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What is the *li* mentioned by Confucius?

The ritual, or the *li*, is a concept of vital importance in Confucian theory. This essay is going to discuss what actually the *li* is mentioned by Confucius based on the *Analects*, which recorded Confucius' words and deeds, and previous works by other researchers and experts. The discussion begins from comparing *li* with two seemingly similar concepts, law and custom, to analyze the differences between them and finally draw the conclusion that *li* is a series of codes of conduct which assign specific behavior, rites and etc. with meanings. An outline of an operable experiment and a corresponding hypothesis will be put forward.

To begin with, the *li* is not and almost has no intersection with the law. According to the definition of the law, it "may be defined as a principle, rule, or standard in accordance with which justice is administered" (Willis, 212). In contrast, as illustrated in the *Analects*,

2.3 The Master said, "If you try to lead the common people with govern- mental regulations and keep them in line with punishments, the laws will simply be evaded and the people will have no sense of shame. If, however, you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and will moreover reform themselves." (Ivanhoe, 5)

Confucius clearly divided the law and the *li* by pointing out the different outcomes of using them to manage the country separately. Another important

comment here is that in Confucius' view, the *li* is to be used as a tool to cultivate and unify citizen's moral sense so that the country can be in order and harmony.

Another seemingly similar but actually different concept is the custom. Confucius believed that "the Golden Age of humankind had been realized during the height of Zhou dynasty" and "In return for such formal obedience to Heaven in all matters great and small, the Zhou royal line was rewarded with a *ming* 命, 'Mandate,' to rule China" (Ivanhoe, 2). As a consequence, Confucius spared no effort to appeal to people at that time to restore the ritual system in Zhou dynasty. However, he didn't consider *li* simply as imitating previous dynasty.

Zi Zhang asked whether the affairs of ten ages after could be known. Confucius said, "The Yin dynasty followed the regulations of the Xia; wherein it took from or added to them may be known. The Zhou dynasty has followed the regulations of Yin; wherein it took from or added to them may be known. Some other may follow the Zhou, but though it should be at the distance of a hundred ages, its affairs may be known." (cText.org, 23)

Confucius was not advocating everything in the past and neither asked people to imitate exactly what had been done. The central idea of his philosophy lies in finding a way to consolidate the chaotic country at that time and bring people together to form a better life, which he represents it as the form of *li*.

There are many sentences that recorded what Confucius believed and acted as *li*, most of which are in the section "Xiang Dang".

Li = a form of better life, or a means to a better life?

(1)“When fasting, he thought it necessary to have his clothes brightly clean and made of linen cloth. When fasting, he thought it necessary to change his food, and also to change the place where he commonly sat in the apartment.”(ctext.org, 7)

(2)“If his mat was not straight, he did not sit on it.”(ctext.org, 9)

(3)“When he was about to mount his carriage, he would stand straight, holding the cord. When he was in the carriage, he did not turn his head quite round, he did not talk hastily, he did not point with his hands.”(ctext.org, 17)

Confucius have never talked about meta-ethics nor even gave a real theoretical definition of what *li* is, that is, from which we can deduce whether a conduct accords with *li* or not. Those *li* are specified as a series of codes of conduct which assign specific behavior, rites and etc. with meanings. Those conducts themselves are of no meaning at the very beginning. For example, in China, young people have to wait for older family members to eat first, which refers to moving chopsticks 动筷子, then they can begin to pick up food with chopsticks. The interesting thing lies that although it has anything to do with the deliciousness, safety, law, and etc., Chinese people believe that this is of great importance, which is beyond the scopes of mere convention. This *li* highlights the relationship between old people and young people, which is a miniature of the Chinese clan culture. The reason why Confucius devoted to building the *li* system should be that he believed it will cultivate and unify people's moral sense and to maintain the stability and harmony of the country.

Here is the experiment. There is a very interesting phenomenon that when Chinese students begin their classes, the class monitor will shout "stand up" 起立 and every student in the classroom will stand up as long as the teacher comes in and the class clock bells. Then each student will shout "hello teacher" 老师好 and wait for the teacher says "hello students" 同学们好, then the class monitor will shout "sit down" 坐下 and after that, the class really begins. And the similar thing will happen when the class ends. We call this phenomenon as "classroom ritual" for abbreviation. Note that although the classroom ritual might also happen in other countries, China must be the place where this ritual takes place most frequently and prevailing. Every Chinese student will have to do it when they are in senior school, and even many universities will obey this classroom ritual. The most interesting thing lies that among the majority of Chinese teachers and students, they view this classroom ritual of great importance. We can conduct an experiment that asks whether the participants think that whether the classroom ritual is of importance and meaning to them.

How?

The hypothesis is that for Chinese students, they might think this classroom ritual can show whether a person is polite and whether he or she respects the teacher, which is also one major traditional and most valued Chinese relationship. While students from other countries might think that it is simply a facial or nonsense behavior.

Like, ask them to judge, on a scale of 1-5, how bad a person is who doesn't do that?

References

- APA
1. Willis, Hugh Evander. "A Definition of Law." *Virginia Law Review*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1926, pp. 203–214. *JSTOR*, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1065717.
 2. Ivanhoe, Philip J. and Norden, Bryan W. Van, "Readings in classical Chinese philosophy." Seven Bridges Press. ISBN 1-889119-09-1.
 3. Chinese Text Project. 2018/10/25. <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zheng/ens>.

Overall, this is excellent work! Going forward, you don't need to spend as much time explaining / giving examples of the phenomenon / term from the text, "li." You can and should, going forward, spend more time explaining the "experimental" questions you'd ask - procedure.