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Modern Times and Modern Rites

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Abstract

Classical Confucianism says that ritual propriety (*li* 禮) is necessary to bind society and produce a harmonious and peaceful social order. Secular liberal moral and political theories are skeptical that shared manners, etiquette, rituals, and rites are necessary to bind society and produce intra-state harmony and peace. Liberalism, especially liberalism adapted to cosmopolitan and multicultural states, proposes that an overlapping consensus about values can be sufficient to bind a people, without shared norms governing *li*. It might be true that shared values can bind a liberal multi-culture without shared *li*, while at the same time there are costs associated with doing without *li*, or abiding a plural *li*. Some philosophers associate *li* with conservative social orders and are glad to see the *li* dissipate with the recession of such orders. Others think that we need to recognize the costs associated with *li*-lessness, and that liberal, multicultural orders have, and/or are in need of creating or recreating *li* in order to sustain a harmonious common life. This paper revisits this debate and explores the question of whether and how Chinese Confucian philosophy sheds light on the normative contribution *li* makes to human life, and whether and to what degree this depends on whether the culture or nation state is liberal or liberal and multicultural. This will enable us to evaluate whether we in the North Atlantic should want more, less, or none of *li*.

Keywords: Confucianism, *li* 禮, liberalism, manners, rites, rituals, *zhi* 治

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1. Rites for Liberals

One key question for the dialogue between Western and Chinese philosophy—and in particular Chinese Confucian philosophy—is whether and if so to what extent does, or better, should classical Chinese Confucian philosophy appeal to us now? To what extent does classical Chinese Confucian philosophy provide resources for us in twentieth-first century liberal societies? Are there aspects of the Chinese Confucian tradition, of this classical Chinese way of being human, that are live options for us now, and more importantly good live options, options that were we to adopt them would make us better off in our own terms?

This paper will focus exclusively on the question of whether we would be better off if we had more of the rite stuff that Classical Confucian China emphasizes and celebrates as necessary for a good human life. There are some contemporary philosophers who think that classical China holds this lesson, e.g., David Wong (2000, 2015),[1] P. J. Ivanhoe (2013), Amy Olberding (2015, 2019), and Hagop Sarkissian (2010, 2014, 2015, 2017), while there are skeptics, e.g., Chris Fraser (2012, 2013), Eske Møllgaard (2012), and Tongdong Bai (2014). Here I provide some general reflections on the debate, trying to understand what rites contribute to good human lives and how and why we might benefit from more rather than less of the rite stuff. There is pretty much no question about whether rites and debates on the right rites played an important role in classical Chinese Confucian thinking about human excellence. My question is whether rites and debates on the right rites should matter to us now and if so, how.

It is common to hear the lament that modern liberal cultures lack in good manners and respect. Classical Chinese Confucian philosophy has things to say about such matters, about what respect and

[1] Wong thinks that rites play several important roles, one is teaching the right (culturally endorsed) emotions and internal attitudes; another is honing attentional skills. These are related. Therefore, for example, if the priest knows how to perform the funeral service properly according the norms, then all those attending can focus on, attend to, what matters—the loss, the life of the loved one, their relation to the deceased individual and to the other mourners.

manners consist in, what they mean, and why they matter. Here I focus on ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and ask if classical Chinese Confucian philosophy sheds any light on what sort of normative contribution *li* makes to human lives. This will enable us to evaluate whether we should want more, less, or none of *li*.

I ask the question about *li* in terms of its normative contribution rather than its contribution to ethics because it might be that such things as good manners, ritual practices, and the like make contributions to a good life that are not distinctively moral but that nonetheless make human life better.

1.1. Varieties of Li

In classical Chinese Confucian philosophy, *li* encompasses such things as greeting practices, dress, bodily posture, deference rules, tone of voice, diet, food etiquette, marriage and remarriage rules, funeral practices, and mourning periods.

The first thing to notice is that Western liberal cultures have norms governing all these things as well.[2] It might be that all cultures have rites or rituals built around some such universal events as birth, coming of age, marriage, death, and, perhaps, being in relation to the divine. It may also be natural, in some sense of the word "natural," to create norms where order is necessary or helpful to accomplish some task,

