



Ritual Traditions of the Three Dynasties and the Continuity of the Chinese Civilization

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Abstract: The rule of rites was the fundamental pattern of the governance in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties (i.e. the Three Dynasties). As a complex system of political and cultural practices with political, religious and moral attributes, rites legitimately and structurally underpinned the royal regime, therefore ensuring regime stability, integrating social relations, and enhancing recognition of cultural and political identities. Ritual traditions of the Three Dynasties went beyond extrinsic rites and institutions to include intrinsic spiritual traditions, e.g. divinity of the Heaven, conformity with ancestral heritage, and derivative moral values such as the pursuit of ethics and rewards for benevolence. Also included were the sense of blood relationships, the sense of clanship, the sense of ethics and the sense of filial piety and fraternal duty based on ancestral worship. Through the enlightenment of ritual music, the sense of rites was internalized as the collective value and cultural identity of the members of a society. Therefore, early nations that were founded upon rites functioned as a community of politics, culture and morality. Rites, having been internalized as cultural elements of the Chinese people, shaped the ways of thinking and behavior. It is fair to say that rites have served as the fundamental bedrock for the continuity of the Chinese civilization.

Keywords: Three Dynasties, ritual traditions, rule of rights, civilization, continuity

As a complex society evolved into an early nation, the political institutions of the Central Plain creatively politicized, hierarchized and integrated religious services, funeral/interment services, architectural

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design and ritual vessel management as a set of ruling strategies and ploys, which, when infused with political and cultural ideals, formed an influential political rule pattern, i.e. the rule of rites. The ruling strategies perfused many aspects of the early state, physical, spiritual, ritual and artistic, and formed a highly-developed body of rites and traditions. Continuity is a major feature of the Chinese civilization, which is inseparably linked with ritual traditions. This paper intends to elaborate on the ritual traditions and continuity of the Chinese civilization.

The Rule of Rites of the Early State

Pre-Qin rites came into existence through a dynamic process. The diverse embryonic forms of rites of the city states evolved in the Xia and Shang dynasties until finally emerging as a fully developed body of Western Zhou rites. Zhou rites were a comprehensive system of prehistoric culture and Xia and Shang rites. It is a catch-all phrase for the codes, institutions, rituals and spiritual principles of the Western Zhou period. This comprehensive system encompassed many regulations, institutions and codes of behavior in politics, economy, militarism, social life and ethics. It also covered the various rituals relating to divination, war, guest reception and matrimony. That is why Zhou rites are considered to be the basic principles on which ancient civil governance was founded, and a system of stringent political and social norms.

The Structure of the Rule of Rites in the Three Dynasties

Early China developed a political structure founded on theocracy which, built on the belief in divine providence, evolved ceremonious rites of Heaven worship. Besides evolving a complicated system of funeral/interment services and ancestral worship with blood kinship as the bond, the structure consolidated social orders (e.g. theocratic order, and secular political order) and evolved a system of rites covering diplomacy, royal audiences and dining. This complicated network consolidated many kinds of rites, including offerings (gifts), codes and institutions (codes of conduct), practices (rituals), and ethics (metaphysics), and more, so it had multiple attributes, political, religious or ethical, with the political attribute lying at the core. In early China, rites were institutional practices initiated through somewhat peremptory institutions and codes. The establishment of rites strengthened royal power and therefore generated a system of political and social order which was centered on royal power to distinguish social hierarchy and responsibilities.

In the early stage of societal civilization and state formation, blood relationships were an important contributor to the prominence of the rites of the Three Dynasties. As the combination of blood relationships and political control evolved until the Western Zhou period, the familial-political system founded on patriarchal institutions came into being. The ethic-featured system made a point of how natural blood kinship played a political role as a centripetal, cohesive force (Tanigawa, 2004, p. 63). In this political structure, patriarchal and political hierarchies interwove and perfused the many aspects of politics and rituals like a set of “political symbols.” Archaeologically remarkable

settlements, capital cities, palaces, and earthenware, jade or bronze ritual vessels constituted a forest of physical symbols of power. Bronze and jade ritual vessels were the most tangible and typical part of the Zhou rite system. The vessels varied in detail with hierarchy, such as quantity, quality, shape, color and workmanship, which were further combined to convey different meanings. The Zhou dynasty distinguished its political hierarchy with ritual symbols, such as horse-drawn carriages and costumes, which also strengthened the hierarchy of patriarchal politics. In the *Commentary of Zuo – The Second Year of Duke Cheng’s Reign*, Confucius said, “Vessels and peerages are not to be leased.” Vessels and peerages became tools of ruling due to their symbolic significance.

