



THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ORDER



Xinying Wu

School of Marxism, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, Henan 473061 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2133-8935> |  Xinying_Wu2023@outlook.com

Ying Zhao

School of Marxism, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, Henan 473061 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5285-1549> |  m15225364383@163.com

WU, Xinying; ZHAO, Ying. The concept of ritual in Confucian thought and its implications for social order. *Trans/Form/Ação: Unesp journal of philosophy, Marília*, v. 47, n. 6, e02400331, 2024.

Abstract: “Ritual” is one of the core concepts in Confucian culture. Duke Zhou developed the notion of “ritual” as a set of behavioral norms to maintain the hierarchical system of the ancestral lineage and as regulations for state governance and ceremonial practices. Pre-Qin Confucianism inherited and innovated the Zhou rituals, forming the influential Confucian ritual system deeply embedded in traditional Chinese society. The ritual system embodies elements of absolute monarchy, ancestral reverence and filial piety, reflecting China’s traditional cultural factors. It holds significant social functions, serving as a powerful tool for maintaining social order, promoting stability and ensuring the well-being of future generations. This article starts with the three main aspects of the relationship between benevolence and ritual, governance through virtue, and ritual and law. It explains the spirit of benevolence, people-friendly political ethics and the inherent morality of the law contained in Confucian etiquette ethics, and further analyzes the modern value of Confucian etiquette culture and spirit to the contemporary Chinese society’s moral construction and legal one.


Keywords: Ritual culture. Ritual system. Social order. Confucian thought.

WU, Xinying; ZHAO, Ying. O conceito de ritual no pensamento confucionista e suas implicações para a ordem social. *Trans/form/ação: revista de filosofia da Unesp, Marília*, v. 47, n. 6, e02400331, 2024.

Resumo: “Ritual” é um dos conceitos centrais da cultura confucionista. O duque Zhou desenvolveu a noção de “ritual”, como um conjunto de normas comportamentais, para manter o sistema hierárquico da linhagem ancestral e como regulamentações para governança estatal e práticas cerimoniais. O confucionismo pré-Qin herdou e inovou os rituais Zhou, formando o influente sistema ritual confucionista, profundamente enraizado na sociedade tradicional chinesa. O sistema ritual incorpora elementos de monarquia absoluta, reverência ancestral e piedade filial, refletindo os fatores culturais tradicionais da China. Ele detém funções sociais significativas, servindo como uma ferramenta poderosa para conservar a ordem social, promover a estabilidade e garantir o bem-estar das gerações futuras. Este artigo começa com os três principais aspectos da relação entre benevolência e ritual, governança por meio da virtude e ritual e lei. Ele explica o espírito de benevolência, a ética política amigável às pessoas e a moralidade inerente da lei, contida na ética da etiqueta confucionista. Ademais, analisa o valor moderno da cultura e do espírito da etiqueta confucionista, para a construção moral e legal da sociedade chinesa contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Cultura ritual. Sistema ritual. Ordem social. Pensamento confucionista.

Submission: 22/07/2024 | Decision: 26/08/2024 | Revision: 12/09/2024 | Publication: 07/11/2024

 <https://doi.org/10.1590/0101-3173.2024.v47.n6.e02400331>



This is an article published in open access under a Creative Commons license.

THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ORDER

Xinying Wu¹

Ying Zhao²

Abstract: “Ritual” is one of the core concepts in Confucian culture. Duke Zhou developed the notion of “ritual” as a set of behavioral norms to maintain the hierarchical system of the ancestral lineage and as regulations for state governance and ceremonial practices. Pre-Qin Confucianism inherited and innovated the Zhou rituals, forming the influential Confucian ritual system deeply embedded in traditional Chinese society. The ritual system embodies elements of absolute monarchy, ancestral reverence and filial piety, reflecting China’s traditional cultural factors. It holds significant social functions, serving as a powerful tool for maintaining social order, promoting stability and ensuring the well-being of future generations. This article starts with the three main aspects of the relationship between benevolence and ritual, governance through virtue, and ritual and law. It explains the spirit of benevolence, people-friendly political ethics and the inherent morality of the law contained in Confucian etiquette ethics, and further analyzes the modern value of Confucian etiquette culture and spirit to the contemporary Chinese society’s moral construction and legal one.

Keywords: Ritual culture. Ritual system. Social order. Confucian thought.