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2 If there was any doubt about the importance of rites outside of religious institutions in America, it ended with Erving Goffman's "microsociology." *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) offers the first sociological analysis of micro-norms governing face-to-face interpersonal life in America. There are rules about manners, decorum, facial expression, posture, deference, and so on that are normative, and that signal such things as age, gender, social role, social position and so on. In America, these norms are culturally endorsed, maintained, and regulated and, at the same time, used by individuals to manage the expectations and reception by others. Goffman emphasized the theatrical aspects of controlling micro-expressions, micro-gestures and the like, referring to such first person deployment of these norms as theatrical, what he called, "dramaturgical." It may be distinctively American to adopt, or to co-opt, depending on one's perspective, certain norms of social performance to the aims of individual advancement, and to see the idea of life as a self-fashioning theatrical performance taken in a radically individualistic direction in the view that one creates or invents norms for oneself in the performance that is one's life (Flanagan 2014).

such as forming coffee lines in order to accomplish the result of first come first served. If the norm was not first come first served, but "elders first," a different practical way of getting the customers their coffee rather than queuing would need to be in place to get all the customers coffee in the right way. But still, there would be some tendency under any normative regime towards creating a method. Notice this much might make us ask what function our rites serve? What is the intended function of our rites? Supposing we can answer in terms of what I am calling a normative contribution, or more likely, normative contributions, we might ask whether our rites, our way of doing the rites, our attentiveness to our rites, our modes of passing on the rites, and so on, are good, effective, and so on.

1.2. Gentlepersons

In classical China, a gentleperson abides the rites. *Li* is necessary for being a good person, part of having a good character. But it is not sufficient (Sarkissian 2014). One also needs to be benevolent, righteous, respectful of elders, and so on. One might think of the relations among these virtues of character[3] holistically. A certain kind of attentiveness revealed in how one greets others enables and is enabled by being benevolent (*ren* 仁) or filial (*xiao* 孝) (to some degree). A loving and respectful family buries its members in certain ways. In China, there are sages who know the proper rites and rituals, these exemplars model the virtues and perform the rites in the right ways. Ideally the rites and the right way(s) of doing the rites spread and then eventually are maintained/sustained in their right form. Xunzi 荀子 is most clear among the classical *Ru* 儒 that rites are necessary for individual and social flourishing. *Li* brings order (*zhi* 治) and it works best if it functions in a society-wide manner and is enforced if necessary by the mechanisms of state power.

[3] It should be noted that calling them virtues of character does not assume that these are all straightforwardly "moral" virtues.

1.3. Learning the Rites

No one is born knowing the rites. But perhaps a disposition to acquire rites is innate (Hansen 1992). Either way, rites need to be learned or developed. Role modeling, especially via exemplars, elders, experts, or virtuosos who really have the rites down is one way for the newbies to acquire the rites. Presumably, the role models themselves model or modeled themselves on other experts. Perhaps they were themselves apprentices to real or imagined virtuosos, sage kings, and the like. Then there is self-cultivation. A gentleperson works at nailing the rites, getting them just right. It is in the nature of most rites that there are norms for how they are to be executed, not merely norms that say that some end should be achieved by any means whatsoever. If forks go to the left, they go to the left in the correct not haphazard way. This does not matter to finding one's fork; it matters to whether the rite is done correctly. If Mass must be held on Sunday morning, then it is to be done on Sunday and in the way Mass is done, not rescheduled for Saturday or Monday or shortened because there is an important football game on TV. People who perform or participate in ritual practice work at getting them right. Some people are poor at handshaking—they grasp the others hand too quickly, too, and so on (Fingarette 1972). They ought to practice more; attend to feedback, largely nonverbal, about how they are doing, and so on.

Some issues emerge: Is it best, and if so why, that rites be shared widely across all members of some society or it is ok if they are shared within groups but not across? How this might work needs to be refined. The first scenario is one in which the rites are homogeneous or global; the second is one in which they are heterogeneous and local. So one dimension is *homogeneity* and *heterogeneity*.

Another dimension is *expressive convergence* versus *cognitive convergence*. Expressive convergence refers to the norm that everyone who is performing the rite, especially if performing it together, executes it in the same way. The demand is that insofar as we are going to perform this rite, we do it in the same way. If it is a song or piece of music, we use the same version, language, and score. Every culture has rites where norms of expressive convergence are expected.

Cognitive convergence occurs when the ritual practice is judged to get at the truth or, what is different, the way things are supposed to be done. In board games, like chess and Go, and in many sports, there are ways of moving pieces or one's own body that are good or correct solutions or the next right move. Usually many other moves are expressible (in a game of Go there are more possible moves that there are atoms in the universe). Most are bad moves. Cognitive convergence on the small set of right moves is required for virtuosity in complex two person as well as in team sports. One question is whether there are only a small number of right ways to pray, greet, or hold funerals.

