Special Feature

The Confucian Concept of *Li* 禮: The Transition from "Worship Rituals" to "Governance Norms"

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Introduction

The history of Confucianism in early China is often abstracted with a few keywords as follows: Confucius' concept of humaneness (*ren* 仁), Mencius' doctrine of innate goodness of human nature (*xingshan* 性善), and Xunzi's theory of human nature which is considered originally evil (*xing'e* 性惡). It is also widely accepted that Neo-Confucianism in Song China, upon this early Confucian heritage and intellectual stimuli from Daoism and Buddhism of the time, built up its core theories of cosmology based on principle (*li* 理) and material-force (*qi* 氣), of the mind and human nature (*xinxing* 心性), and of self-cultivation (*xiuyang* 修養 or *gongfu* 工夫). This understanding, despite oversimplification, seems acceptable to most scholars who study Confucianism in Korea. I do not attempt to completely deny the validity of this approach to the Confucian tradition. Instead, I would like to address what we have missed—or have excluded—in the previous discussions and to suggest a new intellectual lens through which we could view the Confucian tradition more appropriately. That is *li* 禮.

The term *li* has evolved into a multi-layered concept and thus has a few different meanings: ritual formalities for ancestral spirits or deities, the detailed procedures of specific rites, decorum, ritual propriety, and so on.[1] Despite the complex development and its significance in Confucian history, *li* hitherto has been discussed only in terms of religious ceremonies and practices, social norms, institutions, or cultural phenomena at utmost, rather than being fully explored. Consequently, among Korean scholars, the related studies have usually been limited to particular areas, such as cultural studies and bibliography. Some scholars in politics and history also have paid attention to *li*, but their main foci have lain on the specific political-historical events, for example, a series of the Mourning Rite Controversies (*li song*; K. *ye song* 禮訟) in the seventeenth century in Joseon Korea.

However, in the area of philosophy, especially in Confucian philosophy, *li* has hardly been brought up in a discussion. Considering that one of the distinctive features of Confucianism is its strong emphasis on practicality, such as the firm advocate for filial piety and brotherly respect (*xiao ti* 孝悌), faithfulness and sincerity (*zhong xin* 忠信), and the sense of propriety, justice, honesty, and honor (*li yi lian zhi* 禮義廉恥) in one's daily life, the little interest in *li* among modern scholars seems unusual. I believe that what clearly shows the practical philosophy of Confucianism is none other than *li*. Admittedly, the establishment of Confucianism was closely connected to the issue of "disruption of *li*" at Confucius' time, and it influenced the development of the vital Confucian concepts of humaneness and righteousness.

In this article, I will argue that *li* served as a critical component in Confucian philosophy. By tracing the changes in the concept of *li* before the emergence of Confucianism, I will illustrate my point. Mainly, I will explain how the meaning of *li* transformed from "worship rituals" to "governance norms." Second, I will discuss Confucius' insight into the deterioration of the Zhou rites (*Zhouli* 周禮) in the Spring and Autumn period, and how it impacted the formation of Confucianism. Finally, I will analyze the relation between Confucius' philosophical questions about humaneness and righteousness regarding *li*.

Changes in the Meaning of *Li* from "Worship Rituals" to "Governance Norms"

There have been many theories about the origin of *li*. A modern sinologist, Yang Zhigang 杨志刚, based on previous studies, proposes five theories on the issue. First, *li* originated from old customs and practices (*fengsu* 風俗). Second, it was created based on natural human feelings (*renqing* 人情). Third, it derives from rituals for spirits or deities (*jisi* 祭祀). Fourth, it was initiated from the formalities of the ceremony (*yishi* 儀式) that imbued specific objects or actions with a particular meaning. Fifth, it stemmed from the exchange of presents (*liwu jiaohuan* 禮物 交換) (Yang 2000, 4-6).

The purpose of this section, however, is not to investigate the primitive form of *li* in the perspective of cultural anthropology, but to track which

1. The term "*li*" is usually rendered as "rite" or "ritual," which are often used interchangeably. Although both generally mean "a prescribed ceremonial act or action," rite is more like a headline term than a ritual. That is, the former refers to a specific ceremony, while the latter describes the detailed manner or procedure for conducting the ceremonies. In addition to rite and ritual, decorum, ritual formalities, and (ritual) propriety can also be considered as the rendering of the term *li* in accordance with the context. In this article, I will not attempt to offer a standard rendering of the term *li* because it is a multi-layered complex term, rather than a clear-cut terminology. Instead, I will use the Chinese transcription, except for a few cases that have an explicit meaning, which is usually found in a compound word, such as Zhou rites (*Zhouli* 周禮).

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particular origin of *li* functioned as the ideological foundation of social rituals, norms, and practices that came to be put into words. The appearance of a new word, attributed to a specific phenomenon, presupposes a conceptualization process that requires a high level of social cognition. In this sense, it is crucial to survey the advent of the word "*li*" and its historical development.

