Chapter 9
Confucian Ritualization: How and Why?

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9.1 Introduction

Anyone familiar with Confucian Chinese tradition understands the importance of *li* (禮) in the tradition. When you visit a Chinese family, the host and hostess will ask their children to call you "Uncle Smith" or "Aunty Alice". It is not in the *li* for the children to address you as "Mr. Smith" or "Ms. Alice". When a student hands something to her teacher, she should use her two hands to do it. It would violate the *li* if she uses only one hand. Such *li* has been functioning in the Confucian tradition for thousands of years. I will adopt the English words of rituals and rites interchangeably to translate the Confucian word of *li* in this essay.

In one of the Confucian classics of the *li* compiled two thousand years ago, the *Records of Li* (*Liji*, 禮記) (Legge, 1967), the *li* is explicitly divided into two types: ceremonial rituals (*yili,* 儀禮) and minute rituals (*quli,* 曲禮). The Confucian ceremonial rituals include a series of important Confucian rites performed at various levels of society, such as the family rites of capping, wedding, burying, mourning, and sacrificing, the village rites of drinking, banqueting, and archery, and the state rites of interchanging missions, visiting the emperor, and offering sacrifices to Heaven. Another ancient Confucian classic, *Yili* (儀禮) (Steele, 1966), provides the detailed descriptions of some of these ceremonial rites. On the other hand, the Confucian minute rituals denote everyday small behavior patterns, such as various Confucian quasi-ceremonial manners, decorums, etiquettes, and customs. Confucian individuals adopt these quasi-ceremonial manners to address and treat each other in their everyday lives. These small rites can be understood as the Confucian ceremonial rites exhibited partially or employed in a small degree in everyday interactions and activities of the Confucian people (Cf. Legge, 1967, Vol. I, p. 16). It is reported that the Confucian

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community in ancient times had practiced approximately 300 ceremonial rituals and 3,000 minute rituals (*Liji*: *Liqi* 禮記: 禮器; Legge, Vol. I, p. 404).

Accordingly, by the Confucian rituals this essay means both the ceremonial and the minute rituals. The next section shows how the Confucian life is ritualized. It explains in what ways this characterization – the ritualization of the Confucian life – is both legitimate and meaningful. From the Confucian view, rituals are meaningful because they are necessary for virtue cultivation. This point is defended in Section 9.3 by further developing the account of virtue offered by Alasdair MacIntyre. Then the issue is whether general moral principles can replace the role of rituals in directing human actions. Section 9.4 argues for the indispensability of rituals for virtue acquisition and manifestation by drawing on the classical Confucian resources. A general implication of these points is covered in the concluding remarks.

9.2 How Is The Confucian Life Ritualized?

The Confucian rituals, like rituals performed in other cultures, are social practices. They are not the activities conducted for seeking natural objects or effects for human survival, such as hunting to obtain animals for food. Instead, a Confucian ritual is a social practice that was created to pursue a social, spiritual, and even sacred result.[1] It is the Confucian belief that the rituals were created by the Confucian sages to exert their indispensable functions for accomplishing the authentic way of human life. In fact, as the *Records of Li* discloses,

> At the first use of the *li*, they began with meat and drink. They roasted millet and pieces of animal meat; they excavated the ground in the form of a jar, and scooped the water from it with their two hands; they fashioned a handle of clay, and struck with it an earthen drum. [Simple as these arrangements were], they yet seemed to be able to express by them their reverence for spiritual beings (*Liji: Liyun* 禮記: 禮運; Legge, 1967, Vol. I, p. 368).

How could such simple arrangements express human reverence for spiritual beings? In other words, how could the Confucian sages transform such apparently "natural" activities to become ethical and spiritual rituals? In analysis, it is helpful to recognize that the rituals are governed by a system of ritual rules in that in performing the rituals people are observing the rules. Such rules are special, and they determine certain natural objects and ordinary behavior to bear symbolic meanings in proper contexts. In other words, such rules are

[1] Although this essay focuses on the ethical, rather than religious, functions of the Confucian rituals, it is necessary to note that some crucial Confucian rituals (such as sacrifices to Heaven and ancestors) are obviously religious. Moreover, the Confucian rituals as a coherent whole system representing the Confucian way of life exert an essential role of connecting the human life to the divine and therefore elevating and even sanctifying the human life.

constitutive rather than regulative.[2] For example, the rule that directs a Confucian sacrificial ritual to ancestors is in the format that "doing such and such things in such and such ways constitutes the sacrifices to the ancestors." More importantly, if a ritual as a practice has a primary goal to accomplish, the goal is disclosed by its constitutive rule. For example, a Confucian sacrificial ritual to one's ancestors has the primary goal of "offering a sacrifice to one's ancestors," and this goal is clearly defined by the constitutive rule of the ritual: "providing an animal in such and such ways counts as offering a sacrifice to one's ancestors." In contrast, a regulative rule does not identify the primary goal of any practice. It only regulates an already existing practice. Accordingly, it is reasonable to understand that the Confucian sages created the rituals by establishing a system of the Confucian constitutive rules.

