

# Chapter 12

## Ritual, Harmony, and Peace and Order: A Confucian Conception of Ritual

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### 12.1

To begin, I shall discuss how Confucians understand ritual. In particular, the discussion will focus on the importance, the nature and the social context of ritual from a Confucian perspective. For many people, ritual is no more than a set of formal rules or procedures that people observe in celebrations or ceremonies. These rules or procedures are social conventions that have a role perceived as far less important than other legal or constitutional bases of society. Confucians hold a very different view on ritual, however. For Confucians, ritual has a far more important role to play, and is not merely a set of formal rules or procedures used in celebrations or ceremonies. In what follows, I shall propose an interpretive framework to characterize the Confucian conception of ritual.

The framework begins with a basic view that Confucian ritual is a social practice. As a social practice, it consists of a body of rules or norms of proper behaviour of various levels of specificity which governs action in every aspect of life. It also embodies a fundamental set of moral values, gives structure and coherence to human society, and provides a total cultural context in which human life can flourish. Since these descriptions are quite abstract, in what follows I shall make some elaborations on the view.

#### *12.1.1 Ritual as Ceremonial Rites and External Codes of Behaviour*

Confucian ritual consists of a set of concrete rules which includes ceremonial rites such as mourning rituals, sartorial rituals, and birth rituals as well as an

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established or external code of behaviour. These rites and code of behaviour govern action in every aspect of life, regulating every movement, glance, and word. In responding to the question about the specific details of Confucian ritual, Confucius said, “Do not look in a way that is contrary to ritual propriety, do not listen to what is contrary to ritual propriety, do not speak in a way that is contrary to ritual propriety, and do not move in a way that is contrary to ritual propriety.” (*The Analects* 12:1) What Confucius said succinctly expresses the idea that by deploying a set of ceremonial rites and an external code of behaviour, ritual governs action in every aspect of life. It is exactly these rites and code of behaviour that provide standards of excellence for assessing all kinds of activities in human life. When individuals try to achieve those standards of excellence, fundamental good internal to the practice of ritual is realized.

### ***12.1.2 Ritual and Morality***

The fundamental good internal to the practice of Confucian ritual is *ren* or humaneness which is regarded as the supreme virtue by Confucians. In *The Analects*, there is a passage which records a conversation between Confucius and his favourite student Yan Hui

Yan Hui asked about *ren*. Confucius said, “Discipline yourself and return to ritual is what constitutes *ren*.” (*The Analects* 12:1)

Confucius’ answer to the question raised by Yan Hui is important. It provides a clue to understand how Confucius sees the relation between ritual and morality. For Confucians, ritual is not merely a set of ceremonial rites and an external code of behaviour. It is also spoken of as a virtue, and an ethical attitude that leads people to treat others with respect and deference, and its ultimate goal is to cultivate a person to become a humane person. What is more important is that for Confucius, ritual is not only a means to develop *ren* in a person but also constitutive of the virtue. Thus, the relation between ritual and morality is not an instrumental one but a constitutive one. That being the case, ritual not only cannot be separated from morality but also is a manifestation of morality.

*Ren* is not only the supreme virtue but also the ‘total virtue’ in the sense that it includes all other more specific virtues or values such as earnestness and generosity. In *The Analects*, there are passages which attempt to explain *ren*

Whoever is able to put five things into practice throughout the whole world is certainly *ren*. These are earnestness, consideration for others, trustworthiness, diligence, and generosity. (*The Analects* 7:6)

It is also important to note that whenever Confucius wanted to clarify *ren*, he often returned to the ethical values that concern individual relationships: filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and sincerity. These ethical values match the concrete personal relationships such as those between fathers and sons, between older and younger brothers, and among friends. In *The Analects*, it is written,

The exemplary person devotes his efforts to the fundamental, for once the fundamental is established, the Way will grow therefrom. Filial piety and fraternal respect – are they not the fundamental of a person? (*The Analects* 1:2)

Virtues connected with friendship such as loyalty and sincerity are also the logical consequences of *ren*. As Confucius said,

When acting on another's behalf, shouldn't you always be loyal? When dealing with friends, shouldn't you always be sincere? ... Make loyalty and sincerity your first principles. (*The Analects* 1:3 and 1:8)

A young man, when at home, should be filial, and when out in the world should be respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow with love, and cultivate the friendship of the good. (*The Analects* 1:6)

The relationship between *ren* and other more specific virtues, then, can also be used to explain why there exists a strong connection between ritual and morality from the Confucian perspective. Since *ren* is the total virtue, to fully develop *ren* requires cultivating the specific virtues in a person and that in turn requires the person to go through some sort of moral training. For Confucius, practicing ritual constitutes the essential part of the required moral training.