In the *Explanation of Simple and Compound Graphs* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), the first Chinese dictionary compiled by Xu Shen 許愼 (ca. 58-ca. 147), 豐 refers to an "artifact for the ritual practice" (*xinigli zhi qi* 行禮之器).[2] "*Li*" here means an "action to invoke a blessing by serving deities" (*shishen zhi fu* 事神致福).[3] The expert on oracle bone inscription, Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), generally agreed with the explanations in the *Explanation of Simple and Compound Graphs*. Based on his study of the oracle bone inscriptions of the Ruins of Yin (*Yinxu buci* 殷墟卜辭), he further argued that "*li*" was rooted in the oracle bone inscriptions of 曲 (曲) and 豐 (豊) and that these characters were deeply associated with worshipping rituals for spiritual beings and deities. Wang says as follows:

> The [sacred] container, in which jade was placed for worshipping spiritual beings, was referred to as either 曲 or 豐; liquor for worshipping spiritual beings as "*li*" 醴 in this manner; similarly, the overall worship of spiritual beings as "*li*" 禮. Both characters of 曲 and 豐 would have been used [as the reference to the sacred container] at first, and a little later these two characters would have evolved into other two separate characters of "*li*" 醴 and "*li*" 禮. (Wang 1975, 290-91)

In the above statement, I would like to focus on the point that a "worshipping ritual" 祭祀儀式 was the most significant factor in the formation of the character "*li*" 禮. In the very least, when "*li*" appeared in oracle bone script, worship ritual—among different types of rituals—was deemed as most important. Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1903-1982) argued that the character 豐 should not be considered the ancient form of "*li*" 禮, although, for him, "*li*" clearly originated from 豐. According to him, there must have been developments between 豐 and "*li*" (Xu 1969, 42-43). What kind of developments occurred,

2. *Shuowen jiezi*, "Li bu" 豊部.
3. Ibid., "Shi bu" 示部.

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then? Xu Hao 徐灝 (fl. Qing dynasty), in his *Commentary on the Explanation of Simple and Compound Graphs* (*Shuowen jiezi zhujian* 說文解字注箋), asserted that the appearance of the character "*li*" had to do with changed purpose of worshipping rituals; the character has not yet emerged when the purpose of the worshipping rituals was simply to get blessed with fortune (*zhifu* 致福), but it had only appeared when the decorum itself became the primary focus. In short, appearance and utilization of the character "*li*" ware linked with the need to have a concept that refers specifically to norms and institutions (*liyi* 禮儀) of worshipping rituals.[4]

It seems to be in the early Zhou dynasty that the character "*li*" emerged. This event was presumably related to the Duke of Zhou 周公, who secured the ruling power of the Zhou dynasty and established the governance culture called the "Zhou rites." Yang Zhigang points out that the character "*li*" was used as a collective noun, indicating not only ritual formalities for ancestral spirits or deities (*jili* 祭禮) but also decorum (*liyi* 禮儀) or the detailed procedures of specific rites (*lijie* 禮節), and that it finally turned into an abstract noun, which refers to normative rules or institutions. Additionally, Yang (2000, 86-88) claims that the Duke of Zhou was likely to contribute to the extension of the meaning of the character "*li*" when he launched his political project of "rule by rituals" (*lizhi* 禮治), which means to govern the state by ritual regulations.

What gives a clear picture of the scale and characters of the Zhou rites is the text called *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮). The text, also known as *Offices of Zhou* (*Zhouguan* 周官), is a work on the theory of the bureaucratic organization of the Zhou dynasty. The structure is divided into six categories, symbolized as the Heaven, Earth, Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter, and this is again sub-divided into three hundred sixty offices in total.[5] This schematic list reflects the idea to understand the universe and humans through the same framework and to apply this understanding to governing the state.

What is interesting for our discussion is that the text explicitly presents "Five Rites" (*wuli* 五禮), which includes the Auspicious (*jili* 吉禮), the

4. *Shuowen jiezi zhujian*: "禮之名起于事神, 引伸爲凡禮儀之稱."
5. The office of the Heaven (*tianguan* 天官) corresponds to the department of Administration (*zhiguan* 治官); of Earth (*diguan* 地官) to Education (*jiaoguan* 教官); of Spring (*chunguan* 春官) to Rites (*liguan* 禮官); of Summer (*xiaguan* 夏官) to War (*zhengguan* 政官); of Autumn (*qiuguan* 秋官) to Justice (*xingguan* 刑官); and of Winter (*dongguan* 冬官) to Public Works (*shiguan* 事官).

Inauspicious (*xiongli* 凶禮), the Military (*junli* 軍禮), the Guest (*binli* 賓禮), and the Felicitation (*jiali* 嘉禮)—rites for the state's spirit-ancestors and deities, funerals, military campaigns, foreign delegations, and weddings and capping ceremonies, respectively.[6] As we can see, the Five Rites cover a wide range of rites, from the ritual formalities for spirits, deities, and international order to momentous affairs in one's life, which are congratulatory or sorrowful.[7] Another modern sinologist Gou Chengyi 勾承益 (2002, 60), in this respect, sees the central quality of the Zhou rites as "order"—to put it concretely, political and moral order. However, what seems more important is that the boundary of *li* was greatly expanded from the ritual formalities for deities into a societal order, a system that governs the entire society. Therefore, the modern Chinese philosopher Chen Lai 陈来 (2009, 271-72) says: "Since the Western Zhou, the focus of *li* had lain on cultural development, rather than on worshipping deities *per se*; and this is the significance of the development of the rites and music of the Western Zhou."

Arguably, the term "virtue" (*de* 德) was newly invented by the Zhou to support its political slogan of "rule by rituals," which aimed at realizing the natural order representing Heaven's (or deities) intention. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892-1978) (1982, 1:336) insisted that the character "*de*" undoubtedly first appeared in the bronze inscriptions of the Zhou and that it was not found in the oracle bone or bronze inscriptions of the Yin. Later, his theory was refuted by Xu Zhongshu's 徐中舒 (1898–1991) discovery that the character "*zhi*" 値 was the prior form of "*de*" (Chen 2009, 317). Still, it is noteworthy that there was an apparent semantic change between these two graphs, in addition to the changes in the forms. The notable change was the adding of "*xin*" 心 to the original character 値. In the Zhou bronze inscriptions, it is not difficult to encounter [illegible] (悳) or [illegible] (悳), the alternative graphs of 德. The former puts 心 under 値, and the latter substitutes 心 for 彳. The transition from 値 to 德 implies the semantic abstraction process. While "*zhi*" merely signifies actions or practices without value judgment, "*de*" alludes to more complicated mental activities behind one's behaviors (Yang 2000, 83; Chen 2009, 291).