Both the expressivist and the cognitivist can demand conformity to having funerals in a certain way. The expressivist defends particular rites because they are ours, that is the way we do funerals around here, and thus doing the rites this way expresses and sustains certain ways we wish to orient ourselves towards deceased loved ones; the cognitivist defends his rites, or some of his rites, or better the way he executes the rites by claiming that they conform to some deeper metaphysical reality. Heaven (*tian* 天) or God mandates that the rites be executed this way.

2. What Rites Are Good For

What goods might agreement/coordination on rites, on *li*, be claimed to yield? Here is a list of five possibilities:

2.1. Order

Rites might save us from disorder, from war, from chaos. Order is better than disorder or chaos, so one might think that rites of greeting signal that I am not an agent of violence, disorder, or chaos. Think of the ways we signal that we are not dangerous to strangers in cities. Averting one's eyes, a quick smile, nervous laughter, saying "hello." One way to read all these techniques is that they mean something like "continue, I do not intend to harm you." This much of course does

not produce any positive good. It just removes an obstacle—"there is no war of each against each around here," or better perhaps: "even if there is a war of each against each around here I am not part of it or, at least, I do not intend to enact havoc on you right now." The basic rites of engagement say "I am not dangerous," "I will not create havoc, at least not here and right now."

2.2. Harmony

A second rationale for rites is positive and involves the production of the good of harmony. What harmony is or how it reveals itself is not easy to say (Li 2006, 2008). The term *harmony* derives from the Greek *ἁρμονία* (harmonía), meaning "joint, agreement, concord" the verb *ἁρμόζω* (*harmozo*), "to fit together, to join." In music, it refers to synchronic overlay and the ways they fit together, but it is also used in common speech to refer to how a melody, a diachronic musical event, hangs together. Harmony is a positive characteristic. What seems disharmonious at first can seem harmonious later, after one gets used to the sound, once one gets over the initial feeling that things are not fitting together well. Musical examples abound of audiences initially disliking, finding odd and disharmonious music that they later found beautiful, harmonious. There was, depending on the source, the rioting or disappointment of the audience to Stravinsky's "Rites of Spring" in Paris in 1914; there was the skeptical Chinese critics' response to some of the classical (high bourgeois) Western repertoire (re-)introduced to them by Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra in 1973; and there were many rock n' roll purists who thought that George Harrison's interjection of classical Indian music, especially sitar music, to rock n' roll was discordant (a funny charge when you think about the elders' view that rock n' roll was itself the paradigm of discordance, undisciplined noise).

One way that some rites signal harmony as well as order or the intention to not be disorderly is by marking deference, social role, or gender. Boys bow, girls curtsy. In Thailand the *wai* is a greeting where palms are pressed in prayer-like way, and where the height of the hands and the depth of the bow indicate the status of the other. Such

greeting practices indicate that I am not dangerous and that I know my place and yours in the social order. They signal that we are participants in some sort of structure that aims at something more than simple order: harmonious social order.

2. 3. Beauty

A third way rites might be said contribute to human life is by being beautiful or by contributing beauty, artfulness, elegance, choreography, gracefulness to what is ugly or aesthetically neutral but could be pretty. Artfulness might be taken to be its sole contribution or a certain value-added to order or harmony. One thought is that human interaction is somehow dirty, undisciplined, unattractive and that certain rituals, think greeting practices, make it look less so. They put an appealing veneer or overlay on something that is rough, gruff, or unsmooth. If one holds a view like Xunzi that humans interact grossly even if not at first meanly, then rites can be thought of as ways of softening, cleaning up, making pretty what is not so (Mower 2013). If one holds the stronger view, also available in the *Xunzi*, that all others are threats, then ritualized greeting practices can serve as artful signals that I can be trusted, that I know my place, social role, gender. They signal order, or perhaps they say that you should not expect disorder, chaos, and mayhem to be instigated by me or mine; and they signal this in an artful, aesthetically appealing way.

2. 4. Signaling What Matters

Birth, sexual coming of age, marriage, and death have perhaps a special and universal kind of significance to gregarious social animals like humans. They have significance to the lives of individuals, extended families, clans, and lineages that mark changes of importance. Rites and rituals evolve to mark these events, call group attention to them, and speak in their form, possibly in their content, about how the group conceives the coming, the going, the changing, and how it sees its significance, its mattering. Masai ritual male circumcision, Hebrew bar mitzvah and Catholic confirmation all speak, but in different ways,

about coming of age. Signaling in a ritualized way teaches via initiation, group practice, role-modeling how we do such and so, what we conceive as especially important, and how we conceive its importance.

