

2 Confucian ancestor veneration and the Chinese Rites Controversy

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The ‘founding’ of the Confucian tradition

When the first wave of Jesuit missionaries arrived in China in the 16th century, they were confronted with a civilization that was as different from their European civilization as they could possibly imagine. Before them was a proud, ancient civilization that contemporaneously with the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Indus Valley civilizations across Asia was thriving well before the emergence of the Greek civilization in the Mediterranean Basin that marked the beginning of a culture of learning and knowing for Europeans. Here was a civilization that prided itself as the ‘Middle Kingdom’ (*Zhongguo* 中國), the center of the inhabited world, and “a civilized oasis surrounded by what was thought to be a cultural desert.”¹

More significantly, the Jesuit missionaries encountered a civilization that was shaped and nourished by an epistemological framework and philosophical tradition quite unlike anything that they had known prior to arriving in China. Undergirding the Chinese civilization and shaping the worldview of Chinese people for more than two millennia is what the Chinese called the *ru* 儒 (literally, ‘literati’) tradition. In response, these early Jesuit missionaries coined the label ‘Confucianism’ as a neologism for this *ru* 儒 tradition, which they took to refer to the venerable, all-encompassing tradition rooted in the socio-ethical precepts and philosophical norms governing human conduct and social relations in Chinese antiquity that they assumed as having been taught by Master K’ung (*Kongzi* 孔子, ca 551–479 BCE), whom they termed ‘Confucius.’

On the one hand, the efforts of the Jesuit missionaries to canonize Master K’ung as the ‘founder’ of Confucianism had more to do with missionary strategies than being an accurate description of the *ru* 儒 tradition in its socio-historical setting.² On the other hand, in the absence of other more appropriate terms, the terms ‘Confucian’ and ‘Confucianism’ will be used in this discussion as convenient labels for the *ru* 儒 tradition as developed by Master K’ung and subsequently expanded upon by his disciples, and which promotes an ethical-philosophical and socio-religious vision that continues to be influential in shaping the worldviews of the contemporary global and

transnational Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese communities. Hence, for the purposes of our discussion in this article, the terms ‘Confucian’ and ‘Confucianism’ refer to that major Chinese *ru* 儒 philosophical-religious tradition.

The Confucian *ru* 儒 tradition of China

In reality, there is no exact Chinese equivalent of the term ‘Confucianism,’ which is commonly used to translate the *ru* 儒 tradition of China. For example, the Chinese Confucian scholar Yao Xinzhong suggests that “what is meant by ‘Confucianism’ is more a tradition generally rooted in Chinese culture and nurtured by Confucius and Confucians rather than a new religion created, or a new value system initiated, by Confucius himself alone.”³ Unlike the Jesuit missionaries, the Chinese never saw fit to coin a single term to describe the diversity of competing schools that have been referred to as *rujia* 儒家 (literati family), *rujiao* 儒教 (literati teachings), *ruxue* 儒學 (literati learning), or simply as *ru* 儒 (literati). Another Chinese Confucian scholar, Li Chenyang, observes as follows:

The Chinese term often used in similar contexts is “*Rujia* 儒家,” literally the “family of the literati” or the “school of the literati.” “*Rujia*,” compared to “*Daojia* 道家” or the “family of the Dao” and “*Mojia* 墨家” or the “family of Mo,” was originally the name for the school of thought by Confucius, Mencius and Xun Zi during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States period before the Han. The term has also been used to include its later developments. Scholars sometimes divide this tradition into several periods, such as classic *Rujia* 原始儒家, Han *Ru* 漢儒, and Song-Ming *Ru* 宋明儒.

(宋明理學)⁴

Ambrose King has attempted to clarify the confusion around ‘Confucianism’ as referring to institutional or state-sanctioned ‘Confucianism,’ thereby limiting the designation ‘Confucianism’ to the officially sanctioned Chinese philosophical, religious, and socio-political system that emerged during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and lasted to the last days of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE).⁵ Commenting on this approach, Li Chenyang notes that by this definition, “there was no Confucianism before the Han Dynasty, even though Confucius and Mencius developed their core ideas several hundred years earlier.”⁶

While the *ru* 儒 tradition itself predates Master K’ung, the ethical vision of Master K’ung and generations of his disciples, e.g., Master Meng or Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, ca. 371–289 BCE) and others, have come to define and enrich the *ru* tradition. Master K’ung’s ethical vision was shaped by his students and disciples into a distinctive school within the *ru* 儒 tradition that competed with rival schools within the *ru* 儒 tradition in the period

of Chinese history that has come to be known as the period of the Hundred Schools (*Baijia* 百家), which straddled the latter part of the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) period (722–481 BCE), the twilight years of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), and the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period (481–221 BCE), when the Zhou rule finally collapsed and feudal states vied for power.