The importance of the primary goals of the Confucian rituals explains why the rituals are more important than many other activities in the Confucian community. Sports, such as the basketball and football games, are enormously popular "social practices" in today's Chinese society, but they cannot be taken as rituals. Neither can they be considered as important as the rituals. Why not? The reason lies in the difference between their primary goals. The primary goals of the Confucian rituals, such as "getting married properly," "burying the dead seriously" and "offering sacrifices reverently," are the central and irreplaceable elements for a meaningful Confucian way of life. In contrast, the primary goal of the football game, "shooting the gate" (which is identified by the constitutive rule of the game that "doing such and such things counts as shooting the gate"), can by no means be essential to the meaning of the Confucian culture. Confucians will remain being Confucians without playing this game, no matter how popular it is in a time. But the Chinese culture will no longer be Confucian if the Chinese people stop performing the Confucian rituals of wedding, funeral, sacrifices, and so on, just as Americans will no longer be Christians if they stop going to church regularly.

The Confucian life is ritualized in the following way. First, the Confucian rites are a special type of practices, different from other types of practices. Of course, many practices other than the rites are also important in a Confucian society. For example, farming, crafting, medicine, and arts may each be necessary for the flourishing of the Confucian way of life: each of these practices must be employed by some individuals in society in order for the society to do well. However, it is also necessary that each of these practices must not be employed by all the people in society: a division of labor is not only important, but also necessary, for these practices to exert their total functions in society. If one

[2] John Searle's distinction between constitutive rules and regulative rules is helpful for us to understand ritual practices. A constitutive rule is in the form that "x counts as y" or "x counts as y in context c," while a regulative rule is simply in the form that "do x" or "if y, do x" (Searle, 1969, pp. 34–35). In performing rituals people may not be aware of all the important rules they are following. Nevertheless, rituals are impossible without constitutive social rules.

wants to become an excellent medical doctor, one cannot spend most of the time in artistic work, while both good medical doctors and good artists are needed in the society. However, the rituals, as special practices, are different. Confucianism holds that the rituals must be performed by everyone in order to live a normal human life, no matter what else one employs. One may be a farmer, a crafter, a medical doctor, or an artist, but one must engage in the practices of the capping, wedding, burying and sacrificing rituals as well. Accordingly, it is the Confucian rituals, rather than other occupations or professions, that are the real universal Confucian social practices, universal in the sense that every individual in the Confucian community must learn and exercise these rituals in order to live an authentic Confucian life. Moreover, as mentioned, the Confucian tradition emphasizes the importance of not only the formal ceremonial rituals, but also the numerous minute rituals. The Chinese people are firmly committed to both the ceremonial and minute rituals in shaping their everyday familial and social relations as well as conducting various activities. As a result, the Confucian life world is ritualized.[3]

9.3 Why Ritual Practices Are Necessary for Virtue Cultivation?

Why are the Confucian rituals necessary for the Confucian way of life? This section will argue that only through the Confucian ritual practices can the Confucian virtues be cultivated. Given that the Confucian virtues are the power or quality that essentially sustains the Confucian way of life, the role of the Confucian rituals is indispensable. If this argument is sound, then the message should be heuristic not only for Confucian society, but also for other societies. I will deploy my argument by developing Alasdair MacIntyre's account of virtue offered in his seminal volume *After Virtue* (1984). From the Confucian perspective, MacIntyre's exploration must be furthered in order to appreciate the significant role of a special type of practices (like the Confucian rituals) for virtue acquisition.

In order to provide his account of virtue, MacIntyre explores a series of relevant concepts, including practices, internal and external goods, and institutions. To begin, MacIntyre understands a "practice" as "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized" (p. 187). The examples of practices he offers include arts, sciences, games and politics (p. 188). A practice has both internal and external goods attached to it. The external goods of a practice are those contingently attached to the practice, such as prestige, status, and money. But the internal goods of a practice are those specified only in terms of conducting this particular practice and can only be

[3] For more detailed analyses and arguments for the views expressed in this section, see Fan (2010, chapter 11).

recognized by the experience of participating in this particular practice (pp. 188–189). Meanwhile, MacIntyre warns us not to confuse practice with institutions. "Chess, physics and medicine are practices; chess club, laboratories, universities and hospitals are institutions" (p. 194). Institutions are the bearers of practices. They are concerned with the external goods of practices: "they are involved in acquiring money and other material goods; they are structured in terms of power and status, and they distribute money, power and status as rewards" (p. 194).