2.5. Emotional Regulation, Extension, and Enhancement

Birth, death, and puberty are emotional events. Perhaps some of the emotions—joy, sadness, feeling sexual—are universal. However, they occur in a raw and undisciplined manner, or better, they do not initially and automatically occur in what different groups think is their right form. The norms for apt expression of the joy over a newborn or the loss of a loved one—an elder who was once welcomed with such joy and who is now lost—are typically regulated. One might think that it is mainly the behavioral expression of the emotions that is regulated, not how they are experienced first-personally. However, this seems wrong. When Daoists, Confucians, and Mohists debate proper burial practices they are not simply debating mournful facial expressions, respectful postures, burial dress, coffin design, grave depth, whether the deceased is buried with or without his possessions, and so on, they are always also debating how one, in this case the living, ought to experience, express, and conceive of the loss. In addition to stipulating the right rites from a behavioral point of view, the norms are designed to inculcate, regulate, modify, extend, and enhance certain ways of affectively and cognitively experiencing the loss of this loved one, future loved ones, and death in general.

3. Seven Challenges

Fans of rites face objections and challenges. Here are seven, not entirely independent ones.

3.1. Nostalgia

Cicero lamented "O tempore, o mores" (Oh the customs, oh the times). The lament is familiar. The youth (or foreigners) are taking us to hell

in a hand basket. It may just be that folks, typically elders, get used to what they are used to and lament change; and it may just be that other folk, typically the youth or foreigners, introduce such change. It is easy to understand nostalgia and other kinds of resistance to change psychologically and sociologically. Nevertheless, it is hard to see how they count one way or another for the importance of ritual conformity, unless there are arguments brought to bear for why homogeneity is important or why. If the answer is that homogeneity, or what is different, fixity of rites is important because it preserves or enhances order, harmony, aesthetic value, or that it best signals what matters and how it matters and fixes apt emotions, then arguments need to be given as to why the old or extant practices do these things better than new, transformed, or heterogeneous practices.

3.2 Naturalness

One way to defend a set of rites is to claim they are right because they are natural. In classical Chinese Confucian philosophy, alignment with heaven or nature's ways is a common defense for one form of ritual practice over another. There are many problems with arguments for or from naturalness, which also affect the Aristotelean and Christian versions of natural law theory. How does one specify what is natural? Is it innate in human psychobiology? Or is it what accords with nature's mandate conceived impersonally or with the wisdom and will of a non-human über-Being who is nature or being itself? And there is controversy about why what is natural is good. Internal to the Chinese Confucian tradition, for example, in the *Xunzi*, we learn that humans are naturally undisciplined, possibly bad. *Li* is required to bring discipline. So *li* is not natural in the sense of innate; it is natural in the sense that *li* accords with the wisdom of sage kings who detect and follow the mandate of heaven (*tianming* 天命). However, these are clearly different senses of "nature" and "natural." The first derives from human nature; the second from the nature of reality, which is deemed or judged to speak authoritatively about how humans ought to be and to live. Consider the debates about funerals in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, the *Xunzi* 荀子 and in the *Mozi* 墨子. Despite

trash-talking between various philosophical schools like Ru, Daoists, and Mohists about the *li* that govern funerals—what, if anything, the deceased should be buried with, mourning periods, etc.—no party recommends indifference to death, mourning, and funeral rites and wants to leave their relatives' corpses to be eaten by vermin, coyotes, and jackals, as Mohists are sometimes accused of doing, or just getting on with life after the death of a loved one, as Daoists are said to favor.[4] Although the Mohists were radical social reformers who believed that the *Ru* overdo rituals, the Mohists almost certainly believed that the bodies of the deceased should be buried in a respectful manner and not just for public health reasons. The Daoist sage suffers the death of his loved one, but he has prepared for it. The disagreements can be understood as primarily about forms of mourning and questions about whether some *Ru* rituals—a nobleman buried with his most prized possessions, emperors buried with armies of terra cotta warriors—are elitist, resource extravagant, and thus morally pernicious.

3. 3. Enforcing Li

Suppose one knew what the right rites are, the problem remains as to how to convey, fix, and enforce them. There are many possibilities to accomplish these ends, but here are three: A Normative Authority, Fashion Contagion, and "Nudging."