The ruling elite group, represented by the Duke of Zhou, proposed "virtue"

6. *Zhouli*, Chunguan, "Xiaozongbo": "掌五禮之禁令與其用等."【鄭玄注】"用等, 牲器尊卑之差. 鄭司農云, '五禮, 吉·凶·軍·賓·嘉.'"
7. *Sui shu*, Liyi Zhi: "以吉禮敬鬼神, 以凶禮哀邦國, 以賓禮親賓客, 以軍禮誅不虔, 以嘉禮合姻好, 謂之五禮."

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as the crux of their political plan, i.e., rule by rituals, and actively promoted it. One can find considerable remarks relevant to "virtue" from the *Book of Zhou* (*Zhoushu* 周書), the historical record of the Zhou dynasty, compiled in the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經). For example:

> For want of revering virtue, the [favoring] decree of Heaven untimely fell to the ground.[8]

> Superb governance has a beautiful scent and inspires the deities. It is not the millet (offerings) which is fragrant; it is luminous virtue.[9]

"Revering virtue" (*jingde* 敬德) refers to "cultivating one's virtue" that operates behind the actions and practices as the ground mental state; and "luminous virtue" (*mingde* 明德) can be interpreted as the "elevated mental state" which can accord one's behaviors appropriate ethical "authority." The ruling elite group of the early Zhou believed that cultivating one's virtue could be the more proper way to secure their decree of Heaven and to inspire the deities than invoking a blessing through the worship rituals.

The distinct feature of the political theory of the early Zhou consists in its understanding of virtue. The virtue of rulers is profoundly connected to the decree of Heaven in its philosophy, and Heaven here turns into an ethical object. This normative perspective shows a different interpretation of Heaven from its predecessor, who viewed Heaven merely as an object of reverence. For the predecessor, the decree of Heaven was just given, while for the Zhou people, it had to be maintained by their effort. In this manner, Guo Moruo remarked that the idea of "revering virtue" was indeed unique to the Zhou people; and the Chinese historian Yang Xiangkui 楊向奎 mentioned that the character "*de*" reflected the rise of new thought in the Western Zhou in a similar respect (Wang and Gu 2008, 46).

After the revolutionary dynastic change of the Zhou (*yixing geming* 易姓革命), subsequent to that of the Yin, the idea of the "unconstant decree

8. *Shu jing*, Zhou Shu, "Shao Gao": "惟不敬厥德, 乃早墜厥命." I slightly modified James Legge's rendering in the Chinese Classics, digitized in the *Chinese Text Project* (http://ctext.org). Hereafter, the translation of the passages of the *Book of Documents* is based on Legge's translation with minor modifications.
9. Ibid., "Jun Chen": "至治馨香, 感于神明. 黍稷非香, 明德惟馨."

of Heaven" (*tianming michang* 天命靡常) became powerful. According to the idea, the decree of Heaven is neither arbitrarily granted to a designated force nor permanently insured. Moreover, it was evident for the Zhou people that military force was not likely to guarantee the stability of their new dynasty, seen from their experience of suppressing revolts by force.[10] The project of the Zhou rites was driven under this circumstance, and the concepts of "order" and "revering virtue" played key roles here. However, as the Zhou court remained stable, the later generation of kings no longer paid serious attention to their ancestor's awareness and efforts to establish the Zhou rites. Rather, the Son of Heaven exploited the decree of Heaven to threaten his/her subordinates against his/her duty to practice revering virtue and disturbed order by indulging in eunuchs and palace maids (Zhang 2008, 96; 109-10). In this situation, the so-called Five Hegemons (*wuba* 五霸), the powerful rulers of the states of the Spring and Autumn period, appeared on the scene. These mighty feudal overlords despised the Son of Heaven and annexed other weak states, contrary to their expected roles—respecting the Son of Heaven and supporting reciprocity between the states. Their appearance indicates disruption of the order of the Zhou rites, and thus this shows the change in the governing principle, from virtue to force.

The actual status of the powerful feudal overlords at that point was already beyond the ordinary one of the past; it was almost equivalent to that of the Son of Heaven. Accordingly, the demand for the new ritual institutions for the feudal lords arose, which exceeded the one exclusively allowed for the Son of Heaven in principle (Zou 2000, 62). Additionally, the feudal lords more frequently interacted with each other than with the Son of Heaven.[11] This change resulted in the growing need for the experts on *li*, and thereby increasing frequency in conducting the rites and producing ritual objects (Zhang 2008, 148).