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, China has been known as the “Land of Etiquette.” Throughout the five-thousand-year process of civilization development, the reverence, emphasis and observance of rituals have been esteemed traditions among the Chinese people. As recorded in the commentary on *The Book of History - The Tenth Year of Duke Ding*, it states, “China possesses grand rituals, hence it is called Xia; it has beautiful attire, hence it is called Hua” (Zhao, 2007, p. 15). The essence of Chinese civilization has long been intertwined with the practice of rituals. Evidence from oracle bone inscriptions, unearthed in the ruins of the Yin Dynasty, indicates that rituals already held a significant position in the people’s daily lives during the Shang Dynasty. Upon the replacement of the Shang Dynasty by the Western Zhou Dynasty, individuals, such as Duke Zhou, consciously and creatively developed rituals, combining them with music to establish a system of ceremonial practices. Consequently, rituals became the foundation for

¹ School of Marxism, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, Henan 473061 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2133-8935>. E-mail: Xinying_Wu2023@outlook.com.

² School of Marxism, Nanyang Normal University, Nanyang, Henan 473061 – China. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5285-1549>. Email: m15225364383@163.com.

political governance and social stability. According to *The Book of Rites*, it is said that “[...] the Zhou people respected and practiced rituals, demonstrated reverence towards spirits and gods, kept them at a distance while treating people close to them with loyalty” (Liu; Yu; Ding, 2008, p. 256). Through Duke Zhou’s and others’ efforts, rituals were substantially refined during the Zhou Dynasty and formed the basis for subsequent ritual systems throughout various dynastic periods. During the Spring and Autumn period, Confucius inherited, promoted and perfected the culture of rituals and music from the Western Zhou Dynasty, compiling the “Six Classics” that documented ritual and music culture. This culture of rituals and music, then, became the core of Confucian culture. In the Han Dynasty and beyond, with the inclusion of books, such as *The Rites*, *The Rites of Zhou* and *The Book of Rites* which documented ritual culture into the “Thirteen Classics”, etiquette became essential knowledge that candidates had to learn for imperial examinations, deeply influencing ancient political administration and societal culture (Huang; Qing 2021, p. 136-152).

1 THE ORIGIN OF THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

During the era of the original Confucianists, society was in disarray, and there was frequent warfare. The original Confucianists believed that the root cause of this situation was the absence of universally recognized principles for managing relationships among individuals and between individuals and society. In response, they put forward the concept of “ritual” with the intention of establishing guidelines that would regulate the rights and obligations of various social roles in social life’s different aspects and govern people’s behavior. The original Confucianists advocated that all actions should conform to the requirements of ritual. Only by doing so, individuals could establish themselves in society, as the saying goes, “Without learning ritual, one cannot establish oneself” (Dong, 2022, p. 111-121). Moreover, each person played multiple social roles within society. Without understanding the rights and obligations associated with their respective social roles and how they should conduct themselves, they would be unable to achieve self-sufficiency within society.

The original Confucian concept of etiquette was based on its theory of human nature. Confucius linked etiquette with people’s inner temperament and affirmed that the human heart has moral free will, which gave people a brand-new concept of human nature. Confucius proposed the idea that “By nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they get to be wide apart” (Zhang, 2019, p. 36). In his view, the individuals’ physiological needs are similar in their natural state, and it is only through continuous efforts of learning and self-cultivation that one can distance oneself from their natural instincts. The postnatal “practice” determines the distinction between the petty person’s and the noble one’s ethical categories. While Mencius believed that each person is born with the “four inherent virtues,” which constitute the human beings’ essential nature and set them apart from other animals. Based

on this, Mencius put forward his theory of “innate goodness.” Mencius’ “innate goodness” refers to the inherent potential for goodness in human nature and not its actual state. It suggests that people should strive to do what is morally right. This pursuit of the morally right path is considered noble. The inherent virtues are merely possibilities, and it is through the exercise of subjective agency that these virtues can be transformed into virtuous actions (Mao, 2022, p. 189-191). Xunzi’s notion of the “distinction between nature and artificiality” is derived from his idea of differentiating between the human and the divine. He believed that human nature is inherently “evil.” By “nature”, he refers to a person’s innate essence, particularly in psychological aspects, and by “artificiality,” he means that goodness is entirely a result of human effort and not innate. Xunzi argued that physiological needs should be satisfied, and the human nature’s demands are legitimate. His theory can be seen as a form of “maturity doctrine” that prescribes predetermined and ideal outcomes and subsequently demands individuals to strive towards those established goals.

