averted their eyes to avoid the sight. The sweat was not because of what others would think but was an expression in their faces and eyes of what was present in their innermost hearts. They returned home and brought earth-carrying

⁹ For discussion, see Wong (1996) and related papers in Kline & Ivanhoe (2000).

baskets and spades to cover them over. Burying them was truly right, and filial children and benevolent people also act properly when they bury their parents.”¹⁰

We find a parallel account in the *Record of Rites*. In the “Questions on Mourning Rites” (Wen Sang 問喪) chapter, the three year mourning period chapter is deemed to be simply “the fruit of human sentiment” and the desire to perform mourning rites “is not sent down from the heavens or sent up from the earth; rather, it is simply [a matter] of human sentiment”.¹¹ For example, part of Confucian mourning rites throughout Chinese history has been the *fu* 復 ceremony, consisting of climbing on top of one's roof and calling upon the deceased to return. The explanation given of this rite is that it is what people already did spontaneously, a natural coping mechanism that had its origins in bouts of human despair.¹²

The naturalist is not committed to the idea that the rites originally emerged in their best, most beautiful forms. Mengzi, like other classical Confucians, held that the Zhou ('middle antiquity' in the paragraph below) perfected rites that began before them.

“In antiquity there were no rules concerning the inner or the outer coffin. In middle antiquity both the inner and the outer coffins were supposed to be seven inches thick, and this was true for everyone from the Son of Heaven to the common people. This was not simply for the sake of a beautiful appearance but because it allowed, at the last, for the full expression of people's hearts. If people were not permitted to do this, they could not feel satisfaction, and if they did not have the means to do it, they also could not feel satisfaction... Moreover, is it not a comfort to the mind to keep the earth from touching the bodies of those we love who have been transformed in death? I have heard that the noble person would not for anything in the world stint when it came to his parents.”¹³

So rituals arise out of natural affect and inclination, but they can be further refined (and were indeed perfected, by the Zhou) to best match and cope with the emotional needs that generate their existence in the first place.

However, if we consider this general way of looking at rites--that is, as a formalized expression of affective inclinations--then rites are, in a sense, part of the

¹⁰ Mengzi, Mencius, tr. Irene Bloom and Philip J Ivanhoe (New York: Columbia University Press), 60.

¹¹ Ing, *Dysfunction*, 26.

¹² Ing, *Dysfunction*, 195-196.

¹³ Mengzi, Mencius, 43.

coherent way that the natural world works. Continuing this line of thought, one might end up wondering whether rituals cohere and resonate with the broader world or even the cosmos at large. Indeed, we find such accounts in the “Ritual Movements” chapter of the *Record of Ritual*, where we are told that ritual must ultimately “be rooted in the heavens. [It] moves [down] to reach the earth, extends to [all] affairs, changes and follows the times, and assists in demarcating boundaries”.¹⁴ Ritual is so encompassing in its scope, that it must ultimately be rooted in something non-arbitrary, something that is itself orderly and structured and harmonious and all-encompassing.

Critics

Critiques of ritual observance emerge early in the classical period and continue throughout. Critics charge that rituals are elitist and wasteful, that they do not promote widely recognized goods like order and a vibrant population, and that their role in fostering harmony should be seriously questioned. Mozi (墨子), a 5th century BCE moral reformer, found the opulent practices of the nobility—paid for through exorbitant taxes and forced labor—to be morally abhorrent. He attacked in no uncertain terms those who adhered to lavish ritual norms. Consider funerary rites, as previously discussed.

“Nowadays... there must be an outer and an inner coffin, embroidered hide in three layers, jade emblems and jade already prepared, spears, swords, tripods, drums, pots, vessels, embroideries and silks, and funeral garments in countless layers as well as carriages, horses, women and musicians all prepared. They say the ground must be beaten down to make a road [to the grave] and the burial mound should resemble a hill. The interference with the business of the people and the wastage of their wealth cannot be calculated. This constitutes the uselessness of these [funeral practices].¹⁵

In considering elaborate funerals, there is the burial of much wealth. In considering prolonged mourning, there is protracted prevention of the conduct of affairs. Materials already produced are buried and there is a prolonged prevention of further production. To seek wealth in this way is like preventing ploughing but

¹⁴ Ing, *Dysfunction*, 24-25.