The paradoxical situation which led to both the disruption of the Zhou rites and the great increase of *li*-related matters in quantity at the same time elicits a fundamental question. The question is not about the "origin of *li*" nor

10. For the detailed discussion, see Zhang 2008, 77-79.

11. According to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋), the state of Lu 魯 dispatched a delegation to Jin 晉, one of the might states by feudal overlords, for twenty-eight times, but to the capital, where the Son of Heaven dwelled, only for seven times over the same time period (Yang 1990, 478).

about the "contents of it"; it is about the "meaning" (or the "spirit") and the *raison d'être* of *li*. As seen earlier, it was the social and philosophical challenge that contributed to the inauguration of the Zhou rites. The enactment of the Zhou rites was the response to the recognition of reality. As a result, the ideal norms and rational institutions were designed under the name of the Zhou rites, and in doing so, the Zhou people dramatically made their political situation stable and developed their culture. However, the spirit of the former kings, who were seriously concerned with the establishment of social order through *li*, eventually disappeared; and only the ritual formalities were passed down to their descendants. Rules of force conveniently manipulated the formalities destitute of the spirit. Despite the huge progress regarding formalities, *li* was already not what it was originally. What is the intrinsic nature of *li*? Is it its spirit or form? Is it possible for the decoratively corrupted *li* of the unauthorized to have the same *raison d'être* and function as the original one that aimed to establish orders?

The concept of *li* diverged from this point—the ritual formalities (*yi* 儀) separated from the term *li*, *per se*.[12] The disruption of Zhou rites brought about the bifurcation of the idea of *li*: the "ritual formalities" (*yi* 儀) as sheer forms to perform and the "spirit" (*li* 禮) as the intrinsic nature, although the spirit and forms are inseparable by nature.[13] Later, another division came up, which divided *li* into the "meaning" (*yi* 義) and the "numerical instructions for the detailed procedures" (*shu* 數).[14] A study explains the divergence of the concept of *li* in the Zhou as the separation of the "meaning of *li*" (*liyi* 禮義) and the "ritual formalities" (*liyi* 禮儀), namely the "spirit" (*yili* 義理) and "forms" (*xingshi* 形式) (Zou 2000, 64). During the processes of this conceptual divergence, *li* came into the picture of intellectual history and philosophy in East Asian history (Liu 2003, 39). It was particularly true in terms of the rising of Confucianism.

The Disruption of the Zhou Rites and the Rise of Confucianism

Confucianism is fundamentally associated with *li* from its beginning. As it is said that the various schools of pre-Han thought—except for Mozi 墨子—

12. *Zuo zhuan*, Zhao Gong Wu Nian: "是儀也, 不可謂禮"; Ibid., Ershiwu Nian: "是儀也, 非禮也."

13. For the detailed discussion, see Liu 1987, 50-51.

14. *Liji*, Jiao Te Sheng: "禮之所尊, 尊其義也, 失其義, 陳其數, 祝史之事也."

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originated with their professions, the outset of a group of specialists called "*ru*" 儒 is also considered to be related with its profession (Fu 1996, 289). Although there have been a few different theories on the origination of *ru* as a profession, many scholars generally agree that the profession was basically involved in *li*.[15] As a member of this professional group, Confucius was highly reputed as an authority of *li* (*zhilizhe* 知禮者, literally "the conversant with *li*") and stressed *li* in teaching his disciples.[16]

As is well known, Confucius encouraged his disciples to become noble *ru* (*junzi ru* 君子儒), rather than petty *ru* (*xiaoren ru* 小人儒).[17] Considering that the specialists called *ruzi* 儒者 primarily pertained to the profession concerning *li*, the differences between the noble *ru* and the petty *ru* are likely to depend on how one deals with *li*. The ways of or attitudes toward conducting *li* would be different according to one's emphasis on either the spirit of *li* or the ritual formalities. In other words, when conducting *li*, if one underlines the spirit or meaning (*yi* 義) of *li*, then the one can be classified as a noble *ru*; if giving priority to the forms (*yi* 儀), then a petty *ru*. Such an assumption can be ascertained by probing through Confucius' idea about *li*.

Confucius thought that the circumstances of his time fell into disorder, and thus attempted to turn around the situation.[18] He affirmed that one could tell whether the world is in good order or not, by figuring out who executes rite and music and military expeditions.

> When the world is in good order, rite and music and military expeditions proceed from the Son of Heaven. When the world is in disorder, rite and music and military expeditions proceed from the feudal lords.[19]

15. As Liang Jiarong (2010, 5) points out, some modern scholars, such as Hu Shi, Feng Youlan, and Lao Siguang, focus on the references of the words "*shi*" 師 and "*ru*" 儒 found in the *Book of Former Han* (*Qian Han shu* 前漢書) and the *Rites of Zhou*. According to the "Treatise on Literature" (Yi wen zhi 藝文志) of the *Book of Former Han*, the profession of "*ru*" originated from "minister of education" (*situ* 司徒) in the Zhou dynasty: "儒家者流，蓋出於司徒之官，助人君順陰陽明教化者也." In the "Tianguan" of *the Rites of Zhou*, *ru* is described as a profession of teaching *li*: "三日, 師以賢得民. 四日, 儒以道得民."【鄭玄注】: "師, 諸侯師氏, 有德行 以教民者. 儒, 諸侯保氏, 有六藝以教民者." Yun Sasun (2012. 24) also understands "*ruzhe*" 儒者 as an expert educator of *li*.
16. *Lunyu*, Ba Yi: "子入太廟, 每事問. 或日: '孰謂鄹人之子知禮乎? 入太廟, 每事問.' 子聞之日: '是禮 也.'"; Ibid., Zi Han: "顏淵喟然歎日: '…夫子循循然善誘人, 博我以文, 約我以禮, 欲罷不能.'"; Ibid., Shu Er: "子所雅言, 詩·書·執禮, 皆雅言也."; Ibid., Ji Shi: "他日, 又獨立, 鯉趨而過庭. 日: '學禮乎?' 對日: '未也.' '不學禮, 無以立.'"
17. *Lunyu*, Yong Ye: "子謂子夏日: '女爲君子儒, 無爲小人儒.'"
18. *Lunyu*, Wei Zi: "長沮桀溺耦而耕, 孔子過之,…日: '滔滔者天下皆是也, 而誰以易之?'…夫子憮然日: '鳥獸不可與同羣, 吾非斯人之徒與而誰與? 天下有道, 丘不與易也.'"

