

The Centrality of Ritual (*Li*) in Early Chinese Society

Confucius's insistence on the centrality of ritual behavior, and in particular, the rites associated with the early Zhou period, was not new to Chinese thought. As the man himself said, "I transmit, but I do not create." The two passages below from the Zuozhuan explore the deeper meaning of ritual (li) as it was understood in Confucius's time. In a recent introduction to the Zuozhuan, the translators of the text provide this gloss on the significance of li:

"No subject is mentioned more frequently in *Zuozhuan* than ritual propriety (*li*). If required to answer with a single term what *Zuozhuan* is "all about," one could hardly do better than to respond, "ritual propriety." That being said, the notion of *li* as it appears in *Zuozhuan* is varied and complex and might not in all cases be well served by the translation "ritual propriety." Originally, *li* meant something like "sacrificial rites" and, by extension, how to conduct such rites. This fairly narrow meaning was soon expanded to include a wide range of social, political, and domestic ceremonies, which aimed at returning the world to an idealized order that presumably existed before the social and political breakdown of the Spring and Autumn period. At its heart, ritual begins with the recognition that ancient Chinese society, like so many others both ancient and modern, was rigidly hierarchical and that one must be keenly aware of one's position with regard to others. *This hierarchy, at least in some conceptions, includes the realm of deities and deceased ancestors, to whom one maintains a ritual responsibility.* [emphasis added] Compliance with ritual, whether that of a sacrificial offering or a simple interaction between superior and inferior, allowed duties to be discharged in an orderly and predictable fashion. Confucius is said to have been known during his lifetime as a great teacher of ritual propriety. As time passed, the realm of ritual propriety expanded and tended to become more abstract. It sometimes appears in *Zuozhuan*, particularly in the second half of the Spring and Autumn period, almost as a principle or set of principles that enables good governance and even sustains the cosmos."¹

LORD ZHAO, 25TH YEAR (517 BCE)

You Ji of Zheng had an audience with Zhao Yang, who asked about the proper rituals for saluting, yielding, and turning. You Ji replied, "These are ceremonies. This is not the same thing as ritual propriety."

Zhao Yang said, "I presume to ask what is meant by 'ritual propriety,' then."

You Ji replied: "I heard our former high officer Zichan say that ritual propriety is the warp thread of heaven, the proper duty of earth, and the best conduct of the people. It is the warp thread of heaven and earth, and it is this that people make their model. They make a model of the brightness of heaven, they go along with the nature of earth, and they are born in the midst of the six vapors and use the five resources . . .

¹ The *Zuo Tradition/Zuozhuan* Reader. Translated and introduced by Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg (Seattle, 2020), pp. 115–16.

“With excess these become disordered and chaotic, and the people lose their innate qualities. Thus, ritual was made to sustain these innate qualities . . . Ruler and subject, above and below, were created in such a way as to follow the model of the proper duty of the earth. Husband and wife, outside and inside, were created in such a way as to put in order the two kinds of affairs. Father and son, elder brother and younger brother, elder sister and younger sister, nephew and uncle, relations by marriage and parents-in-law, were created in such a way as to figure forth the brightness of Heaven. Administrative affairs, labor and exertions, conduct and commitments, were created in such a way as to accord with the four seasons. Punishments and penalties, authority and legal suits, which cause the people to have fear and restraint, were created in such a way as to resemble thunder and lightning, with its deadly strikes. Warmth and kindness, generosity and affability, were made to imitate Heaven’s way of giving birth and fostering things.

In the people there are liking and disliking, joy and anger, sorrow and pleasure, emotions that originate in the six vapors. For this reason, appropriate types of behavior were examined and imitated so as to govern these six impulses . . . [Accordingly] rulers were careful in their conduct and made their orders trustworthy, using troubles and blessings and rewards and punishments to govern death and life. Life is something that is liked. Death is something that is disliked. To like a thing is to take pleasure in it. To dislike a thing is to find sorrow in it. When there is no impropriety in the way one feels sorrow or takes pleasure, then it is possible to be in accord with the nature of heaven and earth and, in this way, to last long.”

