**ritual/礼(Lǐ)**

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| Final Remarks | Nikolas Århem, CHEN Bisheng | 07 Apr 2022 |

Ritual, as understood in modern Western anthropological and religious scholarship, has two rather distinct meanings; on the one hand, it refers to religious rituals which are concerned with the sacred, actions involving communication and interaction with gods and/or spirits. On the other hand, the concept is also used in a secular sense as referring to formalized and standardized expressive actions which have no necessary practical effect – rather in the sense of the Western idea of etiquette, acts devoid of religious or sacred meaning (cf., the distinct Chinese notion of this term; see Chen Bisheng’s contribution).

However, anthropological scholarship suggests that premodern, animistic societies have an entirely different understanding; what anthropologist and religious scholars call ritual is to them a practical and instrumental activity comparable to the notion of work – i.e., an activity necessary to achieve practical and material ends in an experiential world where gods and spirits are part of the “natural order of things” and where nature is perceived as animate and alive. On this account, ritual is a variety of social interaction with gods, spirits and the souls of the dead and the beings of animate nature.

The word ritual derives from the Latin noun “rituum”, which entered English language in the 16th century, and referred primarily to the correct way of carrying out Church service. Philological studies suggest that the English/Latin terms replaced earlier equivalent terms referring to the practices of ceremonial offerings and blood sacrifices, thus suggesting a linguistic connection between the terms for ritual and for sacrifice. It is worth noting that the Latin (ancient Roman) meaning of the term is close to the ancient Chinese meaning of the corresponding term – i.e., the “proper way” or “customary way” of doing things – implying “correct protocol” (cf., Chen Bisheng’s contribution).

Apart from the religious and secular meanings of the concept of ritual in Western tradition, there exists a different but related concept of ritual which is used in the zoological and ethological sciences (dealing with animal behavior); this natural-science notion of ritual refers to instinctive communicative behavior of animals, notably mammals and birds. This concept lends an evolutionary function to the concept: on this account, ritual behavior is held to give an evolutionary advantage to certain species in the “struggle for survival”. Such animal rituals include courtship rituals of certain birds and animals.

In a comparative perspective, it is interesting to note that the ancient Confucian concept of ritual as “rules” and “ethically correct behavior” is used in China to express the contrast between human beings and beasts in the same way as Western tradition oppose culture to nature [the notion of culture is used in Western thought to express the dichotomy between humanity and nature]. In other words, where the Chinese use the notion of ritual to distinguish humanity from nature, Western tradition use the concept of culture to express the same dichotomy (ibid.).

A further Confucian idea mentioned by Cheng Bisheng (ibid) is that teaching and instructing people of the correct rules of behavior is not enough to install in them “the right path”; instruction needs to be accompanied by rites. In other words, correct behavior must be accompanied by the solemn and pious disposition induced through ritual. In Western anthropological thinking this idea corresponds closely with the notion that ritual invests action with meaning; it makes correct/normative behavior deeply meaningful.

As a final comment on the difference between Chinese and Western civilization, Chen Bisheng notes that while modern Western thinking makes a fundamental distinction between nature and culture, Chinese traditional thought emphasizes the continuity between nature and culture, where culture, as it were, is epitomized by ritual as exemplary human behavior. But ritual as culture is not understood to be opposed to nature; rather ritual is “close to the way of heaven” and thus follows “the inner rules of nature”. When Chen Bisheng remarks that the “music and ritual” of the sage kings was not of their own making but sprang from their inner nature he means to say that music and ritual as cultural expressions are in tune with the divine music of the heaven and the inner workings of nature. That is to say, while to Western thought ritual is culture as opposed to nature, in Chinese tradition ritual is culture in harmony with the order of nature and the cosmos.

**Short synopsis of Chen Bisheng’s contribution on Rite:**

"Rite" is a key word in Chinese culture. It embodies the expectation of a good life according to the precepts of the ancient Chinese. Therefore, "rite" forms a series of theories on how to live (an ideal) political and social life. "Rite" in Chinese culture is not only the basic rule of human life but also a specific etiquette and norm to be followed. It can even be seen as representing the whole system of (ideal) national laws and regulations. In other words, the intention of "rite" is appropriate behavior, while the extension of the concept is much broader. "Rite" is not carved on tablets of stone, it keeps changing with the times. In this sense, a study on "rite" by modern Chinese people means not only tracing the past, but also looking forward toward the future.