3. 3. 1. Normative Authority. One idea in classical Confucian China is that the sage kings knew the will of Heaven and what the sage kings

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[4] A notable exception is the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 32:

> Zhuangzi was dying, and his disciples wanted to give him a lavish funeral. Zhuangzi said to them, "I will have heaven and earth as my coffin and crypt, the sun and moon for my paired jades, the stars and constellations for my round and oblong gems, all creatures for my tomb gifts and pallbearers. My funeral accoutrements are already fully prepared! What could possibly be added?"
> "But we fear the crows and vultures will eat you, Master," said they.
> Zhuangzi said, "Above ground I'll be eaten by crows and vultures, below ground by ants and crickets. Now you want to rob the one to feed the other. Why such favoritism?" (Ziporyn 2009, 117)

Note that even here the surprising attitude about the fate of one's body after death is reverential, reflective, and celebrates ones return to nature's bosom.

know and model is contagious, through their *de* 德—some combination of detectible virtue, wisdom, and charisma. "The sage king problem" is that there were once sage kings, but according to the tradition, what they knew about what is true, virtuous, politically sound, and so on, degraded. If the sage is an attractor and virtue is contagious, then it is hard to explain what happened, how disorder and disharmony come to be. One modern idea is this: given that virtue and righteousness and the correct rites can suffer decay and degradation due perhaps to a host of natural and social contingencies that are hard to control, it is or might be a good idea to use tools of normative enforcement: governmental authority, elder authority, legal authority, significant punishment and/or rewards for normative conformity to the right rites.

The method of authority has well-known problems, especially over long-hauls: people change, customs change, there is interaction across traditions, rebellion, and so on. The method of authority normally works to control the speed or degree of such changes and interactions; but especially in the modern world there are too many counterforces that favor the destabilizing forces.

3. 3. 2. Fashioning. Another technique for generating and fixing *li* is the method of fashion, which involves waiting and allowing for various contingencies, including conflict, rebellion, immigration, cross-fertilization, and the creative impulses of the youth to generate, fix, spread, breakdown, and extinguish various *li*. One who is comfortable with fashion fixing of rites, might also be comfortable with heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. It will be important that groups have rituals of greeting and conversational order and for marking sexual coming of age and marriage and death, but it is not so important that there is homogeneity across all groups. Places where groups intersect—when queuing at coffee shops and airports—could be thought to be governed also by fashion, or by local normative authorities, or by the invisible hand of game theoretic rules. Even under a "fashion regime," some rites, possibly many, might be long lasting and slow to change, especially ones that are extremely efficient or involve mostly the elders and which are ceremonial and fixed in and by sacred institutions; others will be more fluid, for example,

rites of greeting inside age and ethnic groups. Still, when the fist-bumpers meet the hand-shakers there will need to be some higher order *li* or else greeting is confusing, messy, awkward, as indeed it now is.

3.3.3. Nudging. A mixed method—neither the method of authority nor the method of fashion—of gaining *li* fluency and *li* consistency (but not fixity or homogeneity) is what social scientists nowadays call "nudging." Nudging is strategic like authority but seems non-coercive like fashion. The theory behind nudging takes advantage of research on framing. Consider deciding whether to be an organ donor. One gets significantly lower rates of offering to be a donor if one requires opting in than if the choice is framed as a question of whether the individual wishes to opt out. Benign nudging involves the powers-that-be, social planners, and public policy wonks incentivizing the best choices. Malignant nudging involves soda vendors charging only a nickel more for the 64 oz. soda than for the 12 oz. one. Often when the framing seems innocent, it is in the sense that it nudges the person to make exactly the choice she herself would want to make if she had enough time, reasoned carefully, and so on. How could this be done for *li*? How, perhaps, is it already being done for *li*? How, if we do, do we nudge individuals towards the right rites? One way we do this is by encouraging, at the least, this meta-norm: if you want something from a person with more money or power than you, abide the greeting, dress, and respect norms that they and their people (people like them, people with their type of resources) endorse, not the ones you and your people prefer, endorse, and abide. The context of wanting something from someone more powerful or at least who has something you want, frames the situation as one where you should want to know or be a sharp detector of their rites. It is not easy to see how a system of normative guidance would work that nudged people in situations, where there are multiple *li*, to choose the ones that are best for them personally unless what is best for them involves what the most powerful wish for them to abide, even if this is the rites that are the ones for people like them according to their age, gender, their station and duties.

The latter issues pertaining to gaining *li* compliance are special problems in liberal democratic societies where coercion is judged as legitimate only when extremely important matters of morality or public safety are at stake. Fashion is for trivial matters; and nudging for good ideas, which are not morally terribly important or not pressing matters of public safety. The trouble is that even if one can muster convincing arguments for *li*, one will be hard pressed to find ones that will make the right rites seem like the kinds of matters that warrant coercion.