¹⁵ Mozi, Mozi, tr. Ian Johnston (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2009), 225.

seeking to reap. As a method of bringing about wealth it cannot work. Therefore, to seek to enrich the state like this is altogether impossible.”¹⁶

(Mozi makes similar arguments in “A Condemnation of Musical Performances”, and related critiques can be found in the syncretic *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (see Riegel 1995).) Even worse, according to Mozi, is that as experts and paid consultants on ritual the Confucian advocacy of extravagant burials is abhorrently self-enriching. Mozi writes, “When a rich man has a funeral, they are very happy and say delightedly: “This is a source of clothing and food.”¹⁷

Mozi finds it simply incredible that sages such as Yao, Shun, and Yu (heroes for Confucians and Mohists alike) could possibly indulge in such extravagance. (If they did so indulge, then why venerate them?) He claims, instead, that these sages were buried in plain, unremarkable fashion. From the Mohist perspective, the demanding rites of the Spring and Autumn period were discontinuous with the modest rites of the past, and were perpetuated only because of conservatism (e.g. “This is what is called ‘[considering] one’s habits convenient and one’s customs righteous”—presumably a common saying of the time).¹⁸

In the 3rd century BCE, Han Feizi (韓非子) pointed out the problems of trying to adjudicate these competing claims concerning the practices of the ancient sages. “Kongzi and Mozi both followed the Way of Yao and Shun and both claimed that they were the true transmitters of the Way of these sages, and yet the doctrines and practices that each of them accepted and rejected are not the same. Yao and Shun cannot come back to life, so who will determine whether the Confucians or the Mohists are correct?”¹⁹ Han Feizi pointed out that while there are those who find something to appreciate in each approach, they remain contradictory:

When participating in funeral rites, the Mohists wear winter clothes if it is winter and summer clothes if it is summer. Their inner and outer coffins each measure only three inches thick, and they only wear their mourning garments for three months. The rulers of the age consider this to be frugal and honor them. The

¹⁶ Mozi, *Mozi*, 217.

¹⁷ Mozi, *Mozi*, 355.

¹⁸ Mozi, *Mozi*, 227.

¹⁹ Han Feizi, *Han Feizi*, tr. Joel Sahleen, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, 2nd ed., (Indianapolis: Seven Bridges New York, 2005), 352.

Confucians, on the other hand, will bankrupt their entire household in order to provide a lavish funeral. They wear their mourning garments for three years, and so destroy themselves with mourning practices that they are forced to walk with a cane. The rulers of the age consider this to be filial and honor them.

But if one applauds Mozi for his frugality, one should condemn Kongzi for his wastefulness, and if one applauds Kongzi for his filial piety, one should condemn Mozi for his irreverence. Filial piety and irreverence, frugality and wastefulness—these are all features of the teachings of the Confucians and the Mohists, and yet their superiors honor them both equally.²⁰

Finally, while the Mohists argue that we ought to modify rituals in the direction of frugality, other critics question the need for rites whatsoever. In the *Zhuangzi*, for example, we find the following anecdote.

Zhuangzi was dying, and his disciples wanted to give him a lavish funeral. Zhuangzi said to them, I will have heaven and earth as my coffin and crypt, the sun and moon for my paired jades, the stars and constellations for my round and oblong gems, all creatures for my tomb gifts and pallbearers. My funeral accoutrements are already fully prepared! What could possibly be added?"

"But we fear the crows and vultures will eat you, Master," said they.

Zhuangzi said, "Above ground I'll be eaten by crows and vultures, below ground by ants and crickets. Now you want to rob the one to feed the other. Why such favoritism?"²¹

This is a striking way of making a basic critique: who is to say what a 'normal' or 'natural' burial rite consists in? What is the ultimate point of a lavish funeral? And how should we think of the greater cycle of life and death in which we, as humans, form only a small part?

Concluding Remarks

While the Confucian attitude toward ritual has been presented throughout this paper as consistently positive, Confucians also grappled with ritual's troublesome aspects. Clearly, many rituals were thought to be efficacious in ways that, on sober reflection, were unlikely

²⁰ Han Feizi, *Han Feizi*, 352-353.

²¹ Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi*, tr. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009), 117.

to be true. Xunzi, for example, states in rather blunt fashion that superstitious beliefs concerning the ability of human rituals to affect the natural world are simply false and ought to be eliminated. The natural world operates on its own and its workings cannot be affected through entreaties, sacrifices, and the like (see, e.g., chapter 17 “Discourse on Heaven” *tianlun* 天論). But even setting aside these kinds of superstitions about the power of ritual to affect natural phenomena, there are more basic problems that routinely plagued Confucians’ faith in ritual.