Rite and music and military expeditions acted as representative ideas of the Zhou rites, typifying political actions under specific circumstances, including either ordinary or exceptional ones.[20] Thus, if the Son of Heaven exerts control over these elements, then it means that the Zhou rites function properly. Conversely, if feudal lords exercise rite and music and military expeditions at their discretion, then it alludes disruption of *li*. In this sense, Confucius viewed the former as "being in good order" (*youdao* 有道) and the latter as falling into "lack of order" (*wudao* 無道). In reality, an unauthorized force like Five Hegemons manipulated rite and music and committed the unjust annexation with an excuse of "military expeditions."[21] At the time of Confucius, even high officials (*dafu* 大夫) and rear vassals (*peichen* 陪臣) swayed state affairs instead of their superiors.[22]

Confucius identified the corruption of the order proposed in the Zhou rites as the apparent indicator of social disorder. However, the underlying issue of such disorder for Confucius was that the source of political authority moved from "morality" to "force." Confucius vehemently criticized and lamented the evil of his age, i.e., the disruption of the Zhou rites. In particular, he strongly deplored a high official from the Ji Clan 季氏 because the official violated a ritual code by conducting rituals granted only to the Son of Heaven.

19. *Lunyu*, Ji Shi: "孔子日: '天下有道, 則禮樂征伐自天子出, 天下無道, 則禮樂征伐自諸侯出.'" The translation of the passages of the *Analects* in this article, including the above excerpt, is based on Legge's translation with slight modifications.
20. The Zhou rites prescribe specific regulations on military expeditions as well as on rite and music. For instance, "*jiufa*" 九伐 in the *Rites of Zhou* refers to the nine types of regulation of military campaigns as it is illustrated in the *Rites of Zhou* and the *Records of Ritual Matters by Dai the Elder* (*Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記). See *Zhouli*, Xiaguan, "Dasima": "以九伐之灋正邦國. 馮弱犯寡則眚之, 賊賢害民則伐之, 暴內陵外則壇之, 野荒民散則削之, 負固不服則侵之, 賊殺其親則正之, 放弑其君則殘之, 犯令陵政則杜之, 外內亂鳥獸行則滅之."; *Da Dai Liji*, Chao Shi: "明九伐之法, 以震威之."
21. According to the historical record in the *Zuo Commentary*, the state of Chu 楚 seized the entire territory of Hanchauan 漢川 (*Zuo zhuan*, Ding Gong Si Nian: "周之子孫 在漢川者, 楚實盡之"). The Chinese historian Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (1994, 37) claims that the stat of Chu alone annexed forty-five states around the Spring and Autumn period. In addition, the *Han Feizi* (*Han Feizi* 韓非子) conveys that Duke Xian of Jin absorbed seventeen states into his state and subjugated thirty eight states (*Han Feizi*, Nan Yi: "昔者吾先君獻公, 并國十七, 服國三十八"). Mencius also condemned the wars described in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* as injustice (*Mengzi*, Jin Xin II: "春秋無義戰. 彼善於此, 則有之矣. 征者, 上伐下也, 敵國不 相征也").
22. *Lunyu*, Ji Shi: "孔子日: '祿之去公室五世矣, 政逮於大夫四世矣.'"

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(a) Confucius said of [the head of the] Ji [Clan]: "[He] had a dance with eight rows of dancers in his courtyard. If he can bear to do this, what may he not bear to do?"[23]

(b) The three Clans used the Yong 雍 ode while removing the vessels, [after the sacrifice].[24] The Master (Confucius) said, "'Assisting are the feudal lords; the Son of Heaven looks majestic'—How would it be possible to use [this ode] in the hall of the three clans?"[25]

Authority gives the power to put something into action. A person in the highest authority would always have a significant likelihood to exert absolute power because their power is hardly restricted by anyone or anything. Therefore, it is required for power holders to regulate themselves by recognizing such probability and choosing to be virtuous. What guarantees social order pursued by the Zhou rites was the consciousness of the confines of one's social position and observance of such limitation. Morality was requested for this reason. Many provisions of the Zhou rites were nothing but the bounds, which was not supposed to be transgressed, by which to refrain from abuse of power. *Li* based on morality could serve as the higher consented authority to control power than force in this way.

The age of disruption of the Zhou rites came after the movement of political power from the Son of Heaven to feudal lords and to high officials. In so doing, *li* lost its authority and was arbitrarily wielded. As seen from the two excerpts above, Confucius sharply pointed out the reality that *li* was disrupted by force, namely, the political power. What mattered to him was the possibility that such a situation would enable a person in authority to exercise absolute influence. The lamentation, "If he can bear to do this, what may he not bear to do?" shows Confucius' anxiety over the reality.

Again, Confucius' lament was for the disruption of the spirit of *li*, not for that of the ritual formalities. That is, he did mourn neither the wrong formation of the dance nor the incorrect lyrics of the song; instead, he condemned the feudal lords' violation of the code of *li*, by which to consolidate social order. Initially, the number of the rows of dancers (*yi* 佾) stood for the

23. *Lunyu*, Ba Yi: "孔子謂季氏, '八佾舞於庭, 是可忍也, 孰不可忍也?'"
24. *Shijing*, Zhou Song, the ode of "Yong."
25. *Lunyu*, Ba Yi: "三家者以雍徹. 子曰: '相維辟公, 天子穆穆,' 奚取於三家之堂?'"

