

Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual

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in China and Japan

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Michael Puett

Ritualization as Domestication

Ritual Theory from Classical China

As we continue to develop our theoretical understandings of ritual, it is important that we also explore the enormous body of ritual theory that has been generated in non-Western cultures throughout the world. Frits Staal has done excellent work in bringing theories of ritual from South Asia into our theoretical frameworks, and, following his example, we need to do more of the same from the many other traditions throughout the world that have developed indigenous ritual theories.¹ As several scholars have argued, many of our current theories are implicitly based at least in part upon Christian or more specifically Protestant assumptions.² Bringing more indigenous theories into our discussions – in other words, taking non-Western traditions seriously from a theoretical perspective and not simply as objects of our analyses – will help us to overcome the potential biases in our current theoretical understandings.

This paper will be a small contribution to this larger project by discussing ritual theory from China – one of the cultures that has a lengthy, indigenous tradition of theorizing about ritual.³ I will focus particular attention on the “Li yun” chapter of the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, a work from early China that would ultimately become one of the most influential ritual texts in East Asia.

It is important to emphasize at the outset that the theory of the “Li yun” should not be taken to represent “Chinese” assumptions about ritual. As in any tradition that has developed theories on ritual, those theories became widely debated and contested. Thus, the views provided in the “Li yun” chapter are one among many from the classical period in China, and would continue to be hotly debated throughout East Asia over the ensuing two millennia.

It is also important to emphasize that the “Li yun” should not be taken as a description of ritual practice of the day. As we will see, the theory espoused here

1 Staal 1989.

2 Sahlins 1996, Asad 1993.

3 For attempts to take early Chinese ritual theory seriously as theory, see Puett 2006; and Seligman et al. 2008: 17–42 and 179–182.

builds upon several aspects of contemporary practice, but it also explicitly opposed other aspects.

In all of these respects, the theory of ritual in the “Li yun” is like theories of ritual developed in the West over the past two centuries. It builds on certain aspects of ritual practice, while ignoring or opposing others. It also has underlying normative arguments about ritual. (This is, of course, equally true of ritual theories developed in the West, but at least in early China these normative arguments are more overt and explicit.) As we will see, it will accordingly bring out certain crucial elements of ritual left out by other theories, while missing others. It is, in short, much like other theories of ritual, and our understanding of ritual will be enhanced by bringing it into our discussions.

The Argument of the “Li Yun”

Like the other chapters of the *Book of Rites*, the “Li Yun” presents ritual as a human construction. Ritual is not handed down by divine powers; indeed, ritual defines divine powers just as much as it defines humans. Such a position was a controversial view in early China, but, at least in this aspect, the text was building upon certain aspects of popular practice. One of the interesting and most enduring features of sacrificial practice in China, from the early times to the present, is the notion that human ritual domesticates an otherwise capricious and dangerous world of divine powers and determines the pantheon within which those divine beings operate.⁴ I have argued elsewhere that many of the chapters of the *Book of Rites* build upon this aspect of sacrificial practice to develop their theories of ritual.⁵ The “Li yun” does as well, but the focus on the “Li yun” is primarily on the human side of this human project – the ways in which ritual orders human dispositions and thereby orders the relationships that humans take toward both the divine and natural worlds.

Many later practices and theories – notably those of later Daoists – explicitly opposed such a vision of ritual as a human construction and argued on the contrary that only rituals revealed by higher gods should be followed.⁶ But the “Li yun” is clear on this: ritual was created by humans, and the construction of a proper order is a human project of transforming and organizing the world through ritual.

The “Li yun” also argues that, given the transformative power of ritual, humans must construct the world well. Ritual done well creates continuity among disparate phenomena, but, if not done properly, can also create the opposite. This is one of the reasons, the text argues, that the world humans find themselves in at birth is

4 Puett 2002, Jordan 1972, Wolf 1974, Harrel 1974, Watson & Rawski 1988, Weller 1987, Sangren 1987.

5 Puett 2005, 2008.

6 Schipper 1993.

one of discontinuity – rituals have not been used properly. Thus, the aspects of ritual that can create links among what are experienced as discrete and unrelated phenomena in the world are the primary concern of the authors of the text.

This point is also of interest in reflecting on the interplay of cosmology and ritual. Scholars have often read early Chinese as assuming a harmonious, monistic cosmos in which everything was inherently related. I have argued elsewhere that this view was never an assumption in early China.⁷ And certainly the “Li yun” does not assume it. The “Li yun” on the contrary views the world as being one of discontinuity. It does posit a period of unity in distant antiquity – but this was also a world in which humans lived like animals. The subsequent rise of human civilization broke this unity and allowed humans to thrive. The text is thus calling for a vision of ritual in which a new, superior unity can be constructed – a unity in which humans take the central position. A harmonious, monistic cosmos, the text makes clear, would be the product, not the opening assumption, of human ritual. Indeed, among the various theories that have been developed throughout the world arguing for a strong constructionist vision of ritual, those in the *Book of Rites* are among the most extreme. With this as a brief introduction, let us turn to the text itself.