Importantly, in MacIntyre's account, virtues are significant for pursuing the internal goods of practices. "A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods" (p. 191). For him, without a range of key virtues, such as justice, courage and honesty, the goods internal to practices will be barred to us, because such goods can only be achieved in our relationship to other practitioners:

> We have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty. For not to accept these, to be willing to cheat. . . , so far bars us from achieving the standards of excellence or the goods internal to the practice that it renders the practice pointless except as a device for achieving external goods (p. 191).

MacIntyre recognizes that it is very difficult, if not impossible, for practitioners to pursue the goods internal to practices without having proper relationships with each other. He also recognizes that a whole range of virtues, such as honesty, courage and justice, is essential for forming and keeping proper human relationships. This is because "the virtues are those goods by reference to which, whether we like it or not, we define our relationships to those other people with whom we share the kind of purposes and standards which inform practices" (p. 191). Now the question is how it is possible for individuals to acquire the virtues for good human relationships in the first place? MacIntyre fails to address this issue adequately in the book. Presumably, his view is that one learns and acquires the virtues by participating in practices with other practitioners. As an Aristotelian Thomist philosopher, he understands that individuals are not able to acquire the virtues simply through theoretical study without practice. Rather, the virtues are acquired through habituation: we become just by performing just actions and courageous by performing courageous actions. This requires that one come to recognize and enjoy the goods internal to a practice one attends. Indeed, one may enter into a practice not for the goods internal to the practice, but for some external goods attached to it, such as money. MacIntyre gives an example of a highly intelligent seven-year-old child who begins to learn playing chess for getting candy, and who may cheat in order to win and get candy. But there will come a time when the child begins to enjoy the internal goods of the game of chess, trying to excel in whatever way the game demands. In this process he acquires the virtue of

honesty (p. 188). Moreover, practitioners of a shared practice come to genuinely care about each other, and genuinely caring about others means a willingness to risk harm or danger on their behalf, and that is what courage is. Finally, "justice requires that we treat others in respect of merit or desert according to uniform and impersonal standards," the standards that are part of a practice (p. 192). In short, for MacIntyre, the virtues are learned and acquired by the practitioners in participating in such practices.

Is this a convincing story of virtue acquisition through practice for individuals living in society? From a Confucian perspective, MacIntyre is right in emphasizing that a range of virtues is essential for maintaining good human relationships, and in participating in such practices as games, arts and sciences, the practitioners' good relationships with each other are generally necessary for them to pursue the internal goods of the practices. However, a puzzle remains: how can the virtues for good relationships necessarily come out of these practices that are concerned primarily not about the goods of human relationships, but about the goods of the skills, techniques, and strategies that can be used to conduct the relevant practices well? If, as MacIntyre points out, "the virtues are those goods by reference to which. . .we define our relationships" (p. 191), then the virtues are essentially the goods of relationships. However, the internal goods of the practices pursued by the practitioners under MacIntyre's discussion are primarily not the goods of relationships. For example, the goods internal to the game of chess that one can accomplish in playing the game are primarily the goods of skills, techniques, and strategies, the possession of which will enable one to play the game excellently. Although the goods of relations with other players are involved, they are not primary for playing the game well. Similarly, the internal goods that one can accomplish in drawing paintings are the excellence of the products as well as the good of, according to MacIntyre, one's "living out of a greater or lesser part of his or her life as a painter" (p. 190), while the good of a relation with other people involved in one's painting life, although relevant, will not be primary for drawing one's paintings well. This is to say, even if the goods of human relations involved in such practices are part of the internal goods of these practices, they are not the primary internal goods. It is not the case that the better a relation one has with other chess players, the better a player one will be in performing the game. It is also not the case that if one does not virtuously treat others involved in one's painting life, one will never produce a great painting product.

It is evident that in order to perform these practices well, the practitioners' primary goals are not the goods of human relationships involved, but having high skills to win the game or producing excellent paintings. In this case the goods of human relationships that are involved seem to serve only as means for society as a whole to achieve the primary internal goods of these practices.[4]

[4] In this case MacIntyre's account of virtue seems also suffering from a dilemma that Gary Watson has described of virtue ethics: in explaining virtue in terms of something else one renders virtue only secondarily important in one's account, although virtue should have been primarily important in virtue ethics (Watson, 1997).