### ***12.1.3 Ritual and the Basic Structure of Society***

In the above, I have discussed the moral aspect of Confucian ritual. However, to fully understand the nature of Confucian ritual, one needs to go beyond this moral aspect and examine the social and political aspect of Confucian ritual. In what follows, I shall focus my discussion on the kind of social structure that Confucian ritual envisaged. It is a commonplace to say that traditional Chinese society was a society of ritual. But what exactly this statement implies is not clear. However, in my view, it is important to understand the full meaning of the statement if our goal is to characterize the social structure envisaged by Confucian ritual since traditional Chinese society was one of the few ancient societies which put Confucian ritual into practice. A sociological overview of the basic structure of traditional Chinese society would be helpful.

#### **12.1.3.1 The Differential Mode of Association (*chaxugeju*)**

According to a well-known Chinese sociologist, Fei Hsiao-tung, the clue to understand the basic structure of traditional Chinese society is to address the problem of how to draw the line between others and our own selves, between the group and the individual. On Fei's view, no sharp boundary can be drawn between others and our own selves in traditional Chinese society. Nor does a clear cut line exist between the group and the individual. One piece of evidence put forward by Fei is that the concept of family in traditional Chinese society lacks a definite boundary. He wrote

In China, we often see the sentence “The whole family will come” (*hedi guanglin*), but few people can tell what family members should be included in the word *di* (family). . . Why are nouns [which involve using the concept of family] for such basic social units [families] so ambiguous in Chinese? In my opinion, the ambiguity indicates the difference between our social structure and that of the West. . . [Our pattern] is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the center of the circles produced by his or her own social influence. Everyone’s circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places. (Fei, 1992, p. 63)

Fei argued that kinship, the most important relationship in traditional Chinese society, is similar to the concentric circles formed by throwing a stone into a lake. Kinship is a social network formed through marriage and reproduction, which can be extended to embrace countless numbers of people – in the past, present, and future. It is somewhat like a spider’s web in the sense that it centers on oneself. Fei said,

Everyone has this kind of a kinship network, but the people covered by one network are not the same as those covered by any other . . . the web of social relationships linked with kinship is specific to each person. Each web has a self as its center, and every web has a different center. (Fei, 1992, p. 63)

According to Fei’s observation, this pattern of organization applies not only to kinship but also to neighbourhood. In traditional Chinese society, “every family regards its own household as the center and draws a circle around it. This circle is the neighbourhood, which is established to facilitate reciprocation in daily life.” (Fei, 1992, p. 64) This network of human relationships is so elastic that it can even be extended to cover the whole world. Despite the vastness of this social network, there are certain human relationships which are regarded as the most fundamental. Such human relationships include rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, husbands and wives, older and younger brothers, friends, seniors and juniors, the close and the remote. Thus, within such a social network, we can see the path which runs from the self to the family, from the family to the state, and the state to the whole world (all under heaven). Fei called the basic structure of traditional Chinese society characterised by this weblike social network “*chaxugeju*”, in English, “the differential mode of association”.

On Fei’s view, in a society with a differential mode of association, the most important ethical principle is the principle expressed by the Confucian dictum “Discipline oneself and return to rituals.” This is so because, as seen above, practicing rituals provides necessary moral training for a person. And only through this training, a person is able to cultivate her moral character and therefore able to extend oneself out into other circles of human relationships. Thus, according to Fei, in a society with a differential mode of association, moral cultivation has some sort of centrality in moral and social life. This centrality of moral cultivation in moral and social life has a succinct expression in *The Great Learning*

From the Son of Heaven [the ruler] down to mass people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides. (*The Great Learning*, sec 6)

The aim of the cultivation of the person is to develop the necessary virtues which are important for maintaining the proper human relationships in a society whose basic structure is characteristic of a differential mode of association. Only when we understand why moral cultivation is important to a society with such a social structure, we are able to understand why *The Great Learning* said,

The ancients who wished to display illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first order well their own States. Wishing to order well their States, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their own self. . . Their self being cultivated, their families were regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and peaceful. (*The Great Learning*, sec 4)