The rise of Confucianism

Although this was a period of terrible suffering for the ordinary folk caught in the crossfire of marauding armies, it was nevertheless a period of intense intellectual creativity that sought to fill the spiritual vacuum arising from the collapse of the Zhou cultural-religious order. Philosophers, teachers, and scholars from rival schools, the so-called ‘Hundred Schools’ (*Baijia* 百家), offered competing solutions to the existential questions on human suffering and social disorder.⁷ It was during this period that Master K’ung’s disciples and admirers compiled his ideas and teachings into a collection of sayings called *Lunyu* 論語 (*Analects*). His insights, as expounded and expanded by his disciples—including Master Meng or Mencius (Mengzi 孟子) and Master Xun (Xunzi 荀子) during the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period of the Hundred Schools (*Baijia* 百家)—competed with the ideas from rival scholars (*ru* 儒) and schools including Legalism (*Fajia* 法家), Philosophical Daoism (*Daojia* 道家), Ying-Yang School (*Yinyangjia* 陰陽家), Mohism (*Mojia* 墨家), and others. Notwithstanding their sharp differences and the bitter conflicts with each other, all of them were united by the common goal of addressing the increasing destabilization during the Warring States period. During this period, the various restive rulers—sensing an opportunity as the Zhou rulers steadily lost control over the territories that they were engaged in alliances with—engaged in intrigues against each other in a quest for political power and control. With the complete collapse of Zhou political authority, the competing warlords fought each other for control of territory and natural resources, resulting in a full-scale civil war that resulted in severe hardship, widespread deaths and despair, and massive destruction.

In this internecine war, the state of Qin 秦 was victorious, using its ruthless military and legal-political governance based on Legalism (*Fajia* 法家) to overwhelm and defeat its rivals. When the last remaining independent states of Yan 鄒 and Qi 齊 were subjugated and brought under its control in 221 BCE, it unified the empire once again under a single ruler. The Qin ruler promulgated a new dynasty—the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE)—and proclaimed himself the First Emperor (*Shi Huangdi* 始皇帝).⁸ Despite its short reign, the Qin ruler became infamous for stifling dissent and crushing all opposition to its reign, including the persecution of all the schools that opposed Legalism, which included the school associated with Master K’ung.

The collapse of the Qin Dynasty and the rise of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) led to the rehabilitation of Master K’ung’s thought and its rise

to prominence as the officially sanctioned philosophical-religious worldview and social-political system of the Han Dynasty. In the course of Chinese history, Master K'ung came to be honored within the 儒 *ru* tradition as 'Ancestral Teacher' (*zongshi* 宗師), 'First Teacher' (*xianshi* 先師), and 'Great Sage' (*dasheng* 大聖). As the Chinese empire expanded across East and Southeast Asia, the impact of Confucianism was felt far beyond the borders of China, shaping the worldviews of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the transnational and global Chinese diaspora all through history and right up to this present moment.

The existential quest for being human

The many schools of thought within Confucianism converge around the existential quest for the ultimate values that shape human living, from emperor to peasant. The responses that Master K'ung and his successors articulated reveal a focus on authentic relations that form the cornerstone for familial harmony and social cohesion. Master K'ung and his disciples idealized a person who is adept at relating to others and is able to trust in the validity of these relations for familial and social harmony. According to Master K'ung, the perfected Confucian is always and everywhere fully human in relation to others within the wider world of humanity, seeking to embody the ultimate and highest virtue of human living. In the *Analects*, Master K'ung called this ideal person a *junzi* 君子 (exemplary or profound person) and the highest existential virtue that this exemplary person embodies as *ren* 仁 (being human).⁹

The Confucian Five Relations (*wu lun* 五倫) succinctly expresses the kernel of the interconnected webs of familial, communal, and social relationships that undergird the foundations of a Confucian society: parent-child, ruler-subject, husband-wife, elder-younger sibling, and friend-friend (*Mencius*, 3A:4). The first four relations are hierarchical relations, while the fifth is a relation of equals. Within the Confucian conception of society, there are no strangers in society. Indeed, the most basic relation is at least friend-friend, which is a relationship among equals. The Five Relations reveals that the hierarchical ordering of familial relations is the principal foundation upon which complex interlocking human relations in the Chinese society are constructed. Before a person is able to do great things in society, that person must first be a proper spouse, parent, child, sibling, subject, or friend to another.

