



# COMMENT ON “THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ORDER”


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## COMMENT ON “THE CONCEPT OF RITUAL IN CONFUCIAN THOUGHT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL ORDER”

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In traditional Chinese culture, ritual was important, earning China the reputation of “a nation that highly values etiquette.” The practical application of the concept of ritual is reflected in the governance through etiquette, where the specific nature of “etiquette” is shaped by value judgments.

Pre-Qin Confucianism endowed ritual with a wide range of meanings, encompassing etiquette, human ethics, and the foundations of national and social systems. The core of ritual lies in upholding the hierarchical order among superiors, elders, kin, and between men and women. Ritual highlights its dual concern for individuals and the collective. It stresses self-cultivation and the others’ significance, and promotes actions following rituals to maintain harmony and order within the group. From the perspective of Pre-Qin Confucianism, individuals and groups are distinct and interconnected. The principles of loyalty and forbearance guide the values of self-cultivation and the others’ betterment, showing that these goals are not contradictory, but mutually reinforcing. Pre-Qin Confucianism consistently strives for social harmony, a central group value. Confucius, Mencius and Xunzi, distinct in teachings, share a common lineage in their belief in self-cultivation, a way to bring comfort to the people and establish just governance. Confucius, in particular, sought to restore and refine the rituals of the Zhou dynasty, aiming to reestablish a world governed by ritual propriety and benevolence. He believed this would rectify the disorder in ritual and music, ultimately returning society to harmony. Pre-Qin Confucianism highlighted the relationship

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between the individual and the group, viewing the individual not as an isolated entity, but as part of a broader social context. It advocated using moral rationality to guide human nature, encouraging individuals to restrain their instincts and align with social norms. As such, ritual served as a normative standard for regulating behavior, embodying private and public morality from its inception.

The dual function of ritual serves both self-cultivation and the maintenance of public order, thereby deriving the orientation of public morality from private one. Pre-Qin Confucianism reckons that individuals exist within groups and relationships. While establishing an independent personality is one aspect of achieving personal values, the more significant focus is on maintaining the group's harmonious order. Thus, in the pursuit and achievement of value goals, the individual's collective nature is pointed out over the individual nature. Yu Ronggen argues that the core of Xunzi's concept of ritual lies not in formal etiquette, but in human ethics and social systems. Yu Ronggen's view is not limited to Xunzi's concept, but can be applied to pre-Qin Confucianism. For example, Confucius advocated self-cultivation on benevolence and righteousness, especially becoming a gentleman to comfort people. His ambition was encapsulated in the principles of "[...] caring for the elderly, nurturing the young, and trusting friends" (Yu, 2018, p. 29). Mencius, following Confucius, travelled great distances to present the way of Yao and Shun to rulers. He urged monarchs to share their joys with the people and consistently promoted benevolent governance, such as breaking branches for the elderly. Although Mencius warned monarchs that ministers still held authority even without an invitation from the ruler, he demonstrated the scholars' and gentlemen's dignity and independent character. If a monarch failed to treat them with respect, they would depart. Mencius advised scholars and gentlemen to remain virtuous in times of poverty, growing more resolute in adversity, always upholding the social orientation of serving the society's greater good.

In the second section, the Wu and Zhao (2024) delve into the significance of "ritual and music" in maintaining social order and harmony. Confucius enriched and transformed these concepts by integrating them with "benevolence," thereby reshaping the ritual and music system of the Western Zhou Dynasty. Originally centered on national rules and regulations, this system evolved into a culture that became a trinity of moral cultivation, etiquette in communication, and social and political ideals. As such, Confucius' ideas on ritual and music were deeply intertwined with his social and political philosophies. He pointed out the rational understanding of "benevolence" as a means to revive ritual and music, aiming to restore social order and achieve stability, unity, harmony and progress. To this end, Confucius tirelessly sought to refine the theoretical framework of ritual and music. First, he underscored the fusion of "benevolence" and "ritual," advocating that "benevolence" promotes harmony in interpersonal relationships through individual moral cultivation; and "ritual" ensures harmony in social relations through social order and behavioral norms. The close integration

of these two elements fosters social harmony. Confucius taught the understanding, conscious observance and practice of rituals. The foundation for this conscious practice of rituals is “benevolence,” which originates in familial bonds and is extended to others through empathy. Second, Confucius reinforced the integration of “ritual” and “music,” underscoring the role of music in the harmonious effect of emotions. Historically, ritual and music have coexisted in Chinese culture, with “harmony” being the essential characteristic of music. However, for a long time, people focused primarily on the external form of music without fully exploring its role in reconciling hearts, channeling emotions and fostering harmonious relationships. Confucius integrated music into the system of moral cultivation, imbuing it with the value of moral education. He believed that music should cultivate people’s temperament during personal development, leading them to practice etiquette norms willingly and joyfully, thereby ensuring a harmonious social order.

Building on this foundation, Xunzi proposed that the social function of “ritual” lies in “grouping and dividing,” which he saw as essential for achieving social harmony. Xunzi’s “theory of group division” stresses that, although humans are neither as strong as cattle nor as fast as horses, they have dominion over these animals because humans can form social groups, whereas animals cannot. The ability to shape social groups, according to Xunzi, stems from the existence of ranks and statuses, with each individual performing their corresponding functions. But what allows these ranks and statuses to be effectively implemented? Xunzi argued that it is the understanding of rituals and righteousness that enables this structure. According to rituals and righteousness, people determine their status, living in harmony and a cohesive society. Unity fosters strength, leading to a powerful society. Thus, Xunzi believed that rituals and righteousness are indispensable to society. Social unity and order are ensured based on well-organized labor, status and wealth distribution, established on rituals and righteousness, which Xunzi regarded as the highest standards for social groups and divisions. Guided by ethics and morality, people will naturally fulfil their roles and responsibilities within the group. Only in this way, society can achieve true harmony.

At the same time, Xunzi clearly distinguished between “music” and “ritual” while also revealing the positive effect that “music” has on “ritual.” Xunzi stated:

Music unites people, aligning their hearts and efforts, fostering greater cohesion. Rituals clarify roles and guide interactions, providing a framework for social conduct. They are both society’s key pillars, directly shaping our thoughts and behaviours. Music’s power lies in its ability to move, uplift, and even transform character, while the essence of rituals is sincerity – ensuring genuine acceptance and harmony in society (Wang, 2014, p. 147).

Xunzi believed that, although both ritual and music play essential roles in maintaining social order, they operate through different mechanisms. Comparatively, the positive value of

“music” is more pronounced. “Music” can soften the external prescriptiveness and compulsion of “ritual” by influencing the heart and shaping people’s emotional experiences. Through this process, individuals gradually come to identify with and willingly practice the norms of etiquette. In Xunzi’s view, “ritual” holds the legitimate defender of distinctions among social groups, while “music” transforms these differences into harmonious relationships through emotional resonance. This perspective highlights the value of “ritual and music” in fostering social harmony from a fresh angle.

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