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hierarchical differences in the ruling class; the song of Yong described the exemplary relationship between the Son of Heaven and feudal lords. Confucius' observations in these instances demonstrate the decay of *li* in terms of the substantive contents, namely the spirit, and this tells us that Confucius' major focus lies on the spirit, rather than the apparent forms.

The Confucian Spirit of *Li*: Righteousness and Humaneness

Then, what is the spirit of *li*? Confucius gives his attention to righteousness (*yi* 義) in order to define the spirit of *li*. His understanding of the relationship between righteousness and *li* is explicitly expressed in his mention, "Consider righteousness to be essential [in everything], and perform it according to the rules of *li*."[26] To comprehend his utterance, we need to analyze Confucius' language relating to righteousness and humaneness.

In his usage of the term, righteousness usually makes a striking contrast with profit (*li* 利).[27] In his view, seeking a profit often hinders following a great cause because it usually serves the private self—or the self-centered ego—(*shiji* 私己).[28] Therefore, for Confucius, a judgment based on profit is apt to provoke the resentment of others.[29] Given that, Confucius further argued that if giving more consideration to others rather than oneself, it will enable the one to keep from being subject to resentment. The notion of profit is for the sake of one's self-centered ego in Confucius' perspective.[30] Thus, it is natural to think that righteousness, the contrasting notion of profit, aims to overcome being so self-serving and instead contribute to supporting the public.

In short, Confucius' term righteousness implies avoiding seeking a private profit and pursuing the public order, as the spirit of *li*. This idea accords closely with the spirit of the Zhou rites, which looks for solidifying order by emphasizing revering virtue and luminous virtue. In Confucius' thought, the feudal lords, who held absolute hegemony, conducted misdeeds ignoring the

26. *Lunyu*, Wei Ling Gong: "子曰: '君子義以爲質, 禮以行之.'"
27. *Lunyu*, Li Ren 里仁: "子曰: '君子喻於義, 小人喻於利.'"
28. *Lunyu*, Zi Lu 子路: "子夏爲莒父宰, 問政. 子曰: '無欲速, 無見小利. 欲速, 則不達, 見小利, 則大事不成.'"
29. *Lunyu*, Li Ren: "子曰: '放於利而行, 多怨.'"
30. *Lunyu*, Yan Yuan: "仲弓問仁. 子曰: '己所不欲, 勿施於人. 在邦無怨, 在家無怨'; Ibid., Wei Ling Gong: "子曰: '躬自厚而薄責於人, 則遠怨矣,'" respectively.

value of virtue, and thereupon the social chaos arose. When Confucius declared the "disruption of *li*," criticizing the outcome of their misconducts, "*li*" here referred to "order" involved in the Zhou rites. In his declaration, we can see Confucius' strong desire to restore the Zhou rites.

At this point, we should take note of humaneness, the cardinal concept in Confucius' philosophy, because Confucius explained this concept in terms of "overcoming one's self-centered ego" and "restoring the destroyed order of the Zhou rites." We can find a clue to understanding how humaneness is correlated with Confucius' project of restoring *li* from a dialogue between Confucius and his outstanding disciple Yan Yuan 顔淵 in the *Analects*. When Yan Yuan raised a question about humanness, Confucius replied to him saying, "If you overcome selfishness and return to *li* (*keji fuli* 克己復禮), then you can be considered humane."[31] Then, Yan Yuan asked the concrete measures to overcome the self-centered ego, and Confucius replied, "Do not look at what is against *li*; do not listen to what is against *li*, do not speak what is against *li*; and do not make a move which is against *li*."[32]

As previous studies illustrated, Confucius' remarks on humaneness are undoubtedly linked with individual moral character. However, it is easy to overlook that his understanding of humaneness has another facet—the political (or social) function of humaneness. For example, Confucius once commented that Guan Zhong 管仲 was "humane," although Guan Zhong was one of the leading figures to start the violent era of the feudal overlords. It is reasonable to assume that Confucius' appraisal of Guan Zhong was based on the functional respect of humaneness rather than its moral respect.[33] Hence, we should take into account the political function, in addition to individual morality, to examine Confucius' thoughts on humaneness.

To clarify this point, we need to look into how a noble person (*junzi* 君子), a desirable leader in the Confucian perspective, cultivates oneself (*xiu ji* 修己), appeases others (*an ren* 安人), and brings peace to people (*an baixing*

31. *Lunyu*, Yan Yuan: "顔淵問仁. 子曰: '克己復禮爲仁.'" I do not follow Legge's translation of the quoted passage. Instead, I provide my own translation.
32. *Lunyu*, Yan Yuan: "顔淵曰: '請問其目.' 子曰: '非禮勿視, 非禮勿 聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動.'"
33. *Lunyu*, Xian Wen: "子曰: '桓公九合諸侯, 不以兵車, 管仲之力也. 如其仁, 如其仁'"; Ibid., Yang Huo: "子張問仁於孔子. 孔子曰: '能行五者於天下爲仁矣.' '請問之.' 曰: '恭寬信敏惠. 恭則 不侮, 寬則得衆, 信則人任焉, 敏則有功, 惠則足以使人.'"