Ren 仁 (*Human-ness*)

Within the Confucian tradition, the concept of *ren* 仁, often translated as 'humanity' or 'human-ness,' refers to the attribute of 'being fully human,' in contrast with barbarians or animals acting on instincts. The 2nd-century CE Han-era Chinese Dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, suggests that, etymologically, the Chinese character for *ren* 仁 is comprised of the character for

‘person’ (亻 = 人) and the number ‘two’ (二), indicating perhaps a relational quality that marks the ‘human’ character of persons in community.¹⁰ Herbert Fingarette expresses this succinctly as follows: “For Confucius, unless there are at least two human beings, there can be no human beings.”¹¹ Master K’ung himself defined *ren* 仁 as ‘loving people’ (*ai ren* 愛人) (*Analects*, 12:22), emphasizing the inter-relationality and intersubjectivity of human living, where one is always one among many and seeking to achieve full humanity in one’s relations with others. For him, *ren* 仁 is the highest moral virtue and the totality of all moral virtues embodying an ideal moral life. In practical terms, *ren* 仁 embodies *yi* 義 (appropriateness), *li* 禮 (ritual propriety), and *xiao* 孝 (filiality).

Yi 義 (*appropriateness*)

The term *yi* 義 is commonly translated by Western scholars as ‘benevolence,’ ‘morality,’ or ‘moral.’ However, traditional Chinese dictionaries, e.g., the *Ci Hai* 辭海 (‘Sea of Words’), translate this term as ‘right,’ ‘fitting,’ or ‘proper.’ Etymologically, the term *yi* 義 comprises the ideograph of a sheep (*yang* 羊) above the ideograph for the first-person pronoun (*wo* 我) that can be translated both in the first-person (‘I,’ ‘me’) or the third-person (‘we’ or ‘us’). Sinologists think that the ideograph for *yi* 義 represents a community doing something proper or fitting by sacrificing a sheep (see, e.g., *Analects*, 3:17).¹² On this basis, the term *yi* 義—‘appropriateness’ or doing something ‘proper’ or ‘fitting’—undergirds other virtues such as propriety and filiality, enabling one to do what is proper and fitting in relation to others. The Master said, “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) understand what is appropriate (*yi*), petty persons understand only what is of personal advantage” (*Analects*, 4:16).¹³ It also forms the basis for the Golden Rule in the *Analects*: “Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not want” (*Analects*, 12:2, cf. 15:24).

Li 禮 (*Ritual propriety*)

The term *li* 禮 refers to the ritualized norms of proper conduct regulating all aspects of human interactions according to relations of position and rank in family and society. For Master K’ung, *li* 禮 is the proper expression of sincere emotion, distinguishing the civilized person from barbarians who give free and undisciplined vent to their emotions. He condemned empty and formalistic displays of rituals (see *Analects*, 3:12), insisting that *li* 禮 must combine the external aspect of performing the proper ritual form with the internal disposition of heartfelt inner attitude. Indeed, *Analects* 2:7 criticizes empty and insincere ritualized displays of filiality toward one’s parents. There is no separation or contradiction between external propriety and inner disposition. The goal of propriety is social harmony:

Achieving harmony (*he*) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety (*li*). In the way of the Former Kings, this achievement of

harmony made them elegant, and was a guiding standard in all things large and small. But when things are not going well, to realize harmony just for its own sake without regulating the situation through observing ritual propriety will not work.