Fei argued that in a society whose basic structure is defined by a differential mode of association, individual rights have no place in moral and social life at all. It is because the notion of individual rights presupposes a certain social structure which is quite different from that of a differential mode of association. The notion of individual rights requires a social structure in which a sharp distinction between individuals exists and individuals are treated as equal. However, it is exactly such a sharp distinction between individuals and equality among individuals that is absent in the social structure of a differential mode of association. In a society with a differential mode of association, how a person should be treated depends on her relations to others. Equality, then, is relatively unimportant in the moral and social life of that society. Only against a social background which accords the state a distributive function, equality could have an important role to play. Lacking such a social background, it would be meaningless to talk about equality unless what is being talked about is formal equality. However, in the traditional Chinese society, the state was not accorded such a distributive function. And only when we understand this, we are able to understand why Mencius said, “That things are unequal is part of nature. . . If you reduce them to the same level, it will only bring confusion to the empire.” (*Mencius*, 1984, 3A:4)

### 12.1.3.2 Rule of Ritual vs. Rule of Law

Lacking the notions of individual rights and equality has significant implications for how a society with a differential mode of association is ruled. Modern democratic societies such as U.S. societies are often characterized as societies based on the rule of law. It is also conventional to categorize traditional Chinese society as society whose social order is based on rule of men. Fei argued that this categorization is misleading. On his view, traditional Chinese society is a society based neither on the rule of law nor on the rule of men but on the rule of ritual. He wrote,

We can say that [traditional Chinese society] is a society ‘without law,’ if we define laws as those regulations maintained by state power. However, the absence of laws does not affect social order, because rural society is ruled by rituals. (Fei, 1992, p. 69)

Fei argued that both rituals and laws are behavioural norms. The difference between them is the force used to maintain the norms. Laws are enforced through political power, i.e., state power. Rituals, however, do not require any concrete structure of political power in order to be effective. Instead, their enforcement is based on tradition through which individuals receive moral cultivation.

A ritual (*li*) is not something that is carried out by an exterior force. Rituals work through the feeling of respect and of obedience that people themselves have cultivated. People conform to rituals on their own initiative. . . [following rituals] is a habit formed in the process of cultivating oneself. One learns to conform to tradition on one’s own initiative. (Fei, 1992, p. 99)

In a society with a differential mode of association, ritual is a more effective means than law to achieve order. This is so because, as seen above, moral cultivation is the key to achieve order in such a society, and practicing ritual is a more effective way than using laws to achieve moral cultivation. Only when we understand this are we able to understand why Confucius said,

Lead the people with administrative injunctions and keep them orderly with penal law, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence [virtue] and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves. (*The Analects*, 2:3)

In the realm of morality, what law can achieve is minimal. Law is effective only in preventing harmful actions, but not in cultivating virtues. By contrast, ritual is a better means to cultivate virtues in a person. It is because ritual can provide us rules or norms of proper behaviour of various levels of specificity which govern action in every aspect of life.

### 12.1.3.3 Ritual and Its Constitutional Significance

In the above, I have described briefly the kind of social structure in which Confucian ritual is embodied. I also have discussed the nature of the order achieved in a society with the kind of social structure in question. However, the discussion above left one issue untouched, that is the issue concerning the relationship between ritual and the authority of government. From the Confucian perspective, ritual not only provides norms governing individuals’ actions. It also furnishes norms as for guiding governmental actions. For instance, in *The Book of Rites*, which is known as one of the five important Confucian classics, there is a chapter called “Royal Regulation” (*Wang Chih*) which records the regulation of early kings regarding the classes of the feudal nobles and officers and their emoluments, regarding their sacrifices and their care for the aged, and regarding the educational systems. The point of writing down such regulation is to make sure that the ruler and the entire government

operated according to ritual. Thus, for Confucians, ritual is not only a political instrument but also something like a written constitution which constitutes the source of the legitimacy of governmental authority. Only when we understand the constitutional aspect of ritual, we are able to understand why the emperors in ancient China put so much emphasis on ritual. They had to pay utmost attention to the detailed specifications and correct observance of ritual because their political legitimacy depended on correctly regulating their conduct according to ritual. The thought that political legitimacy depends on correct observance of ritual has a clear expression in *Xunzi*