Certainly, both Mencius’ theory of innate goodness and Xunzi’s theory of inherent evilness are normative judgments concerning human nature, rather than descriptive statements of its actual state. Their common focus lies in the question of “how human nature should be,” rather than “how human nature inherently is.” It represents the human nature’s developmental direction, and the human nature’s value and the one of human dignity are achieved through the pursuit of normative ideals. Building upon this human nature’s normative perspective, the original Confucianists integrated their moral and ethical principles with political governance, giving rise to the ruling model known as the “ritual system”.

2 THE CONFUCIAN SPIRIT OF RITUAL SYSTEM

The exploration of the Confucian spirit of the ritual system has always been a central issue in the study of ritual. The essence of ritual corresponds to its external manifestations, concealing the underlying principles of its development and changes. Throughout history, regardless of the fluctuations experienced during transitions between old and new practices, the spirit of ritual remains immutable.

2.1 BENEVOLENCE AND RITUAL

“Benevolence”, as one of the core spirits of Confucian ritual, primarily manifests itself as the fundamental essence of ritual. Within the Confucian ideological framework of ritual and propriety, “benevolence” serves as the highest moral principle. Regarding the connotation of benevolence, Confucius provided a clear response to his disciple Fan Chi’s question. In *The Analects* - Yan Yuan, Confucius said, “Fan Chi asked about benevolence. The Master said, ‘It is to love people’” (Zhang, 2019, p. 29). Confucius believed that the essence of benevolence lies

in loving others. Whom should one love? Confucius also made this unequivocal statement: “A youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all and cultivate the friendship of the good” (Zhang, 2019, p. 112). He maintained that the embodiment of benevolence involves practicing benevolent governance for those in positions of authority and displaying loyalty, filial piety, friendship and brotherhood for those in the roles of subjects or citizens. Regarding the relationship among benevolence, ritual and music, Confucius posed the question, “If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with music?” In other words, Confucius believed that benevolence is the foundation of ritual and music, constituting their intrinsic spiritual essence and value. Hence, benevolence embodies the way of ritual and music, and ritual and music serve as instruments of benevolence, representing its outward expressions. This marks Confucius’ further expansion on the concepts of ritual and music, thus affirming the benevolent spirit within them. Consequently, Confucius emphasized that genuine ritual must be rooted in the benevolent heart, and the performance of ritual is a means of expressing the spirit of benevolence.

Confucius integrated “benevolence” into the ritual system, endowing the cultural tradition of rituals with the philosophical essence of ethics. This established a close connection between ritual culture and ethical and moral principles, ushering in a new realm where benevolence and ritual were intertwined within the ritual system. After the integration of benevolence, the ritual system ceased to be abstract or hollow ceremonial practices. Instead, it became infused with the moral significance of living “ritual”. Mencius also pointed out that “[...] righteousness is like a road, and etiquette is like a gate. A gentleman should walk through the gate of etiquette and on the road of righteousness” (Wang, 2019, p. 56). It shows that Mencius believes that benevolence and righteousness are the foundation and spiritual essence of etiquette, and etiquette is the path to realizing benevolence and righteousness. Benevolence and righteousness are the inner essence of etiquette, and etiquette is the external expression of benevolence and righteousness.

Furthermore, Confucius emphasized that adherence to the norms of ritual and music is necessary to cultivate the spirit of benevolence. When Yan Yuan inquired about benevolence, Confucius responded, “Overcoming oneself and returning to propriety constitutes benevolence”. Yan Yuan asked, “May I ask how to practice it?” The Master said, “Look not at what is contrary to propriety; listen not to what is contrary to propriety; speak not what is contrary to propriety; make no movement which is contrary to propriety” (Zhang, 2019, p. 33). Confucius believed that “benevolence” is attained through one’s subjective endeavors. As long as a man exercises self-restraint over unreasonable and improper desires, and then behaves in accordance with ritual norms to ensure that their actions, words and conduct align with ritual requirements, they can achieve benevolence (Liu; Wang, 2023, p.