(*Analects*, 1:12)

Xiao 孝 (*filiality*)

For Confucians, the proper relational ordering of society as a human macrosystem takes the family as its inspiration and starting point. Society is ordered and harmony is promoted at all levels based on filiality (*xiao* 孝)—the source of order and harmony within a family. Filiality is defined as the primacy of the parent-child relations in the indivisible personal, social, and religious realms of one's life. According to Master K'ung, filiality undergirds one's obligations of reverence, obedience, and love toward one's parents when they are still alive, venerating them with the proper rituals when they are dead, and perpetuating this veneration by producing descendants (see *Analects*, 2:5). At the same time, filiality is more than merely giving material support to one's parents. It also involves one's cultivation of proper, respectful, and reverential inner dispositions toward one's parents that Master K'ung described as follows:

Ziyou asked about filial conduct (*xiao*). The Master replied: "Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference?"

(*Analects*, 2:7)

It does not, however, mean an uncritical obsequiousness:

The Master said, "In serving your father and mother, remonstrate with them gently. On seeing that they do not heed your suggestions, remain respectful and do not act contrary. Although concerned, voice no resentment."

(*Analects*, 4:18)

Ancestor veneration

Ritually, filiality is expressed through ancestor veneration offered by son to father, by scholar-gentry to Master K'ung as ancestor par excellence, and by emperor to his ancestors and to *Tian* 天 (Heaven) for the well-being of the nation. The practice of ancestor veneration as a ritualization par excellence of filiality became a defining characteristic of Chinese culture and the cornerstone of the Chinese family. Ancestor veneration rites in China have a long, unbroken historical tradition supposedly dating from as far back

as the Xia Dynasty (c. 2090–1600 BCE), although much of the ritual repertoire first emerged during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600–1100 BCE), developed during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), and further refined in the Han Dynasty.¹⁴ These ancestor veneration rites involve a complex interplay of deep-rooted religious, spiritual, and sociological factors across all levels of society. At the domestic level, ancestor veneration rites were performed by living family members in honor of their deceased family members. At the village or city level, the village chieftains or city officials would perform rites in honor of the ‘God of Walls and Moats’ (*chenghuang* 城隍)—the local patron deity of that village or city. Confucian literati performed ancestor veneration rites in honor of Master K’ung as ancestral teacher (*zongsbi* 宗師) par excellence in Confucian shrines of learning (*wenmiao* 文廟). At the highest level, the emperor—as the Son of Heaven (*Tianzhu* 天子)—and his court performed the official rites to Heaven (*Tian* 天) for the well-being of the whole nation.

Chinese Rites Controversy

In the encounter between the Christian Gospel and East Asians, nothing was more explosive than the controversy surrounding the ancestor veneration rites that are traditionally associated with Master K’ung and his teaching on filiality (*xiao* 孝). Because filiality, together with its public ritual expression of ancestor veneration, became the glue that held religion, culture, and society together in imperial China, the attempts by some missionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries to prohibit Chinese Catholic converts from participating in ancestor veneration were viewed as attacks on filiality and on the very cohesion of Chinese culture and society, triggering the Chinese Rites Controversy.

On the one hand, Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuits viewed these rites as purely cultural and civic acts (*ritus mere civilis*), and therefore non-religious in nature. They perceived these rites as merely serving the social function of preserving good order in the Chinese society by means of achieving harmony through ritualized performance that simply seeks to reaffirm the hierarchical ordering of kinship and generational relations across the different strata of Chinese society. In this regard, the Jesuits adopted the rationalistic and agnostic approach of the Chinese literati who denied any divinity in the person of Master K’ung. On this basis, the Jesuits were able to conclude that the ancestor veneration rites in honor of Master K’ung were purely honorary and ceremonial, and hence permissible to be carried out by the Confucian literati who had embraced Christianity.

On the other hand, it was also possible to perceive the rituals of ancestor veneration as religious or superstitious and, therefore, not permissible. Indeed, this position was adopted by the Dominican missionary Juan Bautista Morales (1597–1664), who contended that these rites were superstitious and erroneous. Morales’ complaint highlighted the opposing perspectives of

the Jesuits on the one hand, and the Dominicans, Franciscans, and the missionaries from the Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris (MEP) on the other hand, over the identification of the normative meaning of the ancestor veneration rites. If the normative meaning of these rites were agnostic and merely ceremonial, as the Jesuits had claimed, then the rites were civil in nature. However, if a religious meaning could be ascribed to the rites, as the Dominicans, Franciscans, and the MEP missionaries insisted, then the rites were superstitious in nature.¹⁵

