



Trinity Saint David

<i>Student Name:</i> Xixi Xing (3388 words)	
<i>Module Code:</i> SIHE 5005 <i>Module title:</i> Four Books of Confucian Learning II	<i>Student number:</i> 2304056
<i>For completion by marker:</i> <i>Comments:</i>	

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Explaining Ritual Revision in Confucius: From *Analects* 9.3 to His Lived Example

1. Introduction

The *Analects* (*lunyu* 論語) is the most direct record of Confucius' (551–479 BCE) teaching. However, there is a lack of discussion regarding the relationship between Confucius' own life and the principles he advocated—specifically, to what extent did Confucius himself live out the principles he proposed? *Li* 禮 (ritual propriety, rites) is an important concept in the *Analects*, and whether and how it can be revised is a controversial topic among scholars.¹ Despite the general consensus that rites are revisable,² the factors that justify their revision remain unclear. This study is grounded in the first part of *Analects* 9.3, where Confucius affirms that rites are revisable.³ Drawing on various Confucian resources of Confucius own example of ritual revision, it analyses the factor that Confucius believed justified modifying rites, thereby discussing the extent to which Confucius lived out the ritual modification principle in 9.3.

In this study, I argue that the factor justifying ritual modification in Confucius' personal examples is the moral demand embedded in relationships. Confucius fully lived out the

¹ In this essay, I use the terms “ritual propriety” and “ritual/rites” to translate the concept of *li*. When *li* is used in its general sense, I adopt Ames and Rosemont's (1998) translation of “ritual propriety”, according to which it refers both to the complex of socially established and traditionally sanctioned patterns of behavior, and to the process by which individuals appropriate and internalise these patterns as their own. By contrast, when *li* denotes its external dimension—particularly in the context of the present discussion concerning the revision of ritual form—I employ the translation “ritual” or “rites” to highlight its formal and performative aspect. Roger T. Ames., and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998), p. 51–52.

Both translations are included in Ni's (2017) introduction of key terms in his translation of the *Analects*. Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius: A New Translation of Lunyu with Annotations* (Albany: State University of New York, 2017), p. 50.

² Western philosophers familiar with the “reality/appearance” dichotomy tend to uncritically apply this assumption to classical Chinese thought, thereby interpreting ritual propriety as a set of impersonal rituals or rules that discipline differences into commonality. However, more recent scholarship recognises that ritual propriety is modifiable within Confucian thought. See, for example: Roger T. Ames, Observing Ritual Propriety as Focusing the “Familiar” in the Affairs of the Day, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 1 (2), pp. 143–56 (p. 143–45), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02857093>.

Henry Allen, Flexibility and Moral Cultivation in the Analects of Confucius, *Religious*, 16 (4), pp. 1–13 (p. 1), doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040441>.

³ In this essay, the book and chapter number of the *Analects* referenced from Watson (2007). Burton Watson, trans., *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

principle he advocated in *Analects* 9.3 by consistently preserving the relational moral demand, while adapting the *form* of his ritual modifications to each unique situation.

This study proceeds in six sections. Section Two examines the principle of ritual modification in *Analects* 9.3. Section Three reviews existing literature on factors justifying ritual revision. Section Four proposes a new factor to modify rites by discussing four sets of relationships. Section Five assesses the extent to which Confucius lived out the principle of 9.3. Section Six concludes.

2. *Analect 9.3 and Its Principle on Ritual Modification*

The first part of *Analects* 9.3 records one of Confucius' most supportive attitudes toward modifying rites:

The Master said, "The use of a linen cap was prescribed by the rituals, but now a silk one is used instead. It is economical, and I follow the common practice."⁴

According to the *Corrected Meaning of the Analects* (*lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義), the linen cap is the prescribed form of ritual dress of ancestral ceremony.⁵ Its elaborate construction, black above and red beneath, with intricate stitching, symbolises reverence toward one's predecessors and serves as a reminder not to forget one's roots.⁶ Confucius notes that in his own time, this cap had been replaced by a simpler silk version for reasons of economy.⁷

⁴ Original texts: 「子曰：『麻冕，禮也；今也純，儉。吾從眾。』」 Liu Baonan 劉寶楠, *lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), p. 322. Translation of this chapter referenced from Ni (2017). Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius*, p. 230.