26-33). Music, poetry and dance not only bring pleasure to body and mind, but also serve as tools for moral education and guidance. This is because music embodies the spiritual essence of moral principles, with the core being the spirit of benevolence. Therefore, *The Book of Rites - The Record of Music* also mentions, “Ritual deals with diverse matters and consolidates respect; music deals with diverse forms and consolidates love. The sentiments in ritual and music are similar; thus, enlightened rulers have handed them down together” (Sun; Shen; Wang, 2020, p. 185).

Hence, ritual and music aim to educate people in mutual respect and love, and the foundation for this education lies in the spirit of benevolence that they encompass. The spirit of benevolence is the essence and soul of ritual and music. Without the spirit of benevolence, ritual and music would be mere forms without substance. Conversely, ritual and music act as vehicles and external standards for the spirit of benevolence, providing it with tangible expressions. Without the norms of ritual and music, the spirit of benevolence would lack a foundation and remain hollow and intangible. The spirit of benevolence is the internal essence, while ritual and music constitute the external content and form, and these two aspects harmoniously merge with each other, mutually complementing and inseparable.

2.2 GOVERNANCE THROUGH VIRTUE

As a result of integrating “benevolence” into the ritual system, this one acquired distinct moral characteristics. The moral nature of the ritual system requires rulers, while governing the state, to possess noble moral qualities themselves. “Virtue is the foundation of a state” (Zhao; Zhao, 2019, p. 78). The pre-Qin Confucianists believed that a state’s authority comes from the moral qualities and ethical principles in governance, rather than relying solely on coercive state power. The people’s obedience to the state is based on their recognition of the state’s political and ethical principles. The pre-Qin Confucianists demanded rulers in the political domain to govern with virtue, a concept known as “governing through virtue”. Rulers should strengthen their moral cultivation, aiming to achieve the goals of “cultivating self-improvement for practicing respectful diligence and promoting the well-being of others and the masses” (Zhang, 2019, p. 42). *The Analects - The Ruler* section states, “[...] practitioners of virtuous governance, like the north star in the sky, encircled by countless celestial bodies” (Zhang, 2019, p. 44). If rulers can govern through virtue, the people from all directions will naturally be drawn to them. Moreover, several statements emphasize the significance of the rulers’ and administrators’ moral character as an important role model for the people. “If leaders rectify their own minds, bodies, and actions first before governing the country, challenges can be easily overcome. However, if they fail to rectify themselves, how can they effectively govern the country and instill rectitude in the minds and behavior of their subjects?” (Wang, 2022, p. 74-83). These passages all convey the idea that the rulers’

or administrators' moral image plays a crucial role in influencing the people. Furthermore, "When governance is enforced through laws and penalties, the people will become complacent and devoid of shame. When governance is guided by virtue and harmonized through rituals, the people will possess a sense of shame and integrity" (Xu, 2022, p. 45-53). Using laws and penalties to govern the people may result in them only seeking to avoid committing crimes and receiving punishments, without nurturing a sense of integrity. However, if governance is guided by moral principles and supported by cultural rituals, the people will not only have a sense of shame when they do wrong, but also willingly adhere to the principles of governance.

The core of the benevolent governance, advocated by the pre-Qin Confucianists, is "governance through benevolence," which means "[...] governing with a heart that cannot bear to see others suffer, and implementing policies that consider the welfare of others" (Wang, 2019, p. 25). Mencius's view of "governance through benevolence" represents an inheritance and development of Confucius' idea of "governance through virtue." Mencius believed that "[...] those who subdue others with force do not win their hearts, while those who win others over with virtue elicit genuine and sincere obedience". Relying on force to compel obedience does not result in heartfelt and genuine allegiance, but when others are persuaded by moral virtues, they become willingly and sincerely obedient. From the perspective of moral psychology, this demonstrates that benevolent governance is an effective approach to governing a state. The core idea of Mencius' "governance through benevolence" is centered on valuing the people. He opposed tyranny, condemned unjust wars that brought infinite calamities to the people, but acknowledged the people's right to overthrow tyrants (Yuan, 2023, p. 45-53). Rulers, especially, should harmoniously coexist with the people and share in their joys and sorrows. "If the ruler shares in the joys of the people, the people will also share in the ruler's joys. If the ruler shares in the sorrows of the people, the people will also share in the ruler's sorrows. A ruler who can bring joy to the world and share in its sorrows, yet still fails to become a king, is unheard of". Rulers must be aware of the decisive significance of the people's sentiments toward the operation of state power and social stability.