Morales further insisted that the folk religiosity surrounding the practice of ancestor veneration rites among ordinary Chinese people was clearly superstitious. On this basis, he argued that the meaning of these rites was anything but non-religious. After his expulsion from China in 1637 for campaigning against the Chinese Rites, Morales took his fight to Rome in 1643, convincing Pope Innocent X to prohibit the Chinese Rites in 1645. The Jesuits fought back and successfully lobbied the Holy Office to issue a decree in 1656 stating that the Chinese Rites were merely civil and political in nature. Charles Maigrot, the MEP Vicar Apostolic of Fujian, rejected the 1656 decree and issued his own mandate against the Chinese Rites in his jurisdiction. In the ensuing bitter and highly vitriolic fight between Maigrot and the Jesuits, Maigrot's views eventually prevailed with Pope Clement XI, who issued an absolute prohibition of the Chinese Rites in *Ex illa die*, his papal bull written on March 19, 1715. Pope Clement XI also required all missionaries who were bound for East Asia to take an oath to strictly comply with this prohibition under pain of excommunication. This prohibition was reiterated by Pope Benedict XIV in his papal bull, *Ex quo singulari*, of July 11, 1742. In addition, Pope Benedict XIV went a step further than Pope Clement XI when he forbade all further discussion of this controversy.¹⁶

Rome's prohibition against the practice of ancestor veneration rites by East Asian converts led to the prolonged persecution of East Asian Catholics in China, Korea, and Vietnam over their refusal to participate in these rituals. In China, the response of the Kangxi Emperor (1661–1722) to Pope Clement XI's 1715 papal bull *Ex illa die* was critical and angry:

This manifesto shows how narrow-minded Europeans speak about the high doctrine of China. And still none of the Europeans is versed in Chinese books. Most of what they say . . . makes people laugh. The author of this manifesto is like any other Bonze [Buddhist priest] or Taoist but none has ever gone as far as he. Henceforth, no European missionary will be permitted to spread his Religion in China. Thus we shall avoid further trouble.¹⁷

Notwithstanding Pope Benedict XIV's prohibition against any discussion of the Rites Controversy, this issue came to the fore when the imperial Japanese government required all Japanese students to venerate the war dead and the colonial Japanese authorities in Manchukuo (Japanese-ruled

Manchuria) mandated the compulsory participation in civic rites venerating Master K'ung. Satisfied with the official response from the Japanese authorities that these rituals were strictly civil and patriotic in nature, Rome reversed its prohibition through two instructions from Propaganda Fide entitled *Pluries instanterque* (1936) and *Plane compertum est* (1939). In the first instruction, *Pluries instanterque*, dated May 26, 1936, Propaganda Fide explained the rationale for reversing the prohibition on Catholics participating in the ancestor veneration rites as follows:

We are here concerned with those acts which, despite their origin from ethnic primitive religions, are not intrinsically evil but are *per se* different, and which are not enjoined as signs of religion, but only as civil acts to manifest and foster devotion to one's country, and where every intent has been removed to put Catholics or non-Catholics under compulsion for the purpose of signifying some adherence to the religions from which the rites originated.¹⁸

Similarly, in the second instruction, *Plane compertum est*, dated December 8, 1939, Propaganda Fide reiterated:

It is abundantly clear that in the regions of the Orient some ceremonies, although they may have been involved with pagan rites in ancient times, have—with the changes in customs and thinking over the course of centuries—retained merely the civil significance of piety toward the ancestors or of love of the fatherland or of courtesy toward one's neighbors.¹⁹

Today, Chinese and other East Asian Catholics worldwide are allowed to participate in modified forms of ancestor veneration rites that comprise only the ritual elements that have been secularized over the passage of time.²⁰

Catholic orthodoxy vs. Confucian orthopraxis

In the ensuing decades after the Vatican lifted its prohibition on East Asian Catholics' participation in ancestor veneration rites on the basis that they are civil and secular rites, scholars continue to question whether the civil-religious dichotomy adequately and accurately describes the issue. As Herlee G. Creel explains, “[w]hat we call ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ activities were not widely separated in ancient China; in fact, they were almost inextricably mingled. The dividing line between the dead and the living was not sharp.”²¹ The sinologist Laurence G. Thompson points out that the question of whether ancestor veneration rites are “truly religious” or mere “respectful memorials” is “wrongly put in the first place” because it is “a question that could only have arisen in the Western mind.”²²