3. 4. Group Size and the Function(s) of Li

This brings us to the next concern: How important really are rites today, especially homogeneity of rites across large numbers of people? Robin Dunbar (2010) argues that the evidence is that for the first 240,000 years or so of human existence communities were small and face-to-face. The average number of members in a human community was 150 (actually between 100 and 230) until agriculture and domestication of animals began about 11,000 years ago, and the size of human communities began to grow. At the time of Confucius, the Chinese population is believed to have been between 10-13 million, not much larger than the population of the state of North Carolina, which living there, I can say is not all that crowded, and is tiny in terms of land mass compared to China.[5]

In *Analects* 9.14, Confucius answers the student who worries about his impending visit to where the nine barbarian tribes live. Confucius reassures him that the uncouthness of the barbarians will be conquered by his own couthness. The idea is that the *de* 德 of the *junzi* 君子 is contagious. We know better (Flanagan 2008; Flanagan and Hu 2011). Some good practices spread; others do not. And the multifarious reasons that govern spread—fashion, timing, power, and authority—do not track goodness or badness, couthness or uncouthness of the

[5] See Bai (2014) for an insightful treatment of what differences population size makes to normative organization.

practices. Even if one thinks that the best practices of rites and virtue will win out over the long haul, it is not because we do (or should) think that our virtues and rites are better aligned with the will of God, the gods, Heaven's Mandate, or nature's ways. Our criteria for measuring the goodness or badness of our rites and virtues involve these things for some, but they also involve giving our own contingent history weight: these practices are good because they are ours.

The anthropological literature on groups and group size often speaks about the functions of rites. Tattooing, ritual dancing, burial practices, initiation, and marriage practices almost always begin inside small or smallish groups. They serve to mark members and distinguish them from out-group members, and they spread or fail to spread for all the usual good and bad reasons. One central function is to signal group membership and enhance feelings of membership and solidarity. Presumably rites and rituals still function in this way, and we understand better the mechanisms that cause groups to think that their ways are the right ways. However, we now think of these mechanisms as producing causes, not as producing reasons.

3.5. Generational Pressure

In the early 1960's there was a TV show called *American Bandstand*. Dick Clark was the MC who introduced new pop music (rock n' roll was just getting legs), while the audience watched teenagers dance as at a hop. My mother taught me as a small boy that gentlemen knew how to dance and play bridge. Dancing involved the sort of dances (sans the talent) that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers did, or more plausibly, the Fox Trot and various Waltzes. There were also the more edgy Cha Chas, Sambas, and Meringues. On *American Bandstand* I watched with awe and excitement as the world of orderly gentlemanly dance came undone before my eyes in the practices of boys and girls (all white originally) just a bit older than me. The result: new kinds of dancing—the Lindy, the Twist, the Jerk. Happily, many of these did not last, did not catch on or make it, or if they did, they—in their pure form—were short lived. Arguably, in fact almost certainly, these experiments at the edges of the *li* of dancing changed the ways we now

dance. Well they did, plus emerging knowledge of world music, world dance, and so on.

There are several points: One is that *li* changes are often perceived as somewhere between objectively wrong and gratuitously annoying by the elders. It is an interesting question whether perceived disharmony is genuine. Some music, e.g., Stravinsky or 12-tone music sounded discordant until patterns were discerned and it no longer sounded discordant. However, the sounds didn't change, the hearers did. Second, social change, either via the mechanisms of youthful hormones or interaction across groups will put pressure on *li*, will work to produce changes in *li*, possibly only around the edges. Confucius mentions that he approves of changes in the fabric of men's caps for economic reasons. There must be caps, what they are made of is not essential. When the youth bow at the top of steps rather than the bottom, they violate the *li*. However, whether and when modifications of rites change only form rather than function is contestable. Third, holding to the traditional *li* always presupposes a certain conception of the right rites or practices; it almost never provides arguments for their rightness or legitimacy. Though, this does not mean that the traditional rites cannot be defended. It does mean that their defense will often involve claims about identity, claims about the way things are done by us, the conditions of group membership, and so on. However, these serve mainly to mark that these rites are ours, not —to repeat again—to show that they are right in some wider sense, or, what is different, in some deeper sense.