There is a method to obtain the world: by gaining the support of the common people, one gains control over the entire realm. Acquiring the support of the common people can be achieved by winning their hearts and minds. To win their hearts and minds, one must gather what they desire and refrain from imposing what they dislike upon them (Wang, 2019, p. 85).

Confucius' moral demands for rulers focus on their behavior and values in governance, while Mencius' "governance through benevolence" primarily concerns the people's rights to survival and development. Although their perspectives differ, both interpretations are reasonable interpretations of the political ethics of "governance through

virtue,” and “governance through virtue” becomes an essential aspect of Confucian ritual and ethical culture (Xie; Zhang, 2022, p. 111-119).

2.3 RITUAL AND LAW

During the early Western Zhou period, Duke Zhou, drawing lessons from the downfall of the Shang Dynasty due to its moral decline, fully grasped the principle that “Heaven treats all impartially, supporting only those who possess virtue. The hearts of the people have no fixed allegiance, but they yearn for a benevolent ruler” (Xu, 2019, p. 78). He emphasized the moral characteristics of the ritual system and integrated virtue into rituals, proposing the ideas of “matching virtue with Heaven” and “respecting virtue to protect the people.” This established the Western Zhou ritual system with “virtue” as its main essence. The hierarchical nature of human relationships became the ethical foundation of the Zhou rituals, transforming the distinctions, based on blood ties and ancestral laws, into a state-political ethical relationship of ranking and status, forming a hierarchical system centered around “kinship and respect.” From the perspective of the scope of influence of the Zhou rituals, it was not just a system of daily etiquette, but also a political-ethical system for governing the state. The Zhou rituals advocated governance through moral education, suggesting that rulers should obtain the people’s hearts through “cultivating virtue” to secure the Heaven’s mandate. Only by doing so, they could effectively govern the state through moral education. The incorporation of moral content into the Zhou rituals provided it with a sense of moral legitimacy, and Duke Zhou urged rulers to implement “virtue” in various state governance activities to win the people’s hearts (Xunzi, 2009, p. 68).

The moral characteristics, inherent in the ritual system, require rulers, while governing the state, to emphasize the foundational and primary role of ethics. The Confucianists advocate that virtue should be the principal, and punishment the supplementary measure, advocating for education before resorting to punishment, as “virtue is the foundation of a state.” “The ritual system can prevent problems in advance, while legal sanctions only provide punishment and remedy after the fact” (Sun, 2015a, p. 5). The ritual system serves as a preemptive restraint, while laws act as punitive measures after incidents have taken place. The focus of the ritual system is on moral education, while laws concentrate on punishment. Xunzi believed that, in order to clarify the division of labor and responsibilities among society’s members and maintain the hierarchical system, a ritual system must be established. The ethical significance of the hierarchical system in governance is crucial. The hierarchical order and moral standards, advocated by the ritual system, are not only indispensable, but also of paramount importance in governance, known as “elevating ritual”. Furthermore, due to the belief in human nature being inherently evil, it becomes necessary to establish laws with coercive force, as “laws are the basis of governance”. In response to human misconduct, one

should “[...] clarify ritual and righteousness to civilize them, establish laws and regulations to govern them righteously, and emphasize severe punishments to restrain them”, in order to achieve the goal of “[...] bringing the world under governance and aligning it with goodness”, known as “laws” (Xu, 2021, p. 75).

Xunzi believed that respecting rituals and high laws is necessary to govern the country and bring peace to the world. Functionally, the ritual system primarily serves as a preventive measure, while laws are utilized to enforce punishment on a minority of wrongdoers. “By elevating ritual and emphasizing law, a country can maintain order”. Both ritual and law have their strengths and weaknesses, complementing each other as norms and constraints on human behavior. However, laws possess greater coercive and punitive power. Xunzi pointed out that ritual is the major division of law, and its fundamental principle, suggesting that in his thought system, ritual and law are not coequal and parallel concepts. Rather, ritual is the foundation of law, and law is supplementary to ritual. Laws are subordinate to the normative system of ritual. Therefore, ritual is more significant than law. Following the logic of “elevation of ritual and emphasis on law,” “elevating ritual” takes precedence, and “emphasizing law” comes second. Moral education and ritual norms take precedence, while punishment and correction are secondary. If moral education and ritual norms prove ineffective, they should be supplemented with punishment. Confucian etiquette and law thoughts have far-reaching influence. For example, the section on general principles in the *Tanglü shuyi*, in the Tang Dynasty, notes that “[...] morality and etiquette are the foundation of politics and religion, and punishment is the method of politics and religion” (Li, 2016, p. 64). Etiquette is taken as the principle and basis of its legislation. Etiquette is the dominant factor and punishment is the auxiliary one.