At the heart of this controversy are the different perspectives between Rome, which viewed the ancestor veneration rites through an orthodoxic

lens, and East Asian Confucian societies, which are historically orthopraxic in orientation. Moreover, an ‘either-or’ dichotomy in the characterization of the ancestor veneration rites is artificial at best because these rites are being isolated from their orthopraxic Confucian context to be analyzed and judged through the orthodox lens of European Catholicism, resulting in a great injustice being done to the integrity of these rites themselves. Such a dichotomy also imposes an orthodox bias that favors the thought-intellect over action, assuming that ritual action merely expresses an *a priori* normative meaning, ideology, or paradigmatic belief. Accordingly, if it is possible to identify the normative meaning, ideology, or paradigmatic belief behind these rites as civil and therefore non-religious in nature, as Matteo Ricci and his Jesuit confreres did, then these rites are permissible. However, if the normative meaning, ideology, or paradigmatic belief could be identified as religious and therefore superstitious, as Juan Bautista Morales did, then they are not permissible. This begs the question whether such an *a priori* premise is tenable in the first place.

More importantly, such an either-or characterization also highlights the fundamental clash between the orthodox orientation of European Catholicism that privileges belief in correct doctrines, dogmas, creeds, or teachings and ex-communicates heretics who deviate from these correct beliefs on the one hand, and the orthopraxic orientation of the East Asian Confucian societies with their emphasis on proper ritualized performance of behavioral responsibilities, on the other hand. While ritual in an orthodox culture is perceived as the secondary expression of one’s cultural identity, which is formed or shaped primarily by concepts, beliefs, or norms, Judith Berling explains that ritual in an orthopraxic culture is perceived as the primary expression of cultural identity, i.e., ritual defines who belongs within an orthopraxic culture.²³

Truth-seekers vs. Way-seekers

From a historical perspective, the orthopraxic nature of the Chinese culture may be seen in two ways. First, the orthopraxic orientation of the Chinese worldview is revealed in the way that the Chinese people have perceived themselves generally, i.e., as a group-oriented culture centered around participation in group activities (orthopraxis) rather than as an individual-oriented culture centered around the concept of one’s self-identity, defined by adherence to a set of universal principles (orthodoxy). In the Sinic world, the major existential, philosophical, and religious questions always center on discovering the ultimate values that shape human living: “What does it mean to be human as opposed to barbarians or animals?” “What makes life worth living as humans?” “What are the ideals and virtues that are needed to inspire everyone from ruler to ordinary citizen to participate in the creation and maintenance of a harmonious and civilized society?” “Where are these ideals and virtues to be found?” “What is the Way [*Dao* 道] to these ideals and virtues?” “How does one seek and attain the Way [*Dao* 道]?”

In his characteristically blunt style, the late Angus C. Graham argued that the crucial question for the Chinese “is not the Western philosopher’s ‘What is the truth?’ but ‘Where is the Way?’”²⁴ David Hall and Roger Ames have coined the terms ‘Truth-seekers’ and ‘Way-seekers’ to describe the Western and Chinese philosophical worldviews respectively. According to them, Western Truth-seekers “want finally to get to the bottom line, to establish facts, principles, theories that characterize the way things are,” while, in contrast, Chinese Way-seekers “search out those forms of action that promote harmonious social existence,” because “for the Way-seekers, truth is most importantly a quality of persons, not of propositions.”²⁵ In particular, Confucius and his successors perceived human living as a constant striving in the Way (*Dao* 道), calling for a dynamic and relational approach to ‘knowing’ (*zhi* 知)²⁶ that is not concerned with discovering the Truth via abstract, essentialist, and metaphysical conceptualizations, but with knowing how to be adept in one’s relations with others, how to make use of the possibilities arising from these relations, and how to trust in the validity of these relations as the cornerstone for familial and social harmony. Hall and Ames explain it succinctly when they point out that “in the West, truth is a knowledge of *what* is real and what represents that reality,” while

for the Chinese, knowledge is not abstract, but concrete; it is not representational, but performative and participatory; it is not discursive, but is, as a knowledge of the way, a kind of know-how.²⁷

Second, and more importantly, the overarching role that ritual plays in the proper ordering of this group-oriented identity accentuates the orthopraxic worldview of the Chinese. It is revealing that the Chinese language does not distinguish between a person, a community, or the entire nation of Chinese people. It uses the same ideograph (*ren*) for all three categories. This is not to say that the concept of an individual self does not exist in Chinese culture, only that its existence is usually perceived within the perspective of the community as a whole.