3. 6. The Anxiety of Influence

Many modern people get that rites matter and that different communities do the rites that matter, marking birth, death, coming of age, marriage, in different ways. The Hebrew Bible and Muslim "sharia" mark themselves in addition to advancing the faith, as vehicles for protecting communal life and virtue, property, and kinship. The texts of classical China are engaged in a similar project of cultural preservation. However, there is a very modern sensibility in the North Atlantic that expresses resentment at being asked to simply copy the

ways of the past and even to the very idea of cultural preservation. Although, how much this trend, dubbed the "anxiety of influence," by Harold Bloom, pertains to the rejection of rites is difficult to ascertain. On the one hand, the anxiety to being *Homo Xerox* involves desires to do it one's own way. There are two recent and familiar modes of challenging the dominant rites regime that have different relations to the anxiety of influence. Consider hip-hop and hipsters, respectively. Hip-hop culture overtly transgresses the norms of common decorum, hats on backwards or sideways, fist bumps instead of handshakes, pants halfway down the butt. Hip-hop expresses that there will be change of the dominant normative community or at least that the dominant culture will have to co-exist with an alternative one, one that is suspicious, possibly contemptuous of the other. Hipster-hood on the other hand can be exceedingly, even obsequiously polite, decorous; it often involves retrieval of habits of a lost age, the manners of men in fedoras, the integration of the good manners of old into an aesthetic that allows, even relishes, things that are cool, gay, queer, as well as the formally normal.

The point is that neither community is non-normative, sans rites. However, they both challenge the dominant system in ways that express the anxiety of influence, through a movement of like-minded community members. Perhaps there are some strong poets in the hip-hop community, Eminem and Jay-Z come to mind, and even among hipsters, (although I doubt it); but these rite-changing, rite-shifting, rite-challenging movements, like the beatniks, Black Panthers, panthers, hippies, feminists before them, are by and large communal, not individual offerings (Wilson 1995).

3.7. Pluralism and Cosmopolitanism

This brings me to the last challenge in modern times to the idea that we would do well to find the right rites and coalesce around them, with them. Perhaps if we were to do so then our conflicts would devolve into purely epistemic ones. This is crazy. Here again it is useful to replay the ancient Chinese debate among Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists about burial practices. Confucians say bury them deep in

tombs that are emblematic of the life of that individual, with the family jewels, and mourn for three years. Mohists say bury them deep and respectfully and get on with it. Burying one's loved ones with pottery and jewels and not working is a waste of resources. Daoists recommend an attitude of accepting the cycle of life and death, not fearing or being appalled by death. Here is a famous passage from a Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*.

> Zhuangzi's wife died. When Huizi went to convey his condolences, he found Zhuangzi sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub, and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children, and grew old," said Huizi. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"
>
> Zhuangzi said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning, and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter." "Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped." (Watson 1968, 190-191)

Note that this is just an anecdote and is not offered explicitly as a proposal for the right way to do a funeral. Suppose, however, that it is read as such a recommendation, and that a Ru thinker responds that it is appalling. What this would show is that normative communities feel strongly about their *li*. How could a three-way debate between a Confucian, a Mohist, and a Daoist proceed and be resolved? It would, we know, proceed in part by each advocate bringing in considerations of what is natural and appropriate. But claims about what is natural and appropriate will invoke tradition-specific views about human

nature and what makes philosophical and cultural sense, which will beg all the key questions from the point of view of the other tradition.[6] One might appeal to the other to feel his way into the possibility of conceiving of things differently and doing things differently (e.g., greeting, funerals, re-marriages, kinds of marriage, etc.). But this will almost always be an appeal to re-consider how you conceive and do your *li*, which will in part be an appeal to consider the contingency of your way of being human and the prospects for doing a life, even if not your life, in a different normatively acceptable way.

4. Conclusion

So what is the answer to the question, does classical China teach us something about rites, about how we ought to do our rites, about the right rites, and so on? This is really a three-part question; so let's take each part on its own.

First, The classical Chinese Confucian focus on rites teaches this much, or better perhaps, it reminds us of this much: Rites are one universal aspect, arena, or zone of normativity along with values, virtues, and principles. The range of rites and rituals includes practices that we consider matters of etiquette, as well as very many practices that we consider religious, e.g., birth rites, sexual coming of age rites, funeral rites, and marriage rites (Rosemont 1976). But even in our traditions

[6] The worry about question begging is raised in the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2:

> Suppose you and I get into a debate. If you win and I lose, does that really mean you are right and I am wrong? If I win and you lose, does that really mean I'm right and you're wrong? Must one of us be right and the other wrong? Or could both of us be right, or both of us wrong? If neither you nor I can know, a third person would be even more benighted. Whom should we have straighten out the matter? Someone who agrees with you? But since he already agrees with you, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with me? But since, she already agrees with me, how can he straighten it out? Someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? Someone who agrees with both of us? But since he already agrees with both of us, how can he straighten it out? So neither you nor I nor any third party can ever know how it is —shall we wait for yet some "other"? (Ziporyn 2009, 19-20)

where we mark the domains of etiquette, morality, and religious practice as distinctive, they bleed into each other across permeable boundaries. Furthermore, a person who ignores or disdains matters of etiquette or spiritual convention is said, and rightly so, to be disrespectful, which is a term of moral disapproval.[7]