For example, the *Record of Rites* has recently been read as presenting a fundamentally tragic conception of ritual, since ritual performance routinely fails to instantiate order in a disorderly world (see Ing 2012). Ritual deviation is commonplace (whether owing to lack of resources or expertise, or misunderstanding the state of the world the ritual is meant to redress). So, too, is ritual failure. What is the connection between these phenomena? Confucians believed that some deviations from ritual were entirely acceptable (e.g. substituting silk hats for the more expensive linen in *Analects* 9.3), but having certainty about one’s judgments in such matters is difficult, and ritual failures might be easily linked to such deviations. Nonetheless, such modified rituals do sometimes work, and seemingly flawless ritual performances, by contrast, sometimes fall flat. Why? Grappling with these issues was both a source of profound anxiety as well as a spur to repositioning one’s sense of what rituals can and cannot do.

In spite of these tensions, though, ritual remains a source of fascination and veneration in the tradition. From specific descriptions of ritual performance to the more general statements about ritual’s place in human society and reflections and speculations on its origins and functional rationale, ritual is significant in key texts that lie at the very heart of the Confucian tradition. As a whole they constitute an incredibly rich and compelling portrait of ritual’s role in human life.

Bibliography

- Eno, Robert. 1990. *Confucian Creation of Heaven, The: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. Waveland Press.
- Goldin, Paul Rakita. 2011. *Confucianism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hagen, Kurtis. 2007. “A Response to Eric Hutton’s Review.” *Dao* 6 (4): 441–43.

- Haines, William A. 2008. "The Purloined Philosopher: Youzi on Learning by Virtue." *Philosophy East & West* 58 (4): 470–91.
- Hutton, Eric L. 2007a. "A Further Response to Kurtis Hagen." *Dao* 6 (4): 445–46.
- . 2007b. "Hagen, Kurtis, The Philosophy of Xunzi: A Reconstruction." *Dao* 6 (4): 417–21.
- . 2014. *Xunzi: The Complete Text*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ing, Michael David Kaulana. 2012. *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 1991. "A Happy Symmetry: Xunzi's Ethical Thought." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. *American Academy of Religion* 59 (2): 309–22.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Irene Bloom. 2009. *Mencius*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Johnston, Ian. 2009. *The Mozi: A Complete Translation*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Kline, T. C., III, and P. J. Ivanhoe. 2000. *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*. Hackett Publishing.
- Kupperman, Joel J. 1968. "Confucius and the Problem of Naturalness." *Philosophy East & West* 18 (3): 175–85.
- Kupperman, J. J. 2010. "Confucian Civility." *Dao* 9 (1): 11–23.
- Li, C. 2007. "Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between li and ren in Confucius' Analects." *Philosophy East & West* 57 (3): 311–29.
- Olberding, Amy. 2007. "The Educative Function of Personal Style in the Analects." *Philosophy East & West* 57 (3): 357–74.
- . 2015. "From Corpses to Courtesy: Xunzi's Defense of Etiquette." *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 49 (1-2): 145–59.
- . 2016. "Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy." *Ethics* 126 (2): 422–46.
- Puett, Michael. 2001. *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Riegel, Jeffrey. 1995. "Do Not Serve the Dead as You Serve the Living: The 'Lüshi Chunqiu' Treatises on Moderation in Burial." *Early China* 20: 301–30.
- Sahleen, Joel. 2005. "Han Feizi." In *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, 2nd ed., 311–61. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Sarkissian, Hagop. 2010a. "Confucius and the Effortless Life of Virtue." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 27 (1): 1–16.

- . 2010b. “Minor Tweaks, Major Payoffs: The Problems and Promise of Situationism in Moral Philosophy.” *Philosopher’s Imprint* 10 (9): 1–15.
- . 2014. “Ritual and Rightness in the Analects.” In *Dao Companion to the Analects*, edited by Amy Olberding, 95–116. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.
- . 2018. “Confucius and the Superorganism.” In *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self*, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe, Owen J. Flanagan, Victoria S. Harrison, Hagop Sarkissian, and Eric Schwitzgebel, 305–20. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Van Norden, Bryan W. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Waley, Arthur, and Joseph Roe Allen. 1996. *The Book of Songs*. New York: Grove Press.
- Wong, David B. 1996. “Xunzi on Moral Motivation.” In *Chinese Language, Thought, and Culture: Nivison and His Critics*, edited by Philip J. Ivanhoe, 202–23. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company.
- Ziporyn, Brook. 2009. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.