If everyone is virtuous in treating others, it would be most efficient and effective for the entire society to pursue the internal goods of these practices. However, is it the case that it would also be most efficient and effective for an individual to pursue the internal goods of a practice when he or she is always virtuous in treating others?[5] The answer is unfortunately negative. In order for one to obtain necessary external resources to make possible one's further pursuit of the internal goods of chess, it is obviously better to cheat to win a game at least sometimes, if not frequently, than be absolutely honest and lose the game. Moreover, one should not be willing to risk harm or danger on behalf of one's colleagues in a shared scientific research; rather, one should try to survive them in order to secure more internal goods of the research by oneself. Finally, is it not the case that one may enjoy more internal goods of a practice by excluding some individuals from the practice regardless of their merit or desert? Evidently, someone may be a great politician being able to accomplish a great deal in political activities, but he may also be vicious in treating some of his colleagues. This is to say, in MacIntyre's account, there is a discrepancy between individual and society regarding the pursuit of the internal goods of practices. In this case it is difficult to hold that individuals can effectively learn and acquire the virtues by participating in these practices as MacIntyre seems to believe. I term this issue *the virtue learning and acquisition problem*.

To be fair to MacIntyre, his full account of virtue includes three stages in which an appeal to practices is only the first stage. MacIntyre recognizes that if the virtues are defined only in terms of achieving the goods internal to practices, a life as a whole would perhaps be defective. First, since different practices point in different directions, there would be a multiplicity of incompatible internal goods (p. 201). Moreover, one would be unable adequately to specify the context of certain virtues (p. 202). Finally, the virtue of integrity (the wholeness of a human life) recognized by the Aristotelian tradition would not be specified adequately (p. 203). These considerations lead MacIntyre to move to the second stage in which the good of a human life as a whole is introduced. In this stage the virtues must be understood as those dispositions which will not only enable the individual to achieve the goods internal to practices, but will also sustain the individual in the relevant kind of quest for the good of a human life conceived as a unity (p. 219). Finally, MacIntyre

[5] MacIntyre seems to hold a positive answer to this question in his "Postscript to the Second Edition" of the *After Virtue* by emphasizing the robust difference between the internal and external goods that one may accomplish in performing a practice: the good that a grandmaster of chess who cares only about external goods contingently attached to chess playing can achieve will not be "that kind of excellence which is specific to chess and the kind of enjoyment that supervenes upon such excellence" (p. 274). However, for real human beings, isn't it more reasonable to hold that the grandmasters of chess, or any other practice under discussion, care about both the external and internal goods? In this case, MacIntyre cannot convincingly deny that a great chess player who is vicious can still achieve some of the internal goods of chess.

recognizes that no one is able to seek for the good or exercise the virtues only *qua* individual. Instead, one is inextricably bound up with what one inherits: every individual is one of the bearers of a living tradition – whether one recognizes it or not. "A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (p. 222). Such a concept of tradition provides the possibility of harmonizing the roles of individuals in pursuing human flourishing. Accordingly, tradition constitutes an inevitable final stage for a complete Aristotelian account of virtue, providing the final *telos* for a community to pursue in structuring individuals and employing practices. Taken together, MacIntyre's account demonstrates that the goods associated with the virtues are internal to and embodied by practices, practices are performed through the proper human relations sustained by the virtues, and the virtues are the qualities acquired in the practices that are approved, transmitted, and reshaped by traditions (p. 221).

This three-stage account of virtue helps MacIntyre free from the charge of offering an obscure, even suspicious, view of practices in relation to the virtues. At the stage of practices, he is a bit vague about what activities do and do not constitute practices. He gives some examples, stating that playing chess is a practice but playing tic-tac-toe isn't; farming is, but planting turnips isn't (p. 187). A practice is, in any case, a "coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized" (p. 187). Without the final stage of a living tradition that approves, revises and transmits practices, his understanding of practice is definitely defective for the sake of virtue learning and cultivation. Wouldn't the activity of murder conducted by a professional murder association, if set up openly or secretly, constitute a practice under MacIntyre's original definition? Such activity can certainly be coherent, complex, and socially established. It can also carry certain "goods" internal to this form of activity in the sense that they can only be "accomplished" by participating in this form of activity.[6] However, no individual can learn and acquire the virtues from the activity of murder in a coherent sense. One might be described as "courageous" in some sense, but that would be a squarely different sense from MacIntyre's understanding of courage as a willingness to risk harm to oneself due to care for others. Regarding the virtues of honesty and justice, one would only acquire the opposites from such professional murder activities: the vices of dishonesty and injustice.