安百姓).[34] A noble person can achieve this goal by "overcoming selfishness and returning to *li*." "Overcoming selfishness" refers to the way of cultivating oneself; humaneness here is relevant to individual moral character. Whereas "returning to *li*" concerns appeasing others and bringing peace to people, and this manifests another aspect of humaneness of social (or political) function.

Mencius testified that Yan Yuan earnestly strived to become a person like Emperor Shun 舜.[35] Obviously, Yan Yuan did not mean to be the Son of Heaven. However, his aspiration admits of discussion in terms of not just "internally a sage" (*nei sheng* 內聖) but "externally a king" (*wai wang* 外王). For Yan Yuan, Emperor Shun epitomized Confucius' teaching of "extensively conferring benefits and assisting all the people" (*boshi jizhong* 博施濟衆) and "cultivating oneself so as to bring peace to people" (*xiuji yi an baixing* 修己以安百姓).[36] When Yan Yuan asked how to govern the state, Confucius answered him by suggesting to compare the ritual institutions of Xia, Yin, and Zhou and to choose appropriate ones among them.[37] Given that Confucius believed that "When called to office, to undertake its duties; when not so, to remain withdrawn—it is only I and you (Yan Yuan) who have attained to this,"[38] Yan Yuan's resolution to emulate Emperor Shun does not seem to differ from Confucius' admiration for the Duke of Zhou.

The social chaos of the Spring and Autumn period led Confucius to long for the Duke of Zhou since his youth.[39] The Duke of Zhou was the principal figure in formulating the Zhou rites by eclectically adopting the Xia and Yin rites.[40] For Confucius, the Zhou rites were the absolute criteria for social order, and the disruption of the Zhou rites meant the disappearance of order on this

34. *Lunyu*, Xian Wen: "子路問君子. 子曰: '修己以敬.' 曰: '如斯而已乎?' 曰: '修己以安人.' 曰: '如斯而已乎?' 曰: '修己以安百姓. 修己以安百姓, 堯舜其猶病諸!'" Zengzi 曾子, one of the outstanding disciples of Confucius, also described *junzi* as a responsible leader to majestically govern the state even in crisis: "曾子曰: '可以託六尺之孤, 可以寄百里之命, 臨大節而不可奪也, 君子人與? 君子人也'" (ibid., Tai Bo).
35. *Mengzi*, Teng Wen Gong I: "顔淵曰: '舜何人也, 予何人也? 有爲者亦若是.'"
36. The relevant passages of "*bo shi ji zhong*" and "*xiuji yi an baixing*" are from Yong Ye and Xian Wen of the *Lunyu*, respectively. Yong Ye: "子貢曰: '如有博施於民而能濟衆, 何如? 可謂仁乎?' 子曰: '何事於仁! 必也聖乎! 堯 舜其猶病諸!'"; Xian Wen: "子路問君子. 子曰: '修己以敬.' 曰: '如斯而已乎?' 曰: '修己以安人.' 曰: '如斯而已乎?' 曰: '修己以安百姓. 修己以安百姓, 堯舜其猶病諸?'"
37. *Lunyu*, Wei Ling Gong: "顔淵問爲邦. 子曰: '行夏之時, 乘殷之輅, 服周之冕, 樂則韶舞.'"
38. *Lunyu*, Shu Er: "子謂顔淵曰: '用之則行, 舍之則藏, 唯我與爾有是夫!'"
39. Ibid.: "子曰: '甚矣, 吾衰也! 久矣, 吾不復夢見周公!'"
40. *Lunyu*, Wei Zhen: "子曰: '殷因於夏禮, 所損益, 可知也, 周因於殷禮, 所損益, 可知也'"; Ibid., Ba Yi: "子曰: '周監於二代, 郁郁乎文哉! 吾從周.'"

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account. It was natural for Confucius to worry about the disorder and to dream of the establisher of order. Ironically, the Duke of Zhou, the establisher, was not the Son of Heaven. This irony presumably made Confucius have more thirst for the Duke of Zhou, because, for him, it was the Duke of Zhou who showed the probability that one can set the standards for the world without the position of the Son of Heaven. The Duke of Zhou, for Confucius, was probably more feasible hope to reach than Emperor Shun for Yan Yuan.

While Confucius' traveling over the world was a struggle for realizing his ideal in his lifetime, his compiling the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu* 春秋) was the serious criticism of the reality that thwarted his wish.

> As the world fell into decay and the Way faded away, wicked speakings and atrocious deeds became rampant. There were instances of vassals murdering their rulers, and of sons murdering their fathers. Confucius was afraid and composed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*. What the *Spring and Autumn Annals* contains are matters proper to the Son of Heaven. On this account, Confucius said, "It is the *Spring and Autumn Annals* which will make people know me, and it is the *Spring and Autumn Annals* which will make people condemn me."…Confucius completed the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and thereby rebellious vassals and villainous sons were struck with terror.[41]

The Duke of Zhou enacted the Zhou rites in order to build a new order; Confucius composed the *Spring and Autumn Annals* to restore the disrupted order. The Zhou rites created order by assigning normative duties to proper names (*ming* 名), such as "rulers and vassals" and "fathers and sons"; the *Spring and Autumn Annals* criticized the social chaos at that time, ascribing disorder to those who neglected their duties imposed on their names.[42] According to Mencius, through the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Confucius completed what he had to do, which the Son of Heaven was supposed to fulfill, although he was not in such a position. Formally, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is a text of history which contains two hundred forty-two years of historical records.