3 THE CONTEMPORARY VALUE OF RITUAL ETHICS

The ethical and moral educational resources, within Confucian ritual culture, play a significant role in elevating individuals’ spiritual realm, regulating their thoughts and behaviors, harmonizing interpersonal relationships, maintaining social harmony and stability, and coordinating the relationship between humans and nature. This is primarily manifested in promoting personal self-cultivation, ethical conduct and establishing one’s place in society. Additionally, it contributes to purifying social norms, resolving conflicts and upholding harmonious order within society.

3.1 THE EXISTENTIAL VALUE OF RITUAL FOR HUMAN BEINGS

Chinese culture defines human beings from an intrinsic moral perspective, regarding humans as animals with morality and a sense of propriety. The *Yanzi Chunqiu* states: “The

reason why humans are esteemed above animals is because of their observance of rituals” (Xu, 2023, p. 48-57). Human beings are considered noble in comparison to animals precisely because of their adherence to rituals. As Mengzi expressed: “The difference between humans and animals is slight”. “Those without compassion are not human; those without a sense of shame are not human; those without humility are not human; those without a sense of right and wrong are not human” (Wang, 2019, p.59). The distinction between humans and animals lies in these subtle aspects — the presence of a sense of right and wrong, shame, compassion and courtesy. Having these “four hearts” makes one a human, lacking them makes one a mere animal.

The distinction between humans and animals also lies in “differentiation” or “distinction.” *The Book of Rites* said that,

There must be a distinction between males and females, and then there can be the affection of father and son; with the affection of father and son, there can be righteousness between them; with righteousness, there can be the establishment of rituals; and with the establishment of rituals, all things will be in order (Liu; Yu; Ding, 2008, p. 85).

The term “distinction” here refers to the act of differentiating or distinguishing. This differentiation is manifested in all interpersonal relationships, such as rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, males and females, superiors and inferiors, seniors and juniors, and so on (Wu, 2023, p. 30-36). The purpose of “distinction” is to create a structured order, based on clear differentiation, thus achieving social stability and harmony. This ability to establish order, based on differentiation, is unique to humans and is not possessed by animals. Furthermore, the practice of “distinction” primarily relies on various forms of ritual norms and conventions.

Ritual is not only the fundamental boundary that distinguishes humans from natural animals, but also serves as a ladder for individuals to perfect themselves and cultivate a virtuous character.

Confucius emphasized that ritual is essential for a person’s attainment of “adulthood” and serves as the foundation of individual moral cultivation. Confucius stated, “Without learning poetry, one cannot express oneself; without learning ritual, one cannot stand firm; without understanding ritual, one cannot attain proper conduct.” Zhu Xi commented on this, saying, lacking knowledge of ritual leaves one unable to enhance one’s hearing and vision or to manage one’s actions. It is evident that, in order for a person to become truly humane, one must learn, understand and embody ritual. Here, learning, understanding and embodying ritual encompass not merely external formalities, but also inner personal cultivation. A person’s words and deeds should conform to the norms of ritual while being genuine and sincere. True ritual is the natural expression of one’s inner qualities. If a person’s

words and actions do not align, even if they appear to be in accordance with ritual, they are merely performing ceremonial acts without comprehending the essence of ritual. The external compliance with ritual is of limited value; the key lies in the inner qualities. Only when form and substance are harmoniously integrated, it can be considered genuinely in accordance with ritual (Fu, 2020, p. 143-149). Similarly, interactions with elders, superiors, juniors and friends all involve specific codes of conduct. Respect is the essence of dealing with elders, loyalty with superiors, fraternal love with juniors, benevolence with inferiors and trustworthiness with friends. These are the principles to be followed in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, Xunzi regarded ritual as the fundamental means and basis for personal cultivation. Adhering to ritual leads to success, while violating it leads to failure. According to him, a person's physiological nature, mental disposition, wisdom and thinking process are all in order when guided by ritual, but they become perplexed and chaotic without it. Matters related to diet, clothing, dwelling and activity are in harmony and regulated by ritual, but without it, one commits mistakes and becomes flawed. As for appearance, attitude, actions and movements, adhering to ritual leads to elegance, while neglecting it leads to arrogance, waywardness and a violation of social norms, resulting in coarseness and rudeness (Zhang *et al.* 2021).