[6] Think of, for example, the Russian "chessboard murderer" arrested in 2007 – he had planned to kill 64 people and put a coin on every square of a 64-place chessboard for each murder. He preferred to select victims he knew, and stating that he collected the souls of his victims after falling in love with killing. He was finally convicted of 48 murders in six years. Experts at Russia's main psychiatric clinic have found him sane. In a sense he has achieved a great deal of the "internal goods" of the "practice" of murder. See a series of reports online, e.g., http://www.news24.com/Content/World/News/1073/84d5ef9cd77a4374ac876804c7e345da//Killer_wanted_victims_souls (accessed in July 2009).

However, no matter how comprehensive MacIntyre's three-stage account of virtue is, it is unable adequately to handle *the virtue learning and acquisition problem*. MacIntyre fails to recognize that, regarding virtue learning and acquiring, there exists another type of practices which is different from the type of practices such as games, arts or sciences under MacIntyre's discussion. These practices, from the Confucian view, are not the most important practices for individuals to undertake in order to acquire the virtues. Instead, Confucianism recognizes that the rituals are the most important practices for young children to learn and exercise in order to acquire the virtues. Such ritual practices require that, in the first place, young children be taught about how they should properly address other individuals, especially their family members, in correct names: grandpa, grandma, father, mother, elder brother, elder sister, younger brother, younger sister...[7] The differentiation of these names is crucial for the Confucian way of life because these names carry with them an understanding of certain specific moral virtues and obligations that one should accept and discharge when falling under the names. For example, one is told to call his elder brother "*gege*" (哥哥) to show one's respect (*gong*, 恭), to call his younger brother "*didi*" (弟弟) to represent one's brotherly love (*di*, 弟), to use one's two hands to hand a thing to one's parent to manifest one's filial piety (*xiao*, 孝), and to bow to one's grandparents during a holiday to give them reverence (*jing*, 敬). These particular Confucian virtues, *gong, di, xiao, jing*, and so on, are learned and exercised by children in the specific Confucian family interactions and activities so that they are gradually cultivated and integrated in their personality. For Confucians, only if children are nurtured this way, can the proper order and peace of society be hopefully realized.[8]

This is to say, Confucianism recognizes that the rituals are a special type of practice that is directly concerned about human relationships. This type of practice informs and embodies specific ways in which humans should treat each other in conducting relevant activities. The internal goods of such practices are precisely the goods of human relationships rather than the goods of skills for playing a game or excellence in drawing a picture. Accordingly, the Confucian virtues can effectively be learned and cultivated through performing this type of practices, because acquiring the internal goods of such practices is equivalent to acquiring the Confucian virtues.

For a clear distinction, let me term such special practices *ritual practices*, and term the practices that MacIntyre discusses *general practices*. Again, the

[7] "If names are not correct, what is said will not be in accord [with what is to be done]; if what is said is not in accord [with what is to be done], what is to be done cannot be implemented; if what is to be done cannot be implemented, rites and music will not flourish; if rites and music do not flourish, punishments will not be appropriate; when punishments are not appropriate, the people will not know where to put hand and foot" (*Analects* 13.3).

[8] "There are few who, being filial (*xiao*) and fraternal (*di*), are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of starting a rebellion" (*Analects* 1.2).

Confucian ritual practices are directly concerned with how humans should address, treat and react to each other, namely, about human relationships.[9] For example, the Confucian wedding ritual constitutes the actual ways in which a man and a woman show their unity and become husband and wife. The Confucian reception ritual informs the actual ways in which one greets and treats one's guests. And the Confucian sacrificial ritual manifests the actual ways in which family members offer sacrifices to their ancestors. Similarly, numerous Confucian minute rituals inform the proper manners in which the Confucian individuals are concretely directed to revere their parents and grandparents, to take care of their children and grandchildren, to unite with their brothers and sisters, and to provide assistance to their friends and strangers in difficulty. It is the Confucian conviction that if one is able to nurture such virtues through the ritual practices with one's family members as well as with other familiars, one is able to acquire the virtues and exercise them in large society with other practitioners in the general practices.[10]

9.4 Why Ritual Practices Cannot Be Replaced By Moral Principles?

Can virtue be cultivated through following moral principles, without the need of learning and observing ritual practices? No doubt, a virtue, for Confucians, is an acquired quality that contributes to human flourishing rather than the moral strength of a human will that fulfills one's rationally identified duty, irrespective of human flourishing.[11] Nevertheless, some may want to inquire why Confucian virtue, as a quality, must be acquired by submitting to stringent rituals. They may want to argue that virtue can also be obtained simply by complying with moral principles. Indeed, the Confucian resources, such as the most

[9] Of course, the Confucian rituals are not only about human relationships. There are also many Confucian rituals concerning the relationship between humans and Heaven or between humans and spirits. But this essay focuses only on the Confucian rituals regarding human relationships in order to address the virtue learning and acquiring problem.