Institutional norms were also embodied in various ritual norms, which perfused the many aspects of life of the Zhou people, regulated their code of behavior, and formed patterns of behavior and thinking typical of the Zhou Dynasty. Rites are the representation of state ideology and their internal rationale is termed a “variant of metaphysics” in traditional ritualism. Zhou rites, including ethical practices and principles (e.g. upholding of blood relationships, respect for honored people, filial piety, prudent reserve between men and women, and faith of friendship), permeated the ruling class’s ideological system and were assigned a prominently ethical nature.

Multi-level, Multidimensional Functions of Rites

Generally, primitive rites fall into two categories. One is a kind of worship focusing on religious beliefs and thought to be crucial to humanity-deity communication and the worship of Heaven, Earth, spirits and gods. Rationalization, ritualization and politicization of religious services are important features of rites of the Three Dynasties. The *Discourses of the State – Chu* discusses the Heaven-Earth communication, a situation wherein a few aristocrats and dignitaries in the clan monopolized the power to “communicate with the gods,” (Zhang, 2002, p. 29) so politicization of religious and sacrificial services probably dates back to the prehistoric period. The ruling class of the Three Dynasties integrated religious faith, political organizations and secular political hierarchy to organize religious activities and build a system of ideology for the secular regimes. When religious faith, services and the clergy were integrated as part of a secular regime, they lost independence and became the tool of the monarchical rule. Second, there were non-theocratic rites and codes, like diplomatic etiquette and skills of interpersonal relationships. The following paragraphs deal with the role of such rites and codes from the political, social and cultural perspectives.

First, the Three Dynasties featured a political structure with royal power at the core. Rites evolved from and contributed to the formation and maturity of the monarchy. Some scholars suggest that the state structure was complex, with vassal states, dependencies and allies subject to a central government. Royal power directly controlled the central government while indirectly reaching to vassal states. The central government lay on top of the hierarchy, while the dependencies and vassal states constituted part of the kingdom (Wang, 2015, pp. 248-265). In this regime, the relationship between the central government and the dependencies and vassal states was both one of affiliation and one of alliance and game. Therefore, the central state had to set up stable institutional norms to establish political

stability by coordinating the allocation of power and political, social and material resources within the aristocracy. These norms, designed to coordinate power and resource allocations, are the rites.

Early royal power originated from and was founded on divine religious power and military power. Because early royal power reached to sacrificial offerings, clan governance and warring, the supreme leader must have control over the power to legitimize and stabilize his regime. That explains why rites as a political superstructure must coordinate these aspects well to stabilize the political structure. In fact, it was primarily rites that, as a multidimensional contributor, enabled the ancient royal regime to legitimate itself in multiple aspects. Functionally, rites legitimized and justified the royal regime rationally through rituals and ideology, therefore maintaining a stable hierarchical structure. Take the Suburban Sacrifices sacrificial service as an example, its significance went beyond the religious and ceremonial to cover politics. Royal power in antiquity was thought to be ultimately derived from divine power, so the Heaven worship service became the monopoly of the supreme leader. The monopoly made royal power even more divine and supreme and that explained the legitimacy and justification of royal power. Besides, monarchical monopoly of the power of Heaven-human communication constituted a firm grip on the power to interpret divine power. By controlling god worship, ancestral worship and similar holy rites, the rulers of the Three Dynasties established the royal power order and the ethical order (e.g. monarch-subject relationships, male-female relationships, and elder-younger relationships). As a result, the political order surrounding royal power became well established. That was why Li Zehou defined the worship system concisely as a “trinity of religion, ethics and politics” (Li, 2012, pp. 64-65).