⁵ Original texts: 「《白虎通·緋冕篇》：『麻冕者何？周宗廟之冠也。《禮》曰『周冕而祭』，又曰『殷尋夏收而祭』，此三代宜宗廟之冠也。』」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 322.

⁶ Original texts: 「《左·桓二年疏》：『《論語》『麻冕』，蓋以木為乾，而用布衣之，上玄下朱，取天地之色。』」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 322. According to the *Comprehensive Discussions in the White Tiger Hall* (*baihu tongyi* 白虎通義), as women's stitching began with the simple material of linen, the linen cap serves as a reminder not to forget one's roots. Leather is not used for the cap because it belongs to an earlier era when the rites had not yet been fully established (cf. Liu 1990). Original texts: 「絲免所以用麻為之者，女功之始，亦不忘本也。即不忘本不用皮，皮乃太古未有禮文之服。」 Ban Gu 班固, 'baihu tongyi' 白虎通義, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 850 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 66.

⁷ In Liu's commentary, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) explains in detail why the silk cap is more economical than the linen cap—a claim that may seem counterintuitive from a modern perspective. Zheng states that the linen cap was made from cloth with a density of 30 *sheng* (升). Each *sheng* contains 80 strands, so 30 *sheng* equals 2,400 strands. These 2,400 strands, according to Zheng, were woven into a cloth of approximately two *chi* (尺) and two *cun* (寸) in width. Modern archaeological findings provide concrete evidence for this measurement. An Eastern Zhou dynasty (770–256 BCE) ruler unearthed at the Jin town archaeological site in Luoyang, now

Rather than condemning this change, Confucius states his willingness to follow the prevailing practice. In this example, it is clear that while Confucius values traditional practice, he does not follow it dogmatically.⁸ As several scholars note, the acceptance of modification here rests on the preservation of the rite's underlying content, making material substitution for practical reasons permissible.⁹ But what exactly is this “underlying content”? The passage does not say. Determining this factor is necessary to assess how fully Confucius lived out the principle, yet scholarly attempts to fill the gap have produced largely general answers.

3. Literature Review

In the existing literature, several scholars have discussed the issue of modifying rites and proposed factors for when such modification is justified. The factors can be broadly classified into two categories: the capacity-based account and the virtue-based account.

The capacity-based account maintains that revising rites relies on a cultivated, holistic moral sensibility rather than on any particular virtue. Representative scholars include Roger T. Ames (2002) and Henry Allen (2025). Although both emphasise the primacy of moral sensibility, they diverge on how it is cultivated. Ames emphasises that ritualised awareness emerges from continuous patterns of conduct in familiar affairs.¹⁰ Allen, by contrast, focuses on rule-bound approaches that provide practitioners with a moral scaffolding to develop the competence to “break” the rules.¹¹ Despite this difference, both agree that moral maturity is the basis for legitimately revising rites.

housed at Nanjing University, measures 23.1 cm per *chi*. Based on this standard, two *chi* and two *cun* would be approximately 50.82 cm. If 2,400 strands were woven into a cloth of this width, each strand would occupy a space of only about 0.02 cm, which is an extremely difficult feat of craftsmanship in ancient times. Moreover, linen is made from plant fibers, which are rougher than the soft animal protein fibers of silk. Thus, given the extraordinary difficulty of producing such a fine linen cloth, using silk was in fact more economical in this instance. Original texts: 「鄭此注云：『績麻三十升以為冕。』……一升八十縷，三十升是二千四百縷，鄭依漢制，推古布幅廣二尺二寸。以二尺二寸布廣之度，容二千四百縷，是細密難成，故不如用緇帛之從儉也。」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 322. Nanjing daxue 南京大學, Nan da fenghua 南大風華 (n.d.) < <https://www.nju.edu.cn/info/4391/425591.htm> > [accessed 13 May 2026].

⁸ Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius*, p. 231.

⁹ Scholars who advocated this view including Edward Slingerland (2003) and Ni (2017).

Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius*, p. 231. Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), p.87.

¹⁰ Roger T. Ames, *Observing Ritual Propriety as Focusing the “Familiar” in the Affairs of the Day*, p. 147–50.