Within this communal framework, *li* 禮, or ritual observance—which also has connotations of propriety, etiquette, and ethical conduct—plays an important role in establishing and shaping order, unity, cohesion, and harmony among the Chinese people. The Chinese ideograph for *li* combines a radical that means ‘altar’ with ideographs for a vase of flowers placed over a sacrificial vessel. In its original context, *li* 禮 seems to refer to rituals associated with a ‘sacrificial offering’ at the ancestral altar. Over time, *li* 禮 was extended beyond the ritual of ancestor veneration simpliciter to encompass the norms of proper conduct and the modes of carrying oneself vis-à-vis others in a community. In contemporary Chinese usage, *li* 禮 comprises a whole range of meanings, including ritual, ceremony, courtesy, etiquette, and proper manners. For example, the phrase *limao* 禮貌 means polite, i.e., a rude person is a person who has no *li* 禮.

More importantly, *li* 禮 eventually came to cover the entire body of ritualized norms of proper conduct regulating all aspects of human interactions according to relations of position and rank in the family and society. The important role that *li* 禮 plays in the formation and shaping of the orthopraxic Chinese cultural identity is conventionally traced back to Master K'ung. Living in a period of general anarchy that was marked by the absence of a central imperial government after powerful warlords defied the weakened Zhou rulers, Master K'ung yearned for the reestablishment of a strong central government to promote harmony, unity, and peace within China. He postulated that the Early Zhou period was harmonious, united, and peaceful as a result of the practice of *li* 禮, while the present strife, chaos, and destruction were the result of the failure to practice *li* 禮.

From the Han Dynasty until the collapse of the Qing Dynasty, successive Chinese emperors sought to exploit *li* 禮 to legitimize their rule in a diverse, pluralistic, fragmented, and often warring empire by promoting—despite incongruities with grassroots attitudes—a single cosmologically rooted ordering of harmony, cohesion, and unity between the divine and human realms through strategic ritualization, i.e., using *li* 禮 to ensure that everyone—the gods, ancestral spirits, rulers, and common folk alike—all had a proper place in the Chinese Heaven-earth (*Tian-du* 天土) cosmology. Catherine Bell succinctly summarizes the role of *li* 禮 in imperial China when she writes that there are

probably few peoples more overt and self-conscious than the Chinese in their manipulation of ritual for political ends; at the same time there is no culture where it would be less appropriate to regard ritual as mere artifice to mask the origins and exercise of power.²⁸

More specifically, the proper observance of *li* 禮 by the emperor, officials, literati, and common folk according to their place in the Chinese social structure was the foundation for shaping and preserving the Chinese identity. As David Kertzer explains, “ritual builds solidarity without requiring the sharing of beliefs. *Solidarity is produced by people acting together, not by people thinking together.*”²⁹ Elsewhere, Kertzer astutely notes that the “Confucian philosophers understood the importance of ritual for efficient government. People’s behavior, they realized, is not a simple product of consciously weighing options, but rather takes shape through the ritual in which they take part.”³⁰ Similarly, the contemporary Taiwanese American philosopher Tu Wei-Ming concludes that social order in imperial China is maintained not by law, but by *li* 禮.³¹

Concluding reflections

In conclusion, the actual ‘meaning’ of the ancestor veneration rites is not as important as the ritual participation in these rites as a symbol of solidarity

and unity. Indeed, in orthopraxic Confucian societies, ancestor veneration rites may encompass a diverse range of meanings, as seen in the co-existence of both ‘official’ meanings (as defined by the elite, e.g., Confucian scholars, as well as Ricci and his collaborators) and ‘popular’ or ‘folk’ meanings of the common masses, which may differ significantly from the ‘normative’ meanings (as Morales, Alexandre de Rhodes, the Dominicans, Franciscans, and the MEP missionaries had observed). What matters for East Asian Confucians is that by the proper observance of *li* 禮, a family or person was considered *zheng* 正 (i.e., orthopraxic). Any family or person who failed to conform to *li* 禮 would stand out immediately like a sore thumb, and be branded as *xie* 邪 (heteropraxic).