Second, rites were a tool of social integration in traditional China. They were suited to the economic and political superstructure of the ancient society. The fragile Three Dynasties agricultural economy, scarcity of implements and technical resources, and the conflict between a growing population and resource scarcity made it necessary to allocate resources through institutions and ideology. Early society depended primarily on flexible rites for the management of resource allocation for the purpose of social disparity coordination. Therefore, rites turned into a code of conduct governing resource allocation. *Xunzi – A Discussion of Li* records, “The ancient kings hated such disorder, and therefore they established ritual principles in order to curb it, to cultivate men’s desires and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They saw to it that desires would not overextend the means for their satisfaction, and material goods would not be exhausted by the desires. Thus both desires and goods were looked after and satisfied. This is the origin of rites.” In this resource allocation-based coordination mechanism, rites made a point of differentiation in social status and political hierarchy. Rites and the resulting order were built on the platform of differentiation in status. *Xunzi – On the Absurdity of Physiognomy* records, “Differentiation exists widely in the world and the type of differentiation of the most concern is social hierarchy, the most highly-developed form of which is rites.” Differentiation between social groups was the precondition for a well-established social order. In the eyes of ancient Chinese, differentiation constituted the essential difference between humanity and animals and was fundamental to rational resource allocation. The *Commentary of Zuo – the Twenty – Second Year of Duke Xi of Lu* records, “He cared nothing about the rites and ended up mixing the males and females.” Differentiation, as

summarized in *Xunzi – On Rites*, means the “pursuit of the difference in social status, age, office, sex and economic condition.” The *Book of Rites – Record of the Dykes* records, “Rites are meant to clarify doubts of the populace about ritual practices. There must be a difference in social status, dress code and power so that the populace becomes orderly.” In early society, this political order system was a pyramid-like hierarchy with royal power at the core. Rites as a tool of differentiation of ethics were meant to ensure the sustainable development of mankind while avoiding the destruction of mankind through infighting for private desires. At the core of the rite system of the Three Dynasties lay respect for family members, relatives and dignitaries. The ruling class kept to this core principle in order to appease infighting and internal rivalry for wealth resources. That was why practicing rites were regarded as a political means of maintaining the differentiation.

Although rites were a tool of differentiation in nature, they were meant to unify social groups while maintaining differentiation. As the private ownership system developed, the classes and the state emerged, rites originated, evolved and alternated between differentiation and unification. Without differentiation there could not have been unification of social groups; and differentiation alone could not have shored up a sustainable hierarchy. Notably, rites depended primarily on blood relationships to derive cohesion in early society, which was an important reason why later Confucians stressed kinship and filial piety. Kinship-based rites worked towards both differentiation and unification when it came to blood relationships. Take the feast ceremony for example. It was a kind of rite designed to strengthen the rapport and cohesion inside a clan or political group and to contribute to a harmonious political order. As recorded in the *Book of Zhou Rites – Offices of Spring – Dazongbo*, “The dazongbo officiates at feasts to bring together clan members and siblings, and at treats to host guests from around the world.”

Third, the Three Dynasties continually spread their ritual, music and ethos to peripheral civilizations. These ritual, music and ethos contributed to consolidating different ethnic groups and promoting cultural and political identities.

The Three Dynasties had a highly influential cultural system that impacted heavily on peripheral areas. Expansive permeation of the Erlitou culture into peripheral areas is visible in artifacts, primarily wine-holding ritual crocks (e.g. *jue*, *gui*, *he* and *gu*) and jade ritual ornaments (e.g. *gui* and *zhang*). Common vessels, pots and pans are very few, that is to say, expansion of culture from Erlitou’s capital city into peripheral areas was of a super-structural, ritual and vehicular nature (Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2003, p. 138). The Shang Kingdom also expanded its reach to the east and the south, spinning off advanced ritual, music and ethos to peripheral areas. (Shao, 2013, p. 243) From its foundation onwards, the Zhou dynasty introduced feudalism to grant large numbers of fiefs to royal and non-royal vassals who contributed to the achievements of the kingdom. The Western Zhou feudal system was meant to make the vassals states a line of defense to strengthen royal power. Besides, it played the special role of cultural colonization by perfusing these vassal states with Zhou values and ideology, thereby stabilizing Zhou rites as the dominant political and cultural philosophy. In the *Book of Poetry: Minor Odes of the Kingdom, Decade of Bei Shan*, “

Under the wide heaven, all is the king's land. Within the sea-boundaries of the land, all are the king's servants." This phenomenon substantiates the vassal states' political identity with and loyalty to the Zhou royal family. Culturally, the Zhou Kingdom adopted a variety of ritual standards to strengthen the sense of ethical codes, e.g. filial piety, male supremacy and respect for elders. The aristocracy of the vassal states identified with Zhou rites and the underlying ideology, so they helped build political and cultural identity. Spatial dissemination of Zhou rites, also called "the king's influence" by tradition, was characterized by the continual permeation of Zhou culture into peripheral ethnic groups. Finally, the different cultures merged to form the Chinese cultural community. Zhou rites are thought to have contributed to the civilization of a unified kingdom. That is why we say that rites embody the values, ideology and core self-identity of the Chinese nation.