[10] I am not sure what MacIntyre would say about the necessity of the distinction between the ritual practices and the general practices that I have drawn in this section based on the Confucian perspective. But he does state, in another essay, that "about the relationship between respect for ceremonial forms and the practice of the virtues in general, we Aristotelians do have a great deal to learn from Confucians" (2004, p. 158).

[11] In this respect the Confucian understanding of virtue is in line with classical Western views such as Aristotle's, but is at odds with Kant's position. Kant sets out the principles of moral conduct based on his philosophical account of moral agency as being rational and autonomous, and then on that basis defines virtue as the trait of acting according to these principles. Thus a virtue for Kant is not a quality of one's character, emotions, feelings, desires, or any other feature of human nature that might be amenable to habituation, but is rather a quality of one's will, a pure rational volition.

influential *Analects*, have shown that some general ethical principles have been established in the Confucian tradition. What are the relations between such principles and the rituals regarding virtue cultivation? This section will argue that the Confucian moral principles must operate with the Confucian rituals in order to fulfill the aim of virtue cultivation. The point is that the Confucian ritual practices are necessary in the process of virtue acquisition. Their function cannot be replaced by that of the moral principles.

It is no controversy that the most important and complete Confucian virtue is *ren* (humaneness or goodness, 仁).[12] I will use *ren* as a representative Confucian virtue to explore the Confucian view on the relation of virtue to ritual practices based on the resources offered by the *Analects*. Evidently, Confucius clearly holds that ritual practices are necessary for acquiring *ren*. In answering his most intelligent student Yan Hui's question about how to become a man of *ren*, the Master said,

> "overcoming your selfish passions and returning to the observance of *li* constitutes *ren* (克己復禮為仁). If a person can for one day overcome one's selfish passions and return to the observance of *li*, all under Heaven will regard him as having *ren*. The attainment of *ren* comes from oneself, and not from others." Yan Yuan said, "may I ask about the items of this?" The master said, "do not look, listen, speak or act if it is contrary to *li*" (12.1).

Indeed, in his school Confucius taught his students to learn and observe the rituals established in the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE). From his view, the Zhou *li* was perfectly coded through the revision of the rituals existent in the Shang (c. 1600–1100 BCE) and Xia (c. 2100–1600 BCE) dynasties (*Analects* 3.14). For him, these rituals were precisely the proper practices for his students to perform in order to acquire the virtue and become the men of *ren*. Thus it is true that Confucius generally held a conservative attitude towards the rituals (3.1, 3.14, 3.17, 7.1, 7.20). On the other hand, however, it is also true that sometimes when his students ask about how they can become men of *ren,* Confucius replies to them by offering what we may term general ethical principles. A few salient examples are as follows:

> "A *ren* man must love the people" (愛人) (12.22).

> "A *ren* man helps others to take their stand in so far as he himself wishes to take his stand, and gets others there in so far as he himself wishes to get there" (夫仁者, 己欲立而立人, 己欲達而達人。能近取譬, 可謂仁之方也已) (6.30);

[12] In the *Analects,* Confucius and his disciples often explain *ren* in terms of more specific virtues and depict *ren* as most complete Confucian virtue. For example, "filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) and fraternal submission (*di*, 弟) are the root of *ren*" (1.2); "while at home hold yourself in a respectful attitude (*gong*, 恭); when serving in an official capacity be reverent (*jing*, 敬); when dealing with others be loyal (*zhong*, 忠)" (13.19); "unbending strength (*gang*, 剛), resoluteness (*yi*, 毅), simplicity (*mu*, 木) and reticent (*ne*, 訥) are close to *ren*" (13.27); "to be able to practice five things under heaven constitutes *ren*. . .: courtesy (*gong*, 恭), tolerance (*kuan*, 寬), trustworthiness (*xin*, 信), quickness (*min*, 敏) and generosity (*hui*, 惠)" (17.6), and so on.

> "Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (己所不欲, 勿施於人) (12.2);
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> "A *ren* man is loath to speak" (仁者, 其言也韌) (12.3);
>
> "When faced with an opportunity to practice *ren*, do not give precedence even to your teacher" (當仁,不讓於師) (15.36);
>
> "A *ren* man. . .should not seek to stay alive at the expense of *ren*, [but] may have to accept death in order to have *ren* accomplished" (志士仁人, 無求生以害仁, 有殺身以成仁) (15.9).

I term these instructions general ethical principles because they are (1) articulated without mentioning the ritual practices, (2) formulated as regulative rules rather than the constitutive rules functioning in the ritual practices, and (3) directive in a general sense across many different situations. This is to say, Confucius offers apparently two different types of answers regarding how one becomes a *ren* man: one type of answer is that one must comply with the rites, but the other type is that one should follow the general ethical principles. What is the relation between these two types of answers? Is there any contradiction involved? If not, what are their relations? Can one type be reduced to the other type?