Second, As far as the question of the right rites goes, the situation looks this way: there may be certain aspects of human life that across almost all social ecologies will receive communal attention as significant: birth, sexual coming of age, marriage, and death. A community marks membership, acknowledges these transitions to itself, aestheticizes what is mysterious, bewildering, painful, and regulates emotions and attitudes towards these transitions in ways suited the wider ecology constituted in part by its own history. Rightness is largely a matter of fitting and being interpretable by a people who know a symbolic language. As the Chinese debate among Confucians, Mohists, and Daoists shows, there is no non-question-begging answer to the question of what the right way is to respectfully mark the passing of a beloved person.

It is noteworthy that across all rightful practices, or at least in this case across the three radically different conceptions of holding a funeral, there are the twin demands of recognizing some individuals as beloved, and of recognizing that their passing needs to be marked with respect. The Daoist can insist that he is recognizing his beloved as beloved and marking her passing with respect just as the Confucian is. Different rites both express and provide different languages, different affective, cognitive, conative schemes to accomplish these tasks. In the case of burial practices, the right way depends on a worldview, a way of world-making, a cultural system of marking and rendering intelligible love and loss. Different rites can seem unintelligible across even though they serve these twin functions. Once we get that some weird practice is trying to accomplish the tasks that we think necessary, even if it is trying to do so in a very unfamiliar way, we are less appalled; "Oh, that was the funeral?!"

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7 Karen Stohr (2012) has many interesting things to say about the moral aspects of manners.

Third, As for what our reflections teach about how we ought to do our rites, the question cannot be framed any longer in the language of rites enforcement, but rather in the language of expectations, tolerance, negotiation, patience, pluralism, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism of rites. And the reason is this: we get that rites can serve all the functions that the Classical Chinese Confucian thinkers said they do, marking order, attempting to create harmony, adding aesthetic value, signaling gender, social status, mattering and group membership, and regulating, enhancing, and maintaining "apt" emotional expressions and responses to important human institutions and events. But now with some world history under our belts we are less certain about the requirements that rites need to be homogeneous. This is largely because we understand better that socialization works to make us overconfident in the rightness of our rites, makes us mistake familiarity for correctness. Rites mark communities of valuing, they display in their fabric, their inner texture, a way of being and conceiving of who one is, how one defines and situates one's self, who one sees as one's people. In the contemporary world, especially in cities like London and New York, there is increasing appreciation and less and less suspicion (although this is highly vulnerable to fluctuating to the extent that economic competition among groups is exacerbated) about alternative ways of and doing being human. There is greater patience and respect for different ways of revealing one's sense of one's historical heritage, of the ways in which, as we say, a rainbow emerges, and less fussiness and certainty about "my way or the highway." It is an interesting and important question whether modern conflicts about rites, e.g., Muslim temples in lower Manhattan, are not still largely worries about whether some rites serve as cover for disruptive cabalists, as opposed to vestiges of old fashioned ideas that there is a set of right rites or that heterogeneity bespeaks imminent chaos or disharmony. Barring such extreme situations one can hope that some modern cities raise the prospects that sometimes and happily so we are not just awaiting the emergence of some bland gruel that results from the melting pots—perhaps it is now thought of as a speedy, high octane, food processor—but rather large scale situations of cultural appreciation and respect for the wonderful varieties of *li*. Sometimes

there might be *li* fusion as there are with cuisines, but just as often, multiple practices like different ethnic restaurants can lie along the same avenues living in complex harmony, while revealing an array of truly different options.

There is still always the possibility that if we were really asked to live among people who in no way had *li* that marked some kind of respect and recognition for events of universal human significance, birth, death, marriage, that we'd be suspicious that we live in the same world. Happily, we do not live among such alien creatures. Confucians used to say this: that Mohists and Daoists didn't give a shit about their dead relations. But they were wrong. Unless and until—or only when—we find groups that don't care about the newborns or those who pass on, we will just have to accept all manner and variety of the ways that humans have discovered to express the wills to order, harmony, beauty, marking and significance. The good news is that we now live in ecologies in which all sorts of interesting and different ways of doing the *li* surround us. Better to consider this an abundance of resources rather than a threat.

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