¹¹ Henry Allen, *Flexibility and Moral Cultivation in the Analects of Confucius*, p. 10.

The virtue-based account holds that revising rites should be guided by a specific moral principle. Three candidates have emerged: *yi* (appropriateness), *ren* (humanity), and *shu* (reciprocity). Proponents of *yi* argue that a sense of appropriateness determines when a ritual should be observed, suspended, or revised. Kwong-loi Shun (1993) contends that every rule of ritual should be observed only insofar as it is appropriate to do so, citing *Analects* 4.10 and 15.18 to show that *yi* is the substance which rites put into practice.¹² Chenyang Li (2007) argues that *yi* can suspend rites in exceptional circumstances, referring to *Mencius* 4A.17.¹³ Advocates of *ren* believe that *ren* underlies all revision of rites. Tu Wei-ming (1968) regards *ren* as a higher-order concept that gives meaning to rites, arguing that rites are the externalisation of *ren*. If a ritual is incompatible with *ren*, it should be revised.¹⁴ Karyn Lai (2006) similarly affirms that *ren* provides the ethical content for revision, while also contending that *yi* enables one to assess different situations and react appropriately.¹⁵ Supporters of *shu* argue that the principle of reciprocity guides when to follow or suspend rituals. Philip J. Ivanhoe (1990) contends that *shu* enables individuals to place themselves in the position of others, telling the practitioner when to suspend the rules and when to follow them.¹⁶

In the existing literature, despite the proposed factors for modifying rites, these factors remain largely unspecified.¹⁷ This assessment is consistent with the admission of some of the

¹² Original texts: 4.10: 「子曰：『君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比。』」 15.18: 「子曰：『君子義以為質，禮以行之，孫以出之，信以成之。君子哉！』」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 147, 629. Shun, Kwong-loi, Jen and Li in the *Analects*, *Philosophy East and West*, 43 (3), pp. 457–79 (p. 474), doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1399578>.

¹³ Original texts: 「淳于髡曰：『男女授受不親，禮與？』」 孟子曰：『禮也。』曰：『嫂溺則援之以手乎？』曰：『嫂溺不援，是豺狼也。男女授受不親，禮也；嫂溺援之以手者，權也。』」 Zhao Qi 趙岐 and Sun Shi 孫奭, 'mengzi zhushu' 孟子註疏, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 195 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 171.

In this essay, translation *Mencius* are referenced from Bloom (2007), with modifications. The book and chapter numbers of *Mencius* in this essay also follow Bloom. Irene Bloom, trans., Ivanhoe, Philip J., ed., *Mencius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Chenyang Li, Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation Between Li and Ren in Confucius' *Analects*, *Philosophy East and West*, 57 (3), pp. 311–29 (p. 323), doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20109408>.

¹⁴ Weiming Tu, The Creative Tension between Jên and Li, *Philosophy East and West*, 18 (1/2), pp. 29–39 (p. 34, 38), doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1398034>.

¹⁵ Karyn Lai, Li in the *Analects*: Training in Moral Competence and the Question of Flexibility, *Philosophy East and West*, 56 (1), pp. 69–83 (p. 77–78), doi: www.jstor.org/stable/4488001.

¹⁶ Philip J. Ivanhoe, Reweaving the “One Thread” of the *Analects*, *Philosophy East and West*, 40 (1), pp. 17–33 (p. 26–29), doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1399547>.

¹⁷ Scholars in the first group advocate for moral sensibility, yet the specific criteria for determining when an individual has gained such competence—and thereby become eligible to modify rites—are not clearly articulated. The second group faces a similar problem. For *yi*, the standard for determining what is “appropriate” in a given situation remains open to interpretation. For *ren*, Confucius never offers a fixed definition in the *Analects*, leaving its application ambiguous. For *shu*, because it also requires moral competency, it suffers

above scholars, who frankly acknowledge that the factor for modifying rites remains ambiguous.¹⁸ This general understanding may have largely resulted from scholars' exclusive reliance on the *Analects* as their textual basis, which contains only limited discussion of ritual modification. By drawing on a broader range of Confucian texts and by analysing Confucius' own recorded examples of modifying rites, this study aims to offer new insights into the factors that justify modification.¹⁹

4. A New Factor: Relational Moral Demand as the Basis for Modifying Rites

To identify the factors that justify modifying rites, it is necessary to first examine ritual propriety's function. Modern scholarship agrees that ritual propriety regulates human relationships and promotes harmony.²⁰ Confucius explicitly states that ritual propriety distinguishes different social roles.²¹ *Mencius* (*meng zi* 孟子) develops the social roles in

from the same lack of clear criteria as the first group. Consequently, the factors that justify revising rites remain under discussion.