The Opening Dialogue

The chapter opens with a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Yan Yan. Confucius reflects on his desire to practice the Great Way as it was practiced in the past, or at least as it was practiced by particular illustrious figures after the dynastic system was created:

“The practice of the Great Way and the illustrious figures of the Three Dynasties – these I have not been able to reach. But my intent is to do so.”⁸

In distant antiquity, according to the narrative, the world was not divided into families:

“In the practice of the Great Way, all under Heaven was public. They selected the talented and capable. They spoke sincerely and cultivated peace. Therefore, people did not only treat their own kin as kin, and did not only treat their own sons as sons.”⁹

7 Puett 2002.

8 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.1/59/23–24. My translations from the *Liji* here and throughout have been aided greatly by those of James Legge 1885.

9 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.1/59/24.

But this has now been lost:

“Now, the Great Way has become obscure. All under Heaven is [divided into] families. Each treats only its own kin as kin, only their own sons as sons.”¹⁰

Confucius clearly has in mind here the creation of the dynastic system, in which kingship came to be controlled by a single lineage until it is overthrown by another. Confucius is thus regretting the fact that people have come to only think in terms of their immediate kin, and that the world consists of an endless competition between these kin groups.

But the chapter includes a crucial twist: it attributes this loss in part to ritual.

“Ritual and propriety are used as the binding. They are used to regulate the ruler and subject, used to build respect between the father and son, used to pacify elder and younger brother, used to harmonize husband and wife, used to set up regulations and standards, used to establish fields and villages, used to honor the courageous and knowledgeable, taking merit as personal. Therefore, schemes manipulating this arose, and because of this arms were taken up.”¹¹

The attempt to bind people back together again using ritual has simply resulted in people scheming to manipulate these ritual links.

However, according to Confucius, six figures since the creation of the dynastic system have been able to use ritual effectively:

“Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, Cheng, and the Duke of Zhou were selected because of this. These six rulers were always attentive to ritual, thereby making manifest their propriety, thereby examining their trustworthiness, making manifest when there were transgressions, making the punishments humane and the expositions yielding, showing constancy to the populace. If there were some who were not following this, they would be removed from their position and the populace would take them as dangerous. This was the Lesser Peace.”¹²

This for Confucius was the Lesser Peace – lesser, that is, than the Great Way practiced in distant antiquity.

10 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.1/59/27–28.

11 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.1/59/28–30.

12 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.1/59/30–32.

The Development of Ritual

From this opening frame, one might assume that the text will argue against the following of ritual. On the contrary, however, the text presents Confucius as still strongly calling for rituals to be followed:

“Yan Yan asked again, ‘Are the rituals of such urgency?’ Confucius said: ‘Rituals are what the former kings used to uphold the way of Heaven and regulate the dispositions (qing) of humans.’”¹³

When Yan Yan asks Confucius to explain, Confucius provides a narrative of the development of ritual. As the narrative makes clear, the period of the Great Way in distant antiquity – the period when unity prevailed – was also one in which humans lived in caves and nests, and ate berries and drank animal blood for food:

“In ancient times, the former kings did not yet have houses. In the winter they lived in caves, in the summer in nests. They did not yet know the transformations of fire. They ate the fruits of grasses and trees, and the meat of birds and animals. They drank their blood and ate their feathers.”¹⁴

The subsequent inventions of the sages (including dwellings, fire, and agriculture) lifted humanity out of this state.

Confucius, therefore, is not calling for a return to the Great Way (since that would also mean a return to living in caves and drinking blood) but rather a return to those few rulers in more recent times who have been able to use ritual appropriately to create a different kind of unity. And what precisely would this appropriateness mean? It would mean using ritual to re-create the sense of the world as being linked as a single family – the same sense that existed in distant antiquity, only now humans would have this sense while also being part of a complex society practicing agriculture, having a ruler, etc. The remainder of the text is devoted to explaining how this is possible.

The Creation of Continuity

Confucius begins by defining the dispositions of humanity:

“What are the dispositions (qing) of humans? Happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, detesting, liking – humans are capable of these seven without study.”¹⁵

13 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.2/60/1.

14 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.5/60/14–15.

15 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.23/62/8.

The dispositions, in other words, are the basic emotional qualities that all humans have at birth.