The rule of rites was the fundamental pattern of the politics of the Three Dynasties.^① In both the *Book of Rites – Different Teaching of the Different Kings* and *Xunzi – Enriching the State*, the authors highlighted the part of rites in the governance of a state. As recorded in the *Discourses of the States – Discourses of Chu*, the discretion in establishing rites as a code of ethics was deemed to be "of national importance." Over the Three Dynasties, rites were fundamental to the rule of a state because of their nature as a wise political strategy; in practice, they proved effective as a political ploy and a social coordination mechanism. As a multi-level, multidimensional complicated system of politics and culture, rites had political, religious and moral attributes which supported the monarchical rule. As a result, the monarchical rule was stabilized. In the Three Dynasties, rites, as the main means of social integration, contributed to the political and cultural identity of social members in the expansion of the Central Plain civilization to outer areas.

Ritual Traditions as the Underlying Cornerstone for the Continuity of the Chinese Civilization

According to *The Analects – Wei Zheng*, Shang, "derived its ritual heritage from Xia, and Zhou derived its ritual heritage from Shang, with deletions and supplements knowable." The developments of ritual system in Xia, Shang and Zhou rites climbed to a remarkable high in Western Zhou. For example, a great deal of archaeological evidence points to physical ritual symbols (e.g. bronze/jade vessels, capital city layout, palaces, sacrificial services and funeral/interment services) as well as the ideology underlying the rites and gifts, which constituted an integral part of the Three Dynasties civilization. Rites were both institutional and cultural. While the three kingdoms fell one after another for multiple political reasons, the structure of rites, deep-lying values, ideological institutions and belief systems remained consistent. Despite a few changes in ritual details, the cultural philosophy was consistent. That was why the *Book of Rites* says, "The rites of the Three Dynasties were consistent."^① The ritual, artistic and cultural traditions of the Three Dynasties were consistent and

① Both rites and penalties were employed in the rule. The latter were subject to and secured the former.

impacted heavily on the evolution of the Chinese civilization. In terms of ritual civilization of the Three Dynasties, three characteristics need close attention.

Genesis of Agricultural Civilization and Loyalty to and Conformity with Heaven under the Rule of Rites

In antiquity, the Chinese people attached great importance to astronomy, for it guided agricultural kingdoms to do farm work as the solar terms changed. As a nation, the Chinese people needed to observe and investigate the natural laws behind celestial bodies to practice divination as a basis for governance.^② According to scholastic research, the relic of an observatory (Site #: II FJT1) unearthed in a small city found in the mid-Taosi relic has proven capable of deriving a calendar with 20 solar terms, with the aid of a sundial. The calendar includes two equinoxes, two solstices, climate changes, worship festivals and farming seasons of grain, millet, rice and beans (He, 2009, pp. 362-392). The discovery has corroborated the records in the *Book of Documents – Canon of Yao* which precisely identified the seasons for people to do farm work in prehistoric times. Beginning from its origination, ancient Chinese astronomy was inseparably associated with Heaven worship activities and the related sacrificial services. In antiquity, astronomical observations served not only to take action to respond to celestial events, but also to “worship and communicate with Heaven” (Jiang, 2007, pp. 94). Based on Shang oracle bone residuals, some scholars have suggested that the sun worship ceremony, was of a primitive astronomical nature and was meant to track the orbit of the sun (Song, 1985, pp. 33-40). The power to hold this ceremony was exclusive to the Shang royal family.

For the kings of the Three Dynasties, the monopoly of the power of Heaven-human communications was an important means of obtaining and consolidating supreme royal power (Zhang, 1999, pp. 384-400). During the Xia dynasty at the latest, ancestral worship became one with deity worship. As recorded in the *Commentary of Zuo – the First Year of Duke Ai’s Reign*, Shaokang, “revived Xia, restored Yu’s institutions and offered sacrifices to Heaven as always.” Sacrificial offering means worshipping Heaven and ancestral patriarchs. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, ancestral patriarchs were deemed as the aides to and right-hand men of the deities (Zhao, 1993). Suburban Sacrifices in Zhou sanctified Houji (the first ancestral patriarch of Zhou) as an aide to the deities. King Wen of Zhou, also deemed an aide to the deities, was worshiped in a shrine to highlight the monopoly of the Heaven worship power which was not to be transferred to other clans. Politically, Heaven worship power was meant to be supreme, exclusive, holy and morally legitimate; therefore, royal power, derived from Heaven worship power, was pronounced legal, legitimate and unequivocal.

