

# Xunzi – Reading Xunzi's theory of *li* 禮 'ritual' from a modern perspective

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Social Sciences Short Course

Confucian Classical Studies

Lecture 9

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## Ritual – *li* 礼

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- “Ritual has been a central concern of Chinese culture for at least four thousand years.” McDermott, *State and Court Ritual in China*, p. 1.
- it prompted the earliest uses of Chinese writing (oracle bones, bronze inscriptions)
- dominant issue for all schools of Chinese thought
- ritual was that by which Chinese distinguished themselves from non-Chinese, humans from animals

# Varieties of rituals

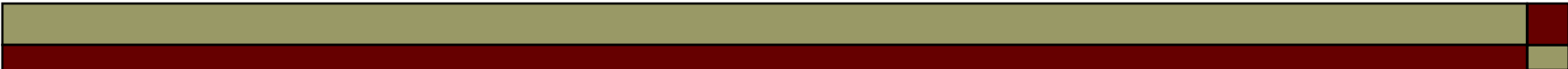
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- State ritual
- Family ritual (*jia li* 家礼)
- See *Tang huidian*
- *ji li* 吉礼 (“wedding rites”)
- *xiong li* 凶礼 (“funeral rites”)
- *guan li* 冠礼 (“capping ritual”)

# Ritual Classics and Compendia

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- *Book of Ritual (Li ji 礼记)*, 1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD
- *Ritual of Zhou (Zhou li 周礼)*, mid 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BC
- *Ceremonials and Rituals (Yi li 仪礼)*, Han dynasty (206BC-AD220)
- *The Kaiyuan Ritual Code (Da Tang Kaiyuan li 大唐开元礼)*, of AD 732)
- *The Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty (Ming huidian 明会典)*, of 1509 and 1587)



# Annual Ritual Programme

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Rituals the emperor needed to perform:

- ❑ offer sacrifices to heaven and his ancestors
- ❑ state ritual at all public audiences with officials and foreign emissaries
- ❑ all rites of passage (coming of age, accession to the throne, mourning and funerals)
- ❑ at rehearsals of warfare
- ❑ after harvests

# Ritual and Foreign Relations

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- ❑ Foreign relations sub-section of the Ministry of Rites, *Libu* 禮部
- ❑ Only after the Second Opium War, in 1861, establishment of a foreign ministry, the *Zongli geguo shiwu yamen* 總理各國事務衙門 (Office in charge of affairs concerning all nations)
- ❑ Macartney Embassy, 1792-93

# Definition

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Roy Rappaport (1926-97) defines ritual as  
"the performance of more or less invariant  
sequences of formal acts and utterances not  
entirely encoded by the performers" (Seligman et  
al., *Ritual*, p. 11)

- focus on *doing*, not on belief.

# Daniel A. Bell (贝淡宁)



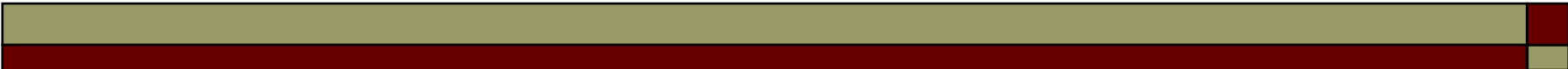
- Dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University (Qingdao)
- Distinguished Chair Professor at Fudan University (Shanghai)
- *China's New Confucianism* (Princeton University Press, 2008)
- *Beyond Liberal Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2007)

# CHINA'S New Confucianism

Politics  
AND  
Everyday Life  
IN A  
Changing Society



DANIEL A. BELL



# Counterintuitive insight

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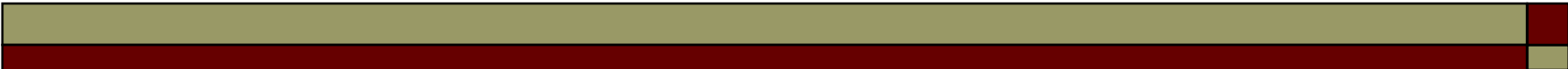
- “...social inequality can actually *contribute* to economic equality” (Bell, New Confucianism, p. 39)

# Xunzi 荀子 (third century BCE)

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- Confucian philosopher, sometimes reckoned as the third of the three great classical Confucians (after Confucius and Mencius)
- “What is so by birth is called *xing*” (*Xunzi* 22.1b) □ “Human Nature (*xing*) is Evil” (evil not in a Christian sense)
- “[...] obeying one’s *xing* [and following one’s emotions must result in contention and robbery ... the transformation [brought about by] the methods of a teacher and the Way of ritual and morality will result in deference and courtesy, in accordance with refinement and principles, and return to order.” (*Xunzi* 23.1a)



# Xunzi “A Discussion of Rites”

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What is the origin of rites? I reply, human beings are born with desires, and when they do not achieve their desires, they cannot but seek the means to do so. If their seeking knows no limit or degree, they cannot but contend with one another. With contention comes chaos, and with chaos comes exhaustion. The ancient kings hated chaos, and therefore established rites and rightness in order to limit it, to nurture people's desires, and to give them a means of satisfaction. They saw to it that desires did not exhaust material things and that material things did not fall short of desires. Thus both desires and things were supported and satisfied, and this was the origin of the rites. ....

# Literature on Ritual

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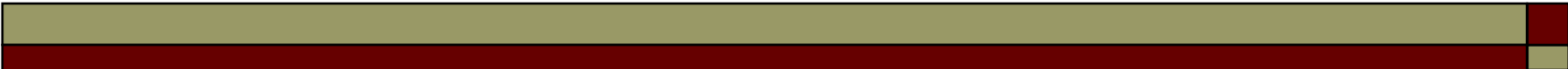
- Joseph McDermott, *State and Court Ritual in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999)
- Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992)
- Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008)
- Emily Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981)
- Daniel Bell, "Hierarchical Rituals for Egalitarian Societies", in: *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 38-55.

# Function of ritual

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- ❑ "...rituals are often used to to both instantiate boundaries and overcome them“ (Seligman et al., *Ritual*, p. 12) → ambiguity
- ❑ Rituals “were made or used to bridge huge cultural gaps, and gloss over or ignore the religious differences, that continued to divide this vast empire and its court long after a performance of state ritual ended” (McDermott, *State and Court Ritual*, p. 4)
- ❑ ritual serves to keep “the metaphorical system alive” against the perceived tensions and incongruities of everyday life.

→ **Ritual as an effective means against fundamentalism**



# Features of ritual

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- ❑ Ritual is a *social* practice
- ❑ Ritual is grounded in tradition
- ❑ Ritual involves emotion and behaviour
- ❑ Details of ritual can be changed depending on the context
- ❑ Rituals specify different treatment for different people
- ❑ Rituals are noncoercive
- ❑ Rituals are socially legitimate

# How does ritual work?

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- **“as if” structure of ritual; ritual as a ‘subjunctive’**  
“Funeral rites are those by which the living adorn the dead. The dead are accorded a send-off *as though they were living*. In this way the dead are served like the living, the absent like the present. Equal attention is thus paid to the end as well as to the beginning of life.” (*Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 1960 ed., p. 110).
- **Social illusion of equality and participation**
- **Ability to play with boundaries**

Thank you for your attention!

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