It is not surprising that participation in ancestor veneration rituals in general, and the cult in honor of Master K’ung in particular, became the litmus test in many Confucian societies to determine whether an individual or a family is *zheng* 正 (orthopraxic) or *xie* 邪 (heteropraxic). If the latter was found to be case, then these people became marked for persecution, as was the case in China, Korea, and Vietnam. Indeed, it is not what one believes, i.e., one could be an agnostic, Daoist, Buddhist, etc., but rather what one does in solidarity with the entire community (*jia* 家) that matters in orthopraxic Confucian societies. The classical Chinese adage *Tianxia yijia* 天下一家 (one people under Heaven) succinctly sums up the power of ritual (*li* 禮) to produce solidarity and harmony in a society with diverse religious traditions (Daoism, Buddhism, folk religiosity, etc.). Thus, in any dialogue with Confucianism, Christianity would do well to critically ponder the significance and implications of Confucianism’s orthopraxic orientation for Christian thinking.

Notes

- 1 Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 1.
- 2 For critical discussions of this point, see Paul A. Rule, *K’ung-Tzu or Confucius: The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986); and Lionel M. Jensen, *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Traditions & Universal Civilization* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 3 Yao Xinzong, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.
- 4 Li Chenyang, “Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?” in *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics and Gender*, ed. Li Chenyang (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2000), 2.
- 5 See discussion in Ambrose Y. C. King, *Chinese Society and Culture* 中國社會與文化 (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1993), cited in Li, “Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?” 2.
- 6 Li, “Can Confucianism Come to Terms with Feminism?” 2.
- 7 For more information on the various schools of thought in the Hundred Schools, see A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1989); and Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

- 8 For a detailed exploration of this historical period, see Li Xueqin, *Eastern Zhou and Qin civilizations*, trans. Chang Kwang-chih (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
- 9 For further discussion, see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
- 10 Cited in Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), 48.
- 11 Herbert Fingarette, "The Music of Humanity in the Conversation of Confucius," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 10, no. 4 (1983): 331–56, quoted in Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 48.
- 12 See discussion in Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 54–55.
- 13 All quotations from the *Analects* are taken from Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*.
- 14 For discussions of the historical origins of ancestor veneration, see Emily M. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1973); Maurice Freedman, "Ancestor Worship: Two Aspects of the Chinese Case," in *Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, ed. Maurice Freedman (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1967), 85–103; Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts and Ancestor," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 131–82; and Wei Yuan-Kwei, "Historical Analysis of Ancestor Worship in Ancient China," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong Rin Ro (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 119–33.
- 15 See discussion in George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 15–76; Andrew Ross, *A Vision Betrayed: The Jesuits in Japan and China, 1542–1742* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 118–54; and Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume 2: 1500–1900* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 120–26.
- 16 See discussion in Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, 25–76; Ross, *A Vision Betrayed*, 178–99; and Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 126–39.
- 17 Quotation taken from Moffett, *History of Christianity in Asia*, 130.
- 18 Quotation taken from Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, 154–55.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 197.
- 20 For further discussion, see Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, 183–203.
- 21 Herrlee G. Creel, *Confucius and the Chinese Way* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 82.
- 22 Laurence G. Thompson, *Chinese Religion: An Introduction* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1979), 42.
- 23 Judith A. Berling, "Orthopraxy," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea C. Eliade, vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 129–32.
- 24 Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 3.
- 25 David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 105.
- 26 Interestingly, the ideograph 知 (*zhi*, 'knowing') comprises the characters 矢 (*shi*, 'arrow,' which is derived from an arrow pointing upwards) and 口 (*kou*, 'mouth'). In other words, 知 (*zhi*, 'knowing') means 'speaking which hits the target,' a metaphor pregnant with significant relational implications. In the Sinic mind, 'knowing' is not a privatized, solitary, or even a psychological act of apprehension in the abstract, but a relational act—one truly knows only when one is able to 'speak' aptly or appropriately about the matter to the people around oneself.
- 27 Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, 104.

- 28 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 194.
- 29 David Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics and Power* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988), 76 (emphasis added).
- 30 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 31 Tu Wei-Ming, "Iconoclasm, Holistic Vision, and Patient Watchfulness: A Personal Reflection on the Modern Chinese Intellectual Quest," *Daedalus* 116, no. 2 (1987): 84.

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