Celestial observation of a religious worship nature brought into being such philosophies as observations of celestial events and conformity with Heaven. Observation of celestial bodies and similar astronomical events, as recorded in the *Book of Documents – Canon of Yao*, is indicative of an age-old sense of Heaven

① As recorded in the *Book of Rites – Ritual Vessels*, rites were consistent throughout the Three Dynasties for the convenience of people. In terms of form, some rites highlighted the use of black and some the use of white. They originated in Xia and were passed down to Shang.

② Refer to *Chinese Archaeoastronomy* (authored by Feng Shi), published by Social Sciences Academic Press in 2001.

worship characteristic of the Chinese people. In the eyes of ancient Chinese, Heaven dictated all the happenings on earth, which occurred with divinations and necessitated celestial observation for the benefit of mankind. In the *Book of Changes*, the Bi Hexagram is thus interpreted, “Celestial events are either soft or hard. Observation of celestial events enables the ruler to understand celestial phenomena, while observation of earthly events guides him to civilize his subjects.” The so-called “earthly events” include rites, codes and institutions. Without doubt, rites as an earthly event were thought to be derived ultimately from Heaven.

In summary, astronomy focusing on celestial event observations (based on which agricultural activities were carried out) played a very significant political role in antiquity. These traditions, along with the derivative philosophies, e.g., respect for Heaven, conformity with Heaven and pursuit of Heaven, impacted deeply and sweepingly on rites, institutions, ideologies and cultures. They deeply underlie the continuity of the Chinese civilization.

Maintenance, Consolidation and Politicization of Blood Relationships in the Midst of a Civilization

Blood relationships maintained, consolidated and politicized civilization, leading to a moral orientation based on clanship and the rule of rites. By the Zhou Dynasty, rites had been merged with moral principles. Prehistoric tribal war, waged to annex territories and gain leadership in and rights to organization of farming activities, led to control of farm labor resources, establishment of tribute systems and accumulation of wealth. That was why blood relationships, instead of disintegration due to military conquest and tribal annexation, caused the various clans or families to live in a spatially scattered or clustered pattern. Blood relationships continually contributed to the formation of national and societal “units” or “cells,” a hypothesis that has basically been recognized by the circle of Chinese historians (Wang, 2013, p. 13). Hou Wailu suggested that the ancient Chinese civilization evolved in a reformative pattern “with clan institutions preserved” (Hou, 1957, pp. 1-17). Archaeological evidence has also established that the social structure of the Longshan era was one featuring patriarchal control of clans consisting of multiple patriarchal families. The activity of clans in the early states, especially Shang and Zhou, included clan-based agricultural production, military action and feast rites, etc. By Zhou, the evolution of funeral and interment rites and ancestral worship rites based on blood relationships had developed more ethical, political, theoretical and systematic significance. At the same time, many derivative moral values, e.g. pursuit of moral principles and rewards for benevolence came into existence. Zhang Guangzhi pointed out that in the origin of the Orient, cities are in consistency with the previous clan settlements. The kinship in the social structure continues from the clan society and accommodates new geographical relationship. Therefore, continuity has become the underlying feature of the origin of the Orient (Zhang, 1999, pp. 484-496).

The key to interpreting ancient Chinese rites, especially rites of the early civilizations, is blood relationships and the deep-rooted sense of clans. Highly developed patriarchalism-centered blood relationships and the relevant sense of blood relationships resulted^① in early political communities depending primarily on moral constraints to consolidate human relations through blood ties. Because this constituted governance flexibility, rites rather than penal codes became an important pattern of