Rites are the highest expression of order and distinction, the root of strength in the state, the Way by which the majestic sway of authority is created, and the focus of merit and fame. Kings and dukes who proceed in according with their requirements obtain the whole world, whereas those who do not bring ruin to their altars of soil and grain. (Xunzi, 1988, vol. II, Book 15.4)

That the ruler and the entire government should regulate their conduct according to ritual is also an important principle advanced in the *Analects*

Rulers should employ their ministers by observing ritual propriety, and ministers should serve their lord by doing their utmost. (*The Analects*, 3:19)

If rulers are able to effect order in the state through the combination of observing ritual propriety (*li*) and deferring to others, what more is needed? (*The Analects*, 4:13)

For Confucius, the ideal government is an “inactive government”, which is the ideal that government should not interfere with people’s social life. The most important thing that government should do is follow the rituals. This ideal of inactive government can also be supported by the notion of the rule of ritual. As seen above, in a society whose order is based on the rule of ritual, people conform to rituals on their own initiative. Governmental interference is only a last resort. Thus, from the Confucian point of view, the sphere of governmental functions is far more limited than the modern states allow.

## 12.2

In the above, I have put forward an interpretative framework to characterize the Confucian conception of ritual. Through this framework, I believe, we can have a more complete and deeper understanding of the Confucian teachings on ritual. In this section, I shall discuss the contemporary relevance of Confucian ritual. I shall discuss two things. First, I shall discuss the relevance of the notion of the rule of ritual to those East Asian societies such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China. From the historical point of view, all these societies have a historical origin from the traditional Chinese society whose basic structure is characteristic of a differential mode of association. These societies then have a cultural background which allows the notion of the rule of ritual to be incorporated into their social system so that order can be more efficiently achieved.

One might ask why the societies in question need to incorporate the notion into their social system. Before responding to this query, I would like to draw the readers' attention to some of Xunzi's thoughts. Xunzi characterizes a social order with ritual and moral principles as 'well-ordered' and otherwise 'chaotic'

The gentleman creates order with what is itself well ordered and not with itself chaotic. What is the meaning of this? I say that 'well ordered' refers to ritual and moral principles and that 'chaotic' refers to what is contrary to them. Accordingly a gentleman creates order in terms of ritual and moral principles; he does not create order with what is contrary to them. (Xunzi, 1988, vol. I, Book I 3.6 & 3.7)

Thus, for Xunzi, ritual is not only an effective means of building a well-ordered society but itself a defining characteristic of a well-ordered society. It is impossible for a society to be well ordered without ritual. One might wonder why Xunzi needs to assign such a conceptual role to ritual when answering the question of what a well-ordered society is. A deeper reason for assigning such a conceptual importance to ritual can be found in Xunzi's theory of human nature.

According to Xunzi, human nature is bad and human goodness is acquired by conscious exertion. If human follows her inborn nature and indulges her natural inclinations, strife and rapacity will result, accompanied by rebellion and disorder, culminating in violence. To avoid such consequences, human needs to be guided by ritual and moral principles so as to transform her inherently bad nature. And only after human's bad nature has undergone such transformational influence may peace and order become possible. It is this transformational role of ritual that leads Xunzi to equate well-orderedness with ritual. For him, well-orderedness and ritual are simply two sides of the same coin. This transformational role of ritual also leads him to consider ritual as not merely rites of assembly but also practices that penetrate every aspect of one's life activity. Other Confucians might not agree with Xunzi's theory of human nature. But they would agree with Xunzi that the transformational role of ritual is the key to building a harmonious society. Consider a statement put forward by Yu Tzu, a disciple of Confucius, in the *Analects*:

Of the things brought about by the rites, harmony is the most valuable. Of the ways of the former Kings, this is the most beautiful, and is followed alike in matters great and small, yet this will not always work: to aim always at harmony without regulating it by the rites simply because one knows only about harmony will not, in fact, work. (*The Analects* 1:12)

For Yu Tzu, harmony is a product of ritual; and only our seeking for harmony is regulated by ritual harmony will result.

One might ask why we must base harmony or peace and order on ritual. Even if, the opponent may argue, we accept Xunzi's theory of human nature, we do not need to accept the Confucian view that harmony or peace and order must be based on ritual. Why not, for example, base harmony or peace and order on administrative injunctions and penal law? At least, Confucius himself admits that people will avoid punishments if they are ruled by administrative injunctions



and penal law. That being the case, why can't we base harmony or peace and order on the deterrent effect of penal law? Or why can't we, like Hobbes and Locke, base harmony or peace and order on social contract?