¹⁸ Scholars hold this stance including Lai (2006) and Ivanhoe (1990). Lai proposes three stages of moral cultivation in which ritual propriety functions differently at each stage: the moral beginner, who strictly adheres to prescribed rites; the developing learner, who begins to comprehend and experiment with the rationale behind each rite; and the pragmatic person, who is consciously attuned to moral situations and modify rites performance by identify the moral weight. However, when discussing the factor that justifies modifying rites in the third stage, despite proposing *ren* as the most plausible factor, she concedes: "The difficult question here is how such decisions are made and by whom and what the relevant criteria are." Ivanhoe holds that although *shu* provides a basis for modifying rites, the question of how such decisions would be made and implemented in practice remains unresolved. Karyn Lai, Li in the *Analects: Training in Moral Competence and the Question of Flexibility*, p.77. Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Reweaving the "One Thread" of the Analects*, p. 31.

¹⁹ A survey of the "Confucianism" section of the Master category and the Classical category of the *Complete Library of the Four Branches* (*siku quanshu* 四庫全書) yields only four texts that record Confucius' own examples of revising rites: the *Analects*, the "Tan Gong" (*tan gong* 檀弓) chapter of the *Records of Ritual* (*liji* 禮記), the *Dialogues of Confucius* (*kongzi jiaayu* 孔子家語), and the *Garden of Eloquence* (*shuo yuan* 說苑). These four works constitute the primary "Confucian texts" referred to in this essay.

²⁰ For example, Cua (1996) proposed three functions of ritual propriety, identifying "delimiting" as the primary function—that is, ritual propriety sets forth rules to promote the unity and harmony of human association. Ing (2012) similarly maintains that ritual propriety are scripted performances enacted by human beings for the purpose of ordering and relating different social phenomena, including interpersonal relationships.

A.S. Cua, The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 23, pp. 153–74 (p. 165–67), doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6253.1996.tb00703.x.

Michael David Kaulana Ing, *Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 18–19.

²¹ Confucius' view that ritual propriety distinguishes social roles appears in two chapters of the *Records of Ritual*. In the "Enquiry of Duke Ai" (*aigong wen* 哀公問) chapter, he states that without ritual propriety, one cannot distinguish the positions of ruler and minister, superior and subordinate, elder and younger, nor the affections between man and woman, father and son, brothers, and marital relations. Original texts: 「哀公問於孔子曰：「大禮何如？君子之言禮，何其尊也？」孔子曰：「丘也小人，不足以知禮。」君曰：「否！吾子言之也。」孔子曰：「丘聞之：民之所由生，禮為大。非禮無以節事天地之神也，非禮無以辨君臣

3A.4, where he identifies five central relationships—parent-child, ruler-minister, husband-wife, older-younger, and friend—and assigns each a defining virtue: affection, rightness, distinction, orderliness, and faithfulness.²² These virtues, I propose, are the moral demands

上下長幼之位也，非禮無以別男女父子兄弟之親、昏姻疏數之交也；君子以此之為尊敬然。」Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji* 十三經註疏禮記 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2001), p. 848.

In the “Principles of Sacrifice” (*ji tong* 祭統) chapter, sacrifice is said to encompass ten relationships, including the rightness between ruler and minister, the relationship between father and son, the distinction between husband and wife, the order between elder and younger, and the interaction between superior and inferior, among others. Original texts: 「夫祭有十倫焉；見事鬼神之道焉，見君臣之義焉，見父子之倫焉，見貴賤之等焉，見親疏之殺焉，見爵賞之施焉，見夫婦之別焉，見政事之均焉，見長幼之序焉，見上下之際焉。此之謂十倫。」Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 834.

²² Original texts: 「父子有親，君臣有義，夫婦有別，長幼有序，朋友有信。」Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, ‘mengzi zhushu’, p. 127.