social consolidation. Consanguinity existed broadly in the early social fabric. The Chinese political entity was based on state governance and clan governance, which were structurally identical. In the *Book of Documents – Canon of Yao*, “He made the able and virtuous distinguished, and thence proceeded to the love of (all in) the nine classes of his kindred, who (thus) became harmonious. He (also) regulated and polished the people (of his domain), who all became brightly intelligent. (Finally), he united and harmonized the myriad states; and so the black-haired people were transformed. The result was (universal) concord.” There was an evolution from familial harmony to inter-state harmony. The rule pattern was founded on blood relationships. Clans constituting the Chinese community depended primarily on nepotism, blood relationships and fictive kinships to hold themselves together and consolidate social relationships. In this manner, as it evolved into civilization and state formations, the society in antiquity developed a morality and rite-centered pattern of patriarchal rule. In the Western Zhou and the Spring and Autumn period, the central government held the vassal states together using peaceful polices. As recorded in the *Commentary of Zuo – the Fourth Year of Duke Xi of Lu*, the central government pacified the vassal states with moral institutions. In the *Classic of Poetry–Sacrificial Odes of Zhou–Inspection*, King Wu of Zhou sought to practice virtue to influence all the vassal states and ethnic groups in China. The *Commentary of Zuo–the Twenty–Fifth Year of Duke Xi of Lu* proposed leveraging moral values to consolidate the vassal states.

The Western Zhou people evolved the rationale of the rule of rites into a rule of virtue. In *Shang and Zhou Institutions*, Wang Guowei pointed out that the rise and fall of Shang and Zhou dynasties is attributable to the rise and fall of virtue; therefore, when Duke Wu of Zhou overthrew Shang dynasty, he gave priority to virtuousness in all policies (Wang, 1959, p. 479). New to Western Zhou political philosophy is that the rulers identified human virtue with legitimate divine power. In the view of the rulers, divine power originated from pursuit of virtue, conformity with virtue and discreet practicing of virtue. However, as a non-physical concept, virtue must be materialized and applied to politics to generate the rule of virtue. As recorded in the *Commentary of Zuo – The Eighteenth Year of Duke Wen’s Reign*, our ancient ruler the Duke of Zhou regulated the rituals of Zhou, saying: “Regulations are for observing virtue, by virtue one deals with affairs, by affairs one measures merits, by merits one nourishes the people.” In other words, people were supposed to conduct themselves according to a code of behavior which was feasibly built on rites and physically embodied by virtue. In summary, the rule of virtue in the Zhou society was embodied by the rule of rites.

The Rule of Civility, Virtue and Rites as a Policy

The Zhou rule of virtue is embodied by the pursuit of the rule of rites. One element of the concept is a kind of one-worldism built on rites. What the Zhou people called “culture” refers to a governance structure where rites, virtue and education played a role in restoring the ethos to simplicity. According to

① He Bingdi said, “The most developed clanship institutions and ancestral worship systems of humanity are found only on the most fertile loess land inhabited by the most generations of people who died and were buried.” See *My Sixty Years of Historical Research* (written by He Bingdi, published by Guangxi Normal University Press in 2005, page 442).

the *Book of Changes – Bi – Interpretation*, celestial events, “We look at the ornamental figures of the sky, and thereby ascertain the changes of the seasons. We look at the ornamental observances of society, and understand how the processes of transformation are accomplished all under heaven.” An earthly event denotes education, rites, codes, institutions and laws. Guidance denotes the education, mentoring and transformation of the people, while success denotes meritorious and civilized governance. Civilization of a nation comes with the genesis of culture, so this quotation was meant to stress virtue, rites and education. As they unrolled, rites inspired the populace with ethical values and moral virtue. Zhou’s aristocratic education, centered primarily on ethical values and rites, enabled the aristocracy to internalize Zhou values as a sense of morality and act in accordance with it. The Zhou rule of civility, virtue and rites had such a profound impact that later dynasties attached great importance to rites, rituals and norms in daily life when introducing seminal changes to folk customs and traditions.

Ritual traditions of the Three Dynasties included not just extrinsic rites which made up the institutional traditions and civilization of a dynasty, but also intrinsic spiritual traditions which accompanied the evolution of the complex society and the early state. In this period, the ideology of the ruling class gave birth to spiritual traditions and was integrated into a system of rites, e.g. religious services, funeral and interment services and social etiquette. These traditions included divinity of Heaven, conformity with ancestral heritage, and such derivative moral values as pursuit of ethics and rewards for benevolence. Also included were the sense of blood relationships, the sense of clanship, the sense of ethics and the sense of filial piety and fraternal duty based on ancestral worship. Through rites, the sense of rites was internalized as the collective value and in-depth cultural identity of the members of society.