41. *Mengzi*, Teng Wen Gong II: "世衰道微, 邪說暴行有作, 臣弑其君者有之, 子弑其父者有之. 孔子懼, 作春秋. 春秋, 天子之事也, 是故孔子曰: '知我者其惟春秋乎! 罪我者其惟春秋乎!'…孔子成春秋, 而亂臣賊子懼."
42. In this respect, we can assume that Confucius' theory of "rectification of names" (*zhengming* 正名) had a similar intent to the composition of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.

However, in terms of the contents, the *Spring and Autumn Annals* could be regarded as a text of *li* in that it praises and blames the historical traces of the Son of Heaven, feudal lords, and high officials in the light of *li*. Therefore, it is little wonder that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is acknowledged as the "great foundation of *li*."[43] As we have noticed, Confucianism was born based on Confucius' fierce pursuit of solving the social problems of his time and on the intellectual circumstances of the so-called Spring and Autumn period. In this view, Confucianism is essentially connected to *li*.

Conclusion

By tracing the origin of *li*, we can see that the category of *li* has extended, and the content of it has been abstracted over time. In other words, the denotation of *li* has expanded from worshipping rituals for spiritual beings and deities to governance norms or institutions. At the time of the Duke of Zhou, *li* finally served as the supreme principle of governing states, i.e., "rule by rituals." What is more significant is that, despite the extension and the abstraction of the meaning of *li*, the essential qualities of *li* were not lost. Namely, the consciousness of Heaven (or deities) that is found in worshipping rituals has remained as the original attributes of—or the spirit of—*li*, while expanding the scope of *li* to the order system that comprehensively applies to the operation of society has arisen.

The Zhou dynasty had its heyday with the ruling class's consciousness of the Mandate of Heaven that suggested the importance of self-cultivation as the heart of the governing principle of "rule by rituals." It was not surprising that the disregard of the Mandate of Heaven and virtue by the ruling class spurred the eventual decline of the Zhou dynasty. The period of the fall of the Zhou dynasty overlapped with the rise of Confucianism led by Confucius in the so-called Spring and Autumn period. Confucius defined his day as "lack of order" and deplored the disruption of the Zhou rites. The main cause of the crisis, in Confucius' view, was the inversion of the foundation of political authority from

43. *Shiji*, "Taishigong zixu": "周道衰廢, 孔子爲司寇, 諸侯害之, 大夫壅之, 孔子知言之不用, 道之不行也. 是非二百四十二年之中, 以爲天下儀表, 貶天子, 退諸侯, 討大夫, 以達王事而已矣…夫春秋, 上明三 王之道, 下辨人事之紀, 別嫌疑, 明是非, 定猶豫, 善善惡惡, 賢賢賤不肖, 存亡國, 繼絶世, 補敝起廢, 王道之大者也…夫不通禮義之旨, 至於君不君, 臣不臣, 父不父, 子不子…春秋者, 禮義之大宗也."

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virtue to force. To recover the normative power of *li*, Confucius proposed the philosophical concepts of humaneness and righteousness. This project served as the foundation of the philosophy of Confucianism.

Upon Confucius' attempt, early Confucianism evolved with the advent of Mencius and Xunzi, the Confucius' intellectual descendants, who put efforts to advocate their intellectual heritage and provide original interpretations of it. However, despite its dominant position in the Han intellectual scene, Han Confucians had to struggle for restoring burned-out Confucian texts in the Qin dynasty, devoting themselves to exegetical research (*xungu* 訓告). In the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the Sui and Tang dynasties, Daoism and Buddhism held hegemony in the realm of thought, while Confucianism merely served administrative purposes, without remarkable intellectual developments. It was in the Song dynasty that a dramatic change occurred in the history of Confucianism which led to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism that profoundly reinterpreted the Confucian heritage. Since then Confucianism had bifurcated into Learning of Principle (*lixue* 理學) and Learning of the Heart-and-Mind (*xinxue* 心學), and finally Evidential Learning (*gaozhengxue* 考證學) arose in the Qing dynasty.

Although *li* is interrelated with the appearance and development of Confucian philosophy, it has been neglected among many contemporary scholars in the area of Confucianism. The main reason for this academic tendency is the limited perspective on *li* by the scholars. The relevant discussions are usually reduced to the issues of ritual formalities or norms or being addressed within the boundaries of institutions or cultural phenomena at most. However, we should reappraise the existing approach to *li* and rethink the meaning of *li*—in that Confucian philosophy has the firm character of practice and that such characteristic is exclusively embodied through "*li*."

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Abstract

The Confucian tradition puts a strong emphasis on practicality. Although this characteristic is often exemplified in the Confucian firm advocates for filial piety and brotherly respect, faithfulness and sincerity, and the sense of propriety, justice, honesty, and honor in one's daily life, what clearly shows the practical philosophy of Confucianism is its concept of *li* 禮. The establishment of Confucianism was closely connected to the issue of "disruption of *li*" at Confucius' time, and it influenced the development of the vital Confucian concepts of humaneness and righteousness. However, *li* has either hardly been brought up in a discussion in the sphere of Confucian philosophy or has been discussed only in terms of religious ceremonies and practices, social norms, institutions, or cultural phenomena at utmost, rather than being fully explored. If we acknowledge the significance of the role of *li* in the rise and development of Confucian philosophy, we should reconsider the way in which *li* has been studied. To this end, in this article, I attempt to explain how the meaning of *li* transformed from "worship rituals" to "governance norms," Confucius' insight into the deterioration of the Zhou rites and its impact on the formation of Confucianism, and Confucius' philosophical questions about humaneness and righteousness regarding *li*.

Keywords: *li* 禮, virtue, Confucius, humaneness, righteousness

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