Since I adopt Mencius’ framework of the Five Relationships, it is necessary to trace its origin before applying it as an analytical lens. The subsequent discussion follows Zhang (2015) in its main lines, while adding further textual support and some original observations. Zhang Qihui 章啟輝, ‘Wulun wude yuanliu’ 五倫五德源流, *He’nan shifan daxue xuebao* 河南師範大學學報, 3 (2015), 82–87 (pp. 82–83).

The earliest relational normative guidance appears in the “Canon of Shun” (*shun dian* 舜典) chapter of the *Venerable Document* (*shang shu* 尚書), which states: “Shun (c. 2300 BCE) carefully set forth the beauty of the five cardinal duties (*wu dian* 五典), and they came to be universally observed.” It also records: “The people continue unfriendly with one another, and do not observe docilely the five orders of relationships (*wu pin* 五品). It is yours, as the minister of instruction, reverently to set forth the lessons of duty belonging to those five teachings (*wu jiao* 五教).” Original texts of the *Venerable Document*: 「慎徽五典，五典克從……帝曰：『契，百姓不親，五品不遜。汝作司徒，敬敷五教，在寬。』」 Translation of the *Venerable Documents* was referenced from Legge (1865), with modifications. James Legge, ‘Chapter VI: II the Body of the Volume’ in *The Chinese Classics: With A Translation, Critical and Exegetical Notes, Prolegomena, and Copious Indexes* (London: Trübner & Co., 1865), p. 31, 44.

The 18th year of Duke Wen in the *Zuo Tradition Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳註) explains the “five teachings” as: “rightness of the father, kindness of the mother, fraternal love of the elder brother, respect of the younger brother, and filial piety of the son.”

Original texts of the *Zuo Tradition*: 「舜臣堯，舉八愷，使主后土，以揆百事，莫不時序，地平天成。舉八元，使布五教於四方，父義、母慈、兄友、弟共、子孝，內平外成。」

Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: Zuozhuan* 十三經註疏左傳 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2001), p. 353–354.

Kong Yingda’s 孔穎達 *Corrected Meaning of the Venerable Document* (*shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義) maintains that the five cardinals, the five orders of relationships, and the five teachings all refer to the same thing. The five relationships are “father, mother, elder brother, younger brother, and son,” and the five teachings associated each a moral responsibility: “rightness, kindness, fraternal love, respect, and filial piety”, while the five cardinals are always following such teaching. By always following such teaching, it became the five constants (*wu chang* 五常).

Original texts of the *Corrected Meaning of the Venerable Document*: 「此『五典』與下文『五品』、『五教』其事一也。一家之內品有五，謂父母兄弟子也。教此五者各以一事，教父以義，教母以慈，教兄以友，教弟以恭，教子以孝，是為五教也。五者皆可常行，謂之『五典』，是五者同為一事，所從言之異耳。……以此知「五典」是五常之教，謂此父義之等五事也。」

Kong Anguo 孔安國 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 62.

Confucius comprehensively summarised and developed the moral thought that had accumulated prior to him. In the *Analects*, he extensively discussed human relationships and moral norms, thereby laying the foundation for the conceptual content of the Five Relationships. Related discussion in the *Analects* including parent-child (1.6, 12.11), ruler-minister (3.19, 12.11, 18.7), friend (1.4, 1.7, 5.26), siblings (1.6), and older and younger (5.26, 17.8), along with their associated relational moral demands. Mencius subsequently systematised this theory into an ethical framework. In *Mencius* 3A.4, he articulated the Five Relationships and, for each, specified the standard for achieving harmony between the two parties, thereby clarifying the moral responsibility embedded

that should be fulfilled to achieve relational harmony. Therefore, if ritual propriety is to serve its interpersonal function, it should express and sustain these moral demands.²³ For this reason, in the following, I adopt Mencius' (327–289 BCE) framework of Five Relationships as an analytical lens. The parent-child and ruler-minister relationships will be examined in detail, as they offer the richest textual evidence. The older-younger relationship and friendship will be discussed more briefly as supporting cases.²⁴

4.1 The parents-children relationship

The parent-child relationship is regarded as the most important aspect of human relations. Within this relationship, Confucius' modifications of rites occur most often in the context of a parent's death. A detailed examination of Confucian texts reveals two distinct reasons for such modifications: to express sorrow toward the deceased parent, and to protect the body inherited from the parents. These two reasons are discussed below.