Ritual works through an ordering of these dispositions. To explain how rituals do this, Confucius provides a lengthy explanation of the nature of ritual. The text begins by stating that humans have pieces of the rest of the cosmos within themselves:

“Thus, humans are [a product of] the powers of Heaven and Earth, the interaction of the yin and yang, the joining of the ghosts and spirits, and the subtle energies of the five phases.”¹⁶

Humans are formed through an interaction of pieces of the rest of the cosmos. This is presumably why humans in their primitive state were part of a larger unity.

The subsequent invention of rituals was related to the other inventions of the sages that lifted humans from the level of animals. All of these inventions involved a domestication of the natural world, but a domestication undertaken by placing humans in a different relationship with those natural elements:

“Thus, when the sagely humans created rules, they necessarily took Heaven and Earth as the basis, took yin and yang as the level, took the four season as the handle, and took the sun and stars as the marker [of time]; the moon was taken as the measure, the ghosts and spirits as the assistants, the five phases as the substance, the rites and propriety as the instruments, the dispositions of humans as the field, and the four efficacious creatures as the domesticates.”¹⁷

All of these were elements of the given world within which humans found themselves, but human sages have now appropriated these elements and utilized them in the larger project of human domestication. Indeed, the text even makes an implicit comparison of the domestication of the dispositions with the formation of agriculture by discussing the dispositions as a field. Later, this comparison becomes quite explicit:

“Therefore, the sage kings cultivated the handles of propriety and the arrangements of the rites in order to regulate human dispositions. Thus, human dispositions are the field of the sage kings. They cultivated the rites in order to plough it, arrayed propriety in order to plant it, expounded teachings in order to hoe it; took humaneness as the basis in order to gather it; and sowed music in order to pacify it. Therefore, rites are the fruit of propriety.”¹⁸

16 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.24/62/15.

17 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.26/62/22–24.

18 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.35/63/25.

Rites, in short, involve a domestication of the dispositions just as agriculture and animal husbandry involved a domestication of nature.

The rites thus serve to inculcate those domesticated dispositions and to define the ways in which those dispositions should relate to the rest of the cosmos:

“Thus the former kings were worried that the rites would not reach to those below. They therefore sacrificed to Di in the suburban sacrifice as a means by which to determine the place of Heaven. They made offerings to the Earth altar in the kingdoms as a means by which to array the benefits of the earth. They offered ancestral sacrifices at the shrines as a means to provide a basis for humaneness. They offered at the mountains and the streams as a means by which to host the ghosts and spirits. They gave the five offerings as a means by which to provide a basis for activities. Therefore, there were ancestral invocators at the shrines, the three dukes at the court, and the three elders at the schools. In front of the king were the ritual specialists and behind were the astronomers; the diviners by crackmaking, the diviners by stalks, drummers, and assistants all stood to the right and left. The king was at the center. His mind was without activity, so as to hold fast to the utmost correctness.”¹⁹

The rituals define the relationship and proper dispositions that humans should have to Heaven, to the produce they have taken from the earth, and to the ghosts and spirits. The specialists for each of these relationships would be given a place in the court, with the king standing at the center of these relationships.

The rituals also give offices to the spirits, define what can be properly appropriated from the earth, and inculcate proper feelings of filiality through ancestral worship.

“Thus, the rites were practiced in the suburbs, and the myriad spirits received offices through them. The rites were practiced at the earth god’s altar, and the hundred goods could be fully appropriated through them. The rites were practiced in the ancestral shrines, and filiality and kindness were submitted through them. The rites were practiced with the five sacrifices, and the correct standards were taken as models through them. Therefore, from the suburban sacrifice, earth god altar, ancestral shrine, mountains and rivers, five sacrifices, propriety was cultivated and the rites were embodied.”²⁰

In short, the entire world comes to be linked through a set of normative relationships embodied in ritual.

As such, rituals, although an invention of humans, and initially part of what led to the fragmentation of the world, are nonetheless constitutive of a larger unity:

19 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.28–9.29/63/4–8.

20 *Liji*, “Li yun” ICS, 9.30/63/10–11.

“It is for this reason that the rites are necessarily based in the Great One, which separated and became Heaven and Earth, revolved and became yin and yang, alternated and became the four seasons, were arrayed and became the ghosts and spirits.”²¹

But the crucial difference with distant antiquity is that now the sage king is the central figure connecting everything into this greater unity:

“Thus, the sage forms a triad with Heaven and Earth and connects with the ghosts and spirits so as to control his rule.”²²

The sage has inserted himself between Heaven and Earth, connecting them along with the ghosts and spirits and thus asserting his rule.