3.2 THE SOCIAL VALUE OF RITUAL CULTURE

Every society possesses its unique order, which serves as a crucial prerequisite and guarantee for maintaining steady progress in various affairs. This order is achieved by constraining and regulating people's behavior, enabling their lives to attain a state of orderly development. Order is an enduring topic in human societies, representing the standard of societal functioning. Public order significantly influences the society's development in various aspects, such as politics, economy, ecology and culture. When examining the thousands of years of Chinese civilization, the profound traditional cultural heritage has provided abundant nourishment for China's enduring development. Within this cultural heritage, ritual culture, as its core and essence, forms the intrinsic foundation for the establishment and continuity of public order, acting as a vital cultural support that sustains the smooth operation of public order.

The Culture of Rituals and Etiquette should belong to the field of sociology as it serves to construct an orderly society and represents a survival rule in human society. The people are the fundamental elements constituting society and, as the public life's main subjects, their own qualities of etiquette and moral cultivation determine the society's stability and harmony. These qualities of etiquette and moral cultivation require the influence and regulation of the culture of rituals and etiquette. The culture of rituals and etiquette drives the development of the overall quality of the collective, and the harmony within the

collective ensures the society's harmony, representing a higher level of harmony built upon the foundation of individual harmony.

In real society, a series of factors, including imperfect legal systems and power corruption, results in the uneven distribution of interests among social members, ever-widening inequality between the rich and the poor, and increasing resentment and envy of the rich. At the same time, under the strike of the market economy, its negative effects cannot be effectively suppressed, which causes utilitarianism and hedonism to gradually become some people's value orientation in society. People are psychologically unbalanced and suffer from psychological diseases, such as anxiety, worry and depression to varying degrees. They are spiritually empty, depressed and bored, and lack the motivation to pursue a noble spiritual life. They have lost their way in the value and meaning of life, which is manifested as depression, decadence, degradation and even crime. In view of the current disharmony between people's bodies and minds, it is necessary to draw lessons from the pre-Qin Confucian ritual and music culture of "cultivating one's body with rituals", "nurturing the mind with happiness" and "combining rituals and music". It can strengthen the education and cultivation of people's rituals and music, guide people to establish correct opinions of view, enhance people's consciousness of self-cultivation and improve people's independent personality.

The harmony within the collective is also key to building stable and harmonious public order. A harmonious and orderly society is established on the basis of harmony between individuals and groups. Only when individuals achieve a state of harmony and stability within themselves, can they integrate harmoniously with others and society? Building social order requires collective efforts, and only when each individual upholds the concept of harmonious coexistence and prioritizes harmony in the culture of rituals and etiquette, paying attention to courtesy and respect and striving for the society's common well-being, an orderly and stable society can be achieved. As stated in the "Doctrine of the Mean" in *The Book of Rites*, "All things grow together without hindrance, and paths run parallel without conflict. Minor virtues flow continuously like a river, while major virtues nurture all things with sincerity and simplicity. This is the greatness of the universe!" (Liu; Yu; Ding, 2008, p. 39). It emphasizes the law governing the operation of all things in the universe and the fundamental nature of harmony in constructing an orderly state. A well-organized society is undoubtedly a harmonious and unified entity.

CONCLUSION

The concept of "ritual" has been highly esteemed and passed down due to its unique social functions and values as well as behavioral norms. While the Western notion of "ritual" mainly emerged within the upper classes, in China, "ritual" encompassed society's and life's various aspects. In ancient times, "governing with virtue, harmonizing with ritual" was the