First, revising rites to express sorrow. At the funeral of Situ Jingzhi 司徒敬之 (dates unknown), all attendees followed the prescribed Zhou rites.²⁵ However, when Confucius was invited to assist, he changed the Zhou rites to those of the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1050 BCE). His disciple Yan Yan 言偃 (506–443 BCE) objected, arguing that a noble person should not alter local custom. Yet Confucius observed that the son of Situ displayed no genuine grief while following the Zhou rites. From this, Confucius concluded that when existing ritual forms fail to elicit the fundamental attitude they are meant to embody, adherence to unalterable custom loses its justificatory force. He therefore introduced the unfamiliar Shang

in each relationship. Given that Mencius' framework is rooted in Confucius' teaching, it is plausible to use it as the analytical lens for this study.

²³ Ni (2017) similarly holds that social order depends on clarifying role-based expectations, including how individuals should act and how they should be treated within a given relationship. Ritual proprieties linked to these roles serve to guide the enactment of such expectations and their corresponding reciprocal responsibilities. Peimin Ni, *Understanding the Analects of Confucius*, p. 51.

²⁴ Of the five relationships in Mencius' framework, Confucius' recorded conduct provides no example pertaining to the husband-wife relationship. Accordingly, this essay limits its analysis to the other four.

²⁵ Original texts: 「孔子在衛，司徒敬之卒，夫子弔焉。主人不哀，夫子哭不盡聲而退。蘧伯玉請曰：『衛鄙俗，不習喪禮。煩吾子辱相焉。』孔子許之。掘中霤而浴，毀竈而綴足，襲於床；及葬，毀宗而躐行；出于大門，及墓，男子西面，婦人東面，既封而歸，殷道也。孔子行之。子游問曰：『君子行禮，不求變俗，夫子變之矣。』孔子曰：『非此之謂也。喪事則從其質而矣。』」

Wang Su 王肅, 'kongzi jiayu' 孔子家語, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 695 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 100.

Translation of the *Dialogues of Confucius* in this essay referenced from Bruya and Li (2026), with modifications. Brian Bruya, and Wenwen Li, *Dialogues of Confucius: The Complete Text of the Kongzi jiayu* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2026).

rites, hoping to reawaken the mourners' attention to the natural sorrow toward the deceased parent.

Second, revising rites to protect bodily health. In a conversation with his disciple Bu Shang 卜商 (b. 507 BCE), Confucius addressed a different tension.²⁶ Bu Shang assumed that the profound sorrow of a filial son would naturally lead him to neglect his own body—even to the point of not showering for the entire three-year mourning period. Confucius rejected this view. He emphasised that one must shower when hygiene is compromised, especially in the case of wounds or skin ailments, precisely because the body is inherited from one's parents and should be cherished. Similarly, while mourning rites typically forbid drinking wine and eating meat as an expression of sorrow, these restrictions may be set aside when the mourner falls ill. Thus, when the prescribed rites for expressing sorrow come into conflict with the obligation to protect one's health, Confucius urged modifying the rites in favour of health.

In sum, in the parent-child relationship, Confucius revised the rites both to enable the expression of sorrow and to protect the mourner's bodily health. According to the *Records of Ritual* and the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*xiao jing* 孝經), a filial child will feel grave sorrow after a parent passes away,²⁷ and protecting bodily health is the starting point of filial piety.²⁸ On the surface, expressing sorrow and protecting health appear to pull in opposite directions—one calls for yielding to grief, the other for restraining it. Yet both, upon closer examination, stem from the same source: the child's deep attachment to the parent. Sorrow is the natural response to loss; protecting the body is the natural response to not harm what the parents gave. Both are expressions of the child's affection for the parent. In Mencius' framework, this affection is precisely what defines the parent-child relationship, which is the moral demand embedded in this relationship. Therefore, through Confucius' own conduct,

²⁶ Original texts: 「子夏問於夫子曰：『凡喪，小功已上，虞祔練祥之祭，皆沐浴，於三年之喪，子則盡其情矣。』孔子曰：『豈