I think these apparently two different answers constitute a coherent whole in which each of the two elements, the ritual practices and the ethical principles, is indispensable for the effective cultivation of the Confucian virtue of *ren*. Taken as a whole, Confucius' point is that only appeal to the general ethical principles is not sufficient for one to acquire the virtue; rather, the ritual practices are inevitably required for the task. The reason can be summarized as three-fold. First, while it is crucial for humans to begin to learn the virtue from a young age so as to form virtuous habituation, Confucianism does not think that we can realize this purpose simply by teaching young children the principles, because they are unlikely to be motivated by the principles. Their desires, feelings and interests have not been nurtured in ways in which they can readily respond to the call of the principles to perform appropriate actions.[13] As MacIntyre sensibly acknowledges, for Confucians,

> the Aristotelian account [of] habituation is misleading. For in saying that we become just by performing just actions and courageous by performing courageous actions, Aristotle omitted to point out that the just actions of those who are not yet just and the courageous actions of those who are not yet courageous are precisely actions in which the outward behavior is one thing and the inner motivation quite another. The young novice does not act as justice requires because justice requires it, but to avoid the approval or disapproval of parents and teachers. So the outward appearance of justice

[13] This observation could hold even if Confucians agree on Mencius' understanding that every human already has a potential power to become a man of *ren*. In his view, "no man is devoid of a heart (*xin*, 心) sensitive to the suffering of others. . . .The heart of compassion is the germ (*dan*, 端) of *ren*. . ." (Mencius 2A6). But this is only saying that everyone has the beginning or starting-point of virtue, which still needs cultivation or development to become actual virtue.

> does not express the agent's inner attitude. And it is not only that the agent's inner attitude has to be transformed, but also that it has to be transformed in such a way as to close the gap between inner and outer (2004, p. 157).

Indeed, central to the acquisition of a virtue is the integration of the inner (such as one's thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and decisions) and the outer (such as one's bodily expressions, movements, and speeches). A young child cannot reach this integration through being directly motivated by the moral principles. Rather, the route is plausibly the other way around: a young child has to form his bodily expressions first by following his parents' and/or teachers' demands to observe the rituals, then in the process of such practices gradually coming to understand that this is precisely the way of following the requirements of the moral principles and subsequently being motivated by the principles. Although from a dominant Confucian view young children already have a desire to be *ren* or virtuous (Mencius 2A6), Confucians also recognize that this moral desire is weaker compared to many other non-moral desires, such as desires for food, drink, comfort, pleasing their parents or teachers, and avoiding the disapproval of their parents or teachers (Xunzi 23). It is usually these strong non-moral desires that motivate them to follow the instructions of their parents or teachers to learn or do "moral" things. For example, a young child does not share his most favorite toy with a neighbor's child as the principle of love requires because the principle requires it, but to avoid the disapproval of his parents. But as he exercises this ritual behavior time and again under his parents' direction, he is gradually to reach the integration of his inner and outer: now he wants to share his toy with other children because it is the proper thing to do. In this way he is able to learn the Confucian virtues. This is to say, for Confucians, the integration of the inner and outer needed for the realization of *ren* requires the implementation of the ritual practices.

Moreover, it is not that only children need ritual practices for virtue acquisition, while adults are already autonomous moral agents acting straightforwardly on moral principles without the need of complying with the ceremonial patterns of behavior. Instead, for Confucians, adult human individuals, as more or less virtuous human beings, will still have to exercise the ritual practices to convey their inner dispositions and cooperate with others in action so as to manifest their virtues. One is virtuous precisely because one is able to do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right feelings. Without the ritual practices, one would lose the normal means of conveying one's feelings and responding to the feelings of others through shared, public standards in one's social life. One would not even have an intelligible language to communicate with others regarding one's autonomous, rational moral principles, even if one has developed a set of such principles (cf. Cua, 1998, pp. 300–302). For Confucius, a man of *ren* must embody four particular virtues: courtesy (*gong*, 恭), prudence (*shen*, 慎), courage (*yong*, 勇), frankness (*zhi*, 直). He sharply points out, "without the rites, courtesy is tiresome; without the rites, prudence is timid; without the rites, courage is quarrelsome; without the rites, frankness is

hurtful" (*Analects* 8.2). This is to say, the ritual practices are necessarily required not only for the integrity of one's inner world and outer behavior, but also for the unity of self and others in human communitarian moral lives.