Thus, ritual operates much like agriculture. Prior to the formation of agriculture, humans were linked to the natural world, but linked in the sense of being animals themselves – eating the blood of other animals and often being eaten themselves; gathering berries that would sometimes end up being poisonous; being subject to a dangerous series of weather changes from freezing cold to torrential rains to heat and drought. Once the world was domesticated by humans, however, the wild animals were killed or transformed into animals of service to humanity; the forests were cleared and the grasses domesticated into foodstuffs for humanity; the dangerous series of weather changes became seasonal shifts that operated usefully within an agricultural cycle. The earlier unity was lost, but from another perspective a greater unity was achieved: the rains and sunlight from Heaven and the domesticated produce from the earth became part of a larger unity, organized by humanity and thus with humanity at its center.

And ritual operates in the same way. Although ritual, unlike the primitive period of universal sharing, assumes a fragmented world in which people only think in terms of their own kin, rituals nonetheless allow these distinct families to once again be made into a single family. The overall argument of the “*Liyun*”, therefore, is that ritual allows a type of re-creation of an earlier unity that existed in deep antiquity. But that earlier unity was a primitive world in which humans starved to death for lack of food and died from the elements for a lack of shelter. Now, humans have innovations that allow them to transform the natural world, and they have a ruler to regulate the distinct families and organize them in the world. But, with ritual, the ruler comes to be seen not as an arbitrary form of power but rather as the linchpin of this connected world. As Confucius puts it:

“Therefore, as for the sage bearing to take all under Heaven as one family and take the central states as one person, it is not something done overtly. He necessarily knows their dispositions, opens up their sense of propriety, clari-

21 *Liji*, “*Li yun*” ICS, 9.31/63/13–14.

22 *Liji*, “*Li yun*” ICS, 9.18/61/26.

fies what they feel to be advantageous, and apprehends what they feel to be calamitous. Only then is he capable of enacting it.”²³

By covertly working upon the dispositions of the populace, the ruler is able to create a sense of everything under Heaven as being a single family. Everything is now united, but united through the person of the ruler.

Thus, if humans find themselves in a world of discontinuity, brought about in part through ritual, those few sages who Confucius reveres were able to use ritual to create continuity – but now a graded, hierarchical continuity in which the cosmos is fully linked, and linked in a way that places the ruler in a position of centrality.

In short, humans, along with the rest of the world, have been domesticated and organized into a unified realm, with the ruler as the center. The cosmology of monistic harmony was not an assumption. In the “*Li yun*” it is rather a product of ritual – a ritual order that is seen as domesticating humans, as well as the rest of the cosmos, in the same way that agriculture and husbandry domesticate plants and animals.

Conclusion

I mentioned above that one of the enduring features of sacrificial practice in China has been the notion of the dramatically transformative properties of sacrifice, involving a domestication of the capricious world of the divine. The chapter under discussion here has taken aspects of the workings of this practice – the fact that it results in a commitment to a human construction of the world – but has focused its theory of the domesticating powers of ritual on human dispositions.

The political goals of the authors are clear. The text was written in opposition to the forms of extreme state centralization that were emerging in the third century BCE and that ultimately culminated in the formation of the first empires in the late third and second centuries BCE.²⁴ The text is not so much arguing against such strong forms of statecraft as it is arguing that centralization can be masked through the ritual transformation of the dispositions of the populace.

But, of course, the same argument concerning domestication and the building of continuity through ritual can equally well be used for practices unrelated to or oppositional to such chilling efforts of building a strong state. This same general theory is very productive for explicating (and has been appropriated historically to support) the operation of the temple network system in later Chinese history, as well as, obviously enough, sacrificial practice in later Chinese history as well.²⁵

23 *Liji*, “*Li yun*” ICS, 9.22/62/5.

24 Puett 2008.

25 On the temple network system, see Schipper 1990, 1977; Dean 2006, 2003, 1998, 1995; Katz

And, perhaps more significantly, it is of use in explicating forms of ritual practice outside of China as well. If we are to start taking theories that arose in China seriously as theory, then we need to use them not simply as providing a powerful lens onto rituals from China but also as a lens onto rituals in general. In the case at hand, we have a theory of ritual focused on domestication, and domestication in the specific sense of building continuity among phenomena otherwise seen as disparate and discrete. This is a vision that opens up a potentially very powerful set of issues to explore in a larger comparative context concerning the workings of ritual.

Although there is not room here to explore the full complexities of the theories in the *Book of Rites*, hopefully this brief discussion of the argument in one of the chapters concerning ritual as domestication and the formation of continuity has at least given a sense of the richness of the theories to be found in the text.

1995. On the logic of the sacrificial system, see Puett 2005.

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