ideal governing principle for rulers, and “ignorance of ritual leads to inability to establish oneself” served as the fundamental measure for personal cultivation and self-determination. Every individual should be aware of “ritual” and adhere to it by following the principles of “do not look at what is not in accordance with ritual, do not listen to what is not in accordance with ritual, do not speak what is not in accordance with ritual, do not act in a way that is not in accordance with ritual.” As a symbol of social civilization, the culture of rituals and etiquette enhances the people’s moral qualities and regulates their behavior, becoming the cultural gene and fundamental guideline for constructing societal public order through the combination of ideas and systems. Despite the ongoing process of modernization in contemporary society, the system of rituals and etiquette continues to hold significant cultural influence in the construction of public order.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Central plains youth top-notch talent foundation of Henan Province in 2022 (branches of Philosophy & Social Science & Art); Colleges and Universities Philosophy Social Sciences Innovative Talents of Henan Province in 2022 (2022-CXRC-01); Training project of young key teachers in Universities of Henan Province in 2020 “the study on the texts and thoughts in Ceremonies and Rituals of Seventy Confucian Disciplines by unearthed documents” (2020GGJS177); University Social Science Innovation Team Funded Project of Henan Province in 2021 “Researches on Strengthening Morality Influence on College Students Growing and Development” (2021-CXTD-09).

REFERENCES

- DONG, P. Order and Harmony: The Ritual and Music System and Behavioral Justice. **Zhejiang Social Sciences**, v. 313, p. 111-121, 2022.
- FU, Q.; TANG, Y. The Construction of Etiquette Culture and Public Order. **Changbai Journal**, vol. 01, p. 143-149, 2020.
- HUANG, J.; QING, T. The Concept and System of Ritual and Music in the Zhou Dynasty Seen from the Inscriptions on Bronze Bells. **Social Sciences**, v. 492, p. 136-152, 2021.
- LI, A. (ed.). **Tanglü Shuyi**. Tianjin: Tianjin Guji, p. 64, 2016.
- LIU, J.; YU J.; DING J. (ed.). **The Book of Rites**. Hefei: Anhui Literature and Art, 2008.
- LIU, Y.; WANG, Y. The Domain, Presentation, and Support of Confucius’ “Music”. **Journal of Hebei University** (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), v. 48, p. 26-33, 2023.
- MAO, N. Mencius’ “Theory of Innate Goodness” and Its Internal Issues. **Chinese Characters Culture**, v. 320, p. 189-191, 2022.

- SUN, C. Confucian Ritual System and Contemporary Chinese Rule of Law. **Shandong Social Sciences**, v. 12, p. 5-10, 2015a.
- SUN, C. Ethics and Modern Value of Confucian Ritual System in Pre-Qin Period. **Ethical Research**, v. 05, p. 40-44, 2015b.
- SUN, X.; SHEN, X.; WANG, X. **Annotations and Explanations of the Book of Rites**. Shanghai: The Commercial, 2020.
- WANG, H. A Reinterpretation of the “Zilu Asks about Court Affairs” Chapter in the Analects - On the Political Character and the Way of Advancement and Retreat of Confucianism. **Confucian Studies**, v. 194, p. 74-83, 2022.
- WANG, R. **Mencius**. Chengdu: Sichuan People’s, 2019.
- WU, B. “Ritual”: The Theoretical Core of Xunzi’s Educational Philosophy. **Theoretical World**, v. 593, p. 30-36, 2023.
- XIE, X.; ZHANG H. The Theoretical Progress of Mencius’ Interpretation of Confucius’ “The Ruler Governs”. **Interdisciplinary Journal**, v. 37, p. 111-119, 2022.
- XU, J. The Ethical Spirit of Ritual and Music. **Jiangsu Social Sciences**, v. 327, p. 48-57, 2023.
- XU, N. The Cultural Image of the Personality of Junzi in the Analects. **Dongyue Journal**, v. 43, p. 146-151, 2022.
- XU, Q. (ed.). **The Etiquette and Rites of the Grand Dai**. Trans. X. Fang. Nanjing: Jiangsu People’s, 2019.
- XU, W. **Annotations and Translations of Yanzi Chunqiu**. Changsha: Yuelu, 2021.
- XUNZI. **Xunzi**. Shenyang: Wanjuan, 2009, p. 689)
- YUAN, X. The Moral Intuitionist Foundation of Mencius’ Political Philosophy. **Confucian Studies**, v. 196, p. 45-53, 2023.
- ZHANG, M.; ZHANG, Z.; ZHANG, H.; QIN, Y. The Intrinsic Connotation and Contemporary Value of Confucian Ritual and Etiquette Culture in the New Era Context. **Frontier**, v. 01, p. 104-111, 2021.
- ZHANG, N. (ed.). **The Analects of Confucius**. Zhengzhou: Henan People’s, 2019.
- ZHAO, J.; ZHAO, Y. **The Zuo Commentary**. Wuhan: Chongwen, 2019.