Zhao Yang said, “Extraordinary indeed is the greatness of ritual propriety!”

Jou Ji replied, “Ritual propriety is the marking line of superior and inferior, the warp and woof of heaven and earth, and the basis for the people’s livelihood. That is why the former kings esteemed it. Therefore, men who are able to bend or straighten themselves in order to enter into the realm of ritual propriety are called perfected men. Is it not fitting, this greatness of ritual propriety?”

Zhao Yang said, “I would request to hold this saying close for the rest of my life.”

LORD ZHAO 26TH YEAR (516 BCE)

Yan Ying said, “The usefulness of ritual propriety for governing a domain is old, as old as heaven and earth. When the ruler commands well, the subject follows. When the father is kind, the son is filial. When the elder brother is loving, the younger brother is respectful. When the husband is gentle, the wife is amenable. When the mother-in-law is kind, the daughter-in-law is obedient. That is in accordance with ritual propriety. So when the ruler gives commands without erring, the subject follows without duplicity. When the father is kind in his teaching, the son is filial in his remonstrances. When the elder brother is loving and friendly, the younger brother is respectful and compliant. When the husband is gentle yet dutiful, the wife is amenable yet principled. When the mother-in-law is kind and accommodating, the daughter-in-law is obedient and complacent. These are the fine institutions of ritual propriety.”

The lord said, “Well said! Only today have I heard of these heights of ritual.”

He replied, “This is what the former kings received from heaven and earth for the managing of the people, and that is why they held it in high esteem.”

The two passages below invest the notion of li with a larger moral content. Flawless observance of ceremonial rules is not enough. Honoring social gradations within the family and society, carefully measuring the consequences of one's actions, and acting for the benefit of the state and his subjects are the true marks of ritual propriety.

LORD XUAN, 12TH YEAR (597 BCE)

When the ruler of Chu raises men to office, among those of his own clan name he selects from close kin; and among those of other clan names he selects from old families holding hereditary offices. In raising men to office he does not overlook the virtuous; in giving rewards he does not overlook those who toiled. The aged are shown additional kindness; travelers are granted gifts. Noblemen and commoners have regalia with different patterns to distinguish them. The noble have consistent standards of dignity; the lowly have a sense of awe based on gradations. There is thus no violation of ritual propriety.

LORD ZHAO, 5TH YEAR (537 BCE)

When our lord went to Jin, he made no mistakes in ritual performance, all the way from the ceremony recognizing his exertions in the outskirts of the city right through to the presentation of gifts. The Prince of Jin said to Ru Qi, "Is the Prince of Lu not excellent in his performance of ritual?" He replied, "In what way does the Prince of Lu comprehend ritual?" The lord said, "What do you mean? A man who in no way violated ritual, all the way from the ceremony recognizing his exertions in the outskirts of the city right through to the presentation of gifts! In what way does he not comprehend it?" He replied, "These are ceremonies. They cannot be called ritual. Ritual is that by which one keeps the domain, implements administrative commands, and does not lose one's subjects. At present, the issuing of administrative commands is in the hands of the great houses of Lu, and he cannot retrieve them. He has Zijia Yibo but is incapable of employing him. He has violated his covenant with a great domain and bullied a small domain. He takes advantage of others' difficulties but knows nothing of his own private affairs. The lord's holdings have been divided in four parts, and the people get their sustenance elsewhere. Nobody's thoughts are on the lord, yet he makes no plans for a good end. He acts as ruler of the domain, and the difficulties will affect him personally, yet he takes no thought of his situation. In these things are the very roots and branches of ritual, yet he busies himself with the petty details of ceremonial practice. Is it not far off the mark to say that he is excellent in his performance of ritual?" The noble man said that in this instance Ru Qi comprehended ritual.