To the above queries, Confucians can have the following replies. First, as to the idea of basing social order on the deterrent effect of penal law, the Confucians might reply that using the deterrent effect of the penal law as the basis for harmony or peace and order is neither secure nor morally desirable. To see why such a basis is not secure we need only to appreciate the fact that the deterrent effect of the penal law can always be outweighed by rewards that people will have if they trespass the zone prohibited by law. People with wicked characters are quite willing to take the risk of being punished by law, if their trespass will bring them enormous reward. Nor is it morally desirable to base social order on the deterrent effect of the penal law. It is not morally desirable because to use the deterrent effect as the sole basis for harmony or peace and order is to base the social order merely on fears. Using the deterrent approach presupposes that people lack moral motivation to obey the law. The social order would then be deprived of moral basis and the harmony brought about would not be a moral one. A reasonable form of Confucianism would not deny the importance of law and social policy; however, it denies that moral harmony can be based merely on law and social policy. For Confucians, moral harmony can be brought about only by developing the people's good character, and the only way to achieve this is following ritual.

Similar comments may be made concerning the idea of basing social order on people's agreement. In the first place, the people's will may be so weak or wicked that they would not honor their promises when doing so would endanger their self-interest. Thus, harmony or peace and order as based on people's agreement may not be secure. More importantly, we need to ask why we could assume that people would come up with such an agreement. That people may want to avoid social disorder cannot guarantee that such an agreement would exist. If the conflict of interest among people are so enormous or their conceptions of the good are so diversified, people may not be able to come up with any such agreement concerning arrangements of social institutions, if such agreement is merely motivated by people's personal interests or values.

The second thing that I want to discuss is concerned with the constitutional relevance of ritual to in East Asian context. As seen above, ritual can have a constitutional effect on the legitimacy of governmental authority. In a society which assigns ritual such a constitutional role, the highest government officials will be required to regulate their conduct according to ritual, and the entire government has to operate according to ritual. This would set a high standard of excellence for anyone who wants to take up the ruling position in that society. And only those who have been disciplining themselves through ritual for a long time could meet this high standard of excellence. In my view, it is exactly these highly self-discipline political leaders that are needed in most of the countries nowadays. Given the fact that corruptions and abuses of political power are due to lack of virtues, to assign ritual a constitutional role can help to diminish

corruptions and abuses of political powers in society. To put it differently, assigning ritual such a constitutional role can help society to select better political leaders.

A logical consequence of adopting such a ritualist approach to political authority is that the political process through which political leaders are chosen must be properly designed so that only those who are properly disciplined through ritual will be selected. The political process in question must include the practice of ritual as a part of education for citizenship. This means that citizens themselves also need to go through some sort of discipline guided by the practice of ritual. This is a line of thought advanced by some political theorists. For instance, Chaihark argues that if the goal of selecting highly self-disciplined political leaders can be realized, citizens need to be appropriately disciplined to know that their constitutional role is to demand such discipline from their ruler too. According to Chaihark, the goal of such an education is that “[t]hrough ‘ritualization’ it seeks to instill in everyone those habits, attitudes, and beliefs according to which one’s constitutional role is to discipline – to discipline through ritual propriety not only one’s self but also one’s political leaders.” (Chaihark, 2003, p. 48)

Besides a ritualist educational program for citizens, Chaihark argues, a ritualist discipline program for political leaders is also needed. This is so because there must be institutional mechanisms ensuring that political leaders will be appropriately disciplined if the political leaders so selected are not already so disciplined. While I welcome Chaihark’s idea of a ritualist discipline program for political leaders, I differ from him in what content of such a program must consist of. He suggests,

Modern-day analogues of the Royal Lectures or the Censorate should become regular parts of the government and be staffed with those who have shown themselves to be similarly disciplined at least in their own fields of expertise. This should not be mistaken as a call to make the president a moral exemplar ... The heightened discipline demanded of the president is not primarily about the moral quality of the person’s private life but more about competency and proficiency in the art of governance. It means ensuring that the president is constantly educated about requirements of statecraft. (Chaihark, 2003, p. 52)

From the Confucian perspective, the moral quality of political leaders and the art of governance are inseparable. If we take the notion of the rule of ritual seriously, the authority of political leaders depends very much on their moral quality. Thus, a sound ritualist discipline program for political leaders must include moral training for political leaders.

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