The Ritual Mechanism for the Continuity of the Chinese Civilization

Beginning from Han, ancient dynasties invariably founded their rite systems on Zhou rites despite regime changes. The high stability of the ritual structure is exemplified by high continuity and coherence in rites, codes, institutions and ritual patterns. A case in point is the organic institutions in *The Offices of the Zhou*, the primary prototype for setting up government agencies in ancient dynasties. Rites in the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremony* are the primary prototype for later dynasties to formulate rites as well. For all the revisions to and improvements in ritual details in some dynasties, the rites tended to restore their ancient counterparts in guiding principles, fundamental structure and ritual patterns. Later versions were identical in nature to their prototypes. Then why have ritual institutions based on Zhou rites lasted several thousand years in China? The following factors are thought to be instrumental.

First, from Western Zhou onwards, Zhou rites based on the belief in divinity and legitimacy of virtuous people underpinned the ancient Chinese society as an important political philosophy. This philosophy, characteristic of a people orientation, initiates regime legitimacy on the protection of the people’s interests. As recorded in the *Commentary of Zuo—The Twenty-Six Year of Duke Xiang’s Reign*, as one of the most important rites, ancient penalty-averse rulers put a premium on awards and took

good care of their subjects with love; namely, benevolence and love of the people were part of the rites. The concept of the rule of virtue matured over time into the Confucian value of benevolence. The proposition of the concept in Western Zhou bridged the clan gaps in rites and culture and spatially expanded the influence of rites. Besides, it evolved into a political philosophy justifying itself in the monarchical regime. The rule of virtue, with its spatial and temporal impact, is a spiritual achievement of the Chinese people to guide social progress.

Second, Zhou rites built on patriarchal architecture resulted in the stability of blood relationships-founded politics. During the Three Dynasties, the rites underpinned by a fragile agricultural economy fit the agricultural civilization of the Central Plain. Compared with such rigid practices as war and penalty, rites involving a low-cost governance pattern held members together with a set of flexible patriarchal, blood relationships-based rituals which proved remarkably effective in upholding ethics, maintaining public order and establishing good conventions. Although later dynasties beginning from Qin and Han underwent tremendous changes in social and political structure, fundamental principles characteristic of patriarchal rites were further consolidated in the context of the small-scale farming economy. Ancient Chinese governments paid high attention to the rule of rites, demonstrating that the rule pattern fit the traditional society.

Third, as the essence of prehistoric culture and the epitome of the rites of the Three Dynasties, Zhou rites were not only a code of social behavior, but also a body of moral, humanistic and cultural principles underpinned by such virtues as respect, humility, care for elders and minors, respect for masters and altruism. The rites were trans-historical. Humility was an important principle of interpersonal relationships in ancient China. People paid high attention to being modest and respecting others in social activities. The *Book of Rites* says, “Rites consist in humility and respect for others. Should not humility be a virtue of the wealthy and powerful when peddlers practice it?” The spirit of rites has a sustainable vitality. Other trans-historical virtues, like respect for others, care for elders and minors, respect for masters, altruism, industry and thrift are of great importance to the humanistic qualities of the Chinese people.

Conclusion

Rites—the representative culture of the Three Dynasties symbolized an advanced civilization at the time. The early Chinese people built on the rule of rites and formed both a political and cultural community. In the words of Wang Guowei, they also formed a moral community. Zhou rites had a deep and sweeping influence in that they constituted the fundamental order of ancient Chinese political ideology and of later imperial ritual institutions.

Rites developed and diversified over time, becoming a collective term embodying various Chinese cultures (Zou, 2000, p. 14). Rites make up an extremely important, inherent part of the national identity of the Chinese people and are the fundamental characteristic and emblem of the Chinese culture. French enlightenment thinker Montesquieu pointed out from the perspective of political philosophy,

“The precepts relating to these four points were what they called rites; and it was in the exact observance of these that the Chinese government triumphed. They spent their whole youth in learning them, their whole life in the practice” (Montesquieu, 1978, p. 313, 316). French sinologist and Jesuit Jean-Marie Callery also pointed out, “Rites embody all the thoughts of the Chinese. They get emotional satisfaction, perform responsibilities, tell right from wrong and maintain natural interpersonal relationships based on rites. This is a people controlled by rites” (Smith, 1894, p. 171). The perspectives and arguments of these foreign thinkers also pointed to the fact that as an inherent trait characteristic of the Chinese people, rites have a close connection to the continuity of the Chinese civilization; in other words, ritual traditions and the sense of the rule of rites underlie a consistent Chinese civilization.

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