Finally, all of these sayings do not mean to underestimate the importance of the moral principles in a Confucian life of virtue. Although it is misleading to think that *ren* can be realized by following the moral principles alone without the need of conducting the ritual practices, the general moral principles are also necessary for the Confucian virtuous way of life because they provide reasons for the defenses, excuses, and exceptions of the applications of the rituals. The moral principles indicate the reasons for why individuals should observe the rites in the normal situations – they can live the authentic way of human life imbued with the content of these principles only by performing the ritual practices. The principles also provide reasons for why the ritual should not be absolute; rather, allowing certain excuses and exceptions to the applications of the rituals can be justified by appealing to the moral principles. For example, while the Confucian mourning rite generally requires that during the mourning period for the death of a close relative, one should not take luxurious food, such as meat, it has also made it explicit that if one is ill or otherwise weak, needing nutritious meals to maintain health, it is legitimate to take them. For another example, when Mencius is provided with a scenario in which one must choose between adhering to a ritual prohibition against physical contact with one's sister-in-law and reaching out to save her from drowning, he argues that everyone would, by weighing (權) the situation, know that one should suspend the ritual prohibition and save his sister-in-law (*Mencius* 4A17). The moral principles of *ren* as those offered by Confucius could be adopted to justify such weighing and exceptions.

The moral principles can also serve as reasons for defending ritual revision or reform. For example, in line with the principle of loving the people, we may find reasons for justifying the reform of some rites – e.g., the rule of using humans as sacrifices must be rejected because this rejection manifests the love of the people (Mencius 1A4); the rule of using the linen cap should be changed to using the silk cap in ritual activities because this change shows more love to the people by being frugal (*Analects* 9.3); and the rule of prostrating oneself before ascending the steps should not be changed to doing so after having ascended the steps because this change shows less love by being casual (*Analects* 9.3).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the Confucian moral principles primarily exert their function in relation to the ritual practices. That is, although they can direct non-ritual behavior, they do not mean to suggest that individuals should forget about the rituals in following these principles. Rather, they provide effective guidance to individual conduct on the assumption that the individual observes the rituals. In other words, these principles do not teach you to abandon the rules of the rituals and create your acts by directly following these principles, but teach you properly to observe the rules of the rituals. The virtue of filial piety (*xiao*, 孝) can be used as a prominent example. To be filial to one's parents, Confucius requires one to observe the rituals, including the

serving rituals when one's parents are alive, the funeral rituals when they die, and the sacrificial rituals after they die (*Analects* 2.5). Meanwhile, he also requires one to follow the principle of respect (*jing*, 敬) in treating one's parents: if one does not respect one's parents, one cannot even distinguish treating one's parents from treating animals (*Analects* 2.7). Evidently, following the principle of respect does not mean that one no longer needs to observe the rituals. Rather, it means that one must observe the rituals in the proper way, namely the way in which reverence is manifested in every context. This includes that in special situations one may not obey a ritual rule in order to fulfill the ritual as a whole. For example, Confucius did not have his mother coffined at home as the rule of the funeral ritual required; instead, he had his mother coffined at a crossroad in order to obtain the information about the location of his father's grave and bury his mother in the same grave as his father (*Liji: Tangong* 禮記: 檀弓; Legge, 1967, Vol I, pp. 124–125).[14]

9.5 Concluding Remarks

If my argument is sound – the Confucian rituals are necessary for virtue cultivation, acquisition and manifestation, and this function of the rituals cannot be replaced by the Confucian moral principles – then the message should be heuristic to both contemporary Confucian Chinese society and non-Confucian society. In modern Chinese society, the Confucian rituals have been attacked by the official ideology as "feudalist" backward activities to be entirely abandoned. Contemporary Neo-Confucian scholars, in attempting to defend the Confucian civilization, put their emphasis on general Confucian moral principles in separation from the function of the Confucian rituals. They have thus abstracted these principles from the real Confucian moral convictions embedded in the ritual practices and detracted from the substance of the Confucian culture and morality. On the other hand, in modern Western liberal culture, self-determined activities have been emphasized to seek the self-chosen conception of the good life. Moral education becomes difficult, if not impossible, to deploy in such society. Such society will have to pay immense moral costs by failing to recognize that the true nature of any human morality cannot be properly cultivated and realized without appreciating rituals, a series of familial and societal practices traditionally established and commonly performed by human individuals.

[14] The Confucian principle of reciprocity (*shu,*恕) can be used as another example to indicate the point. The principle states that "do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire" (*Analects* 12.2). This is not meant to substitute for the rules of the rituals. It rather provides guidance as to how you perform the rituals appropriately. For example, when you perform a present-giving ritual, this principle reminds that you do not give to your friend a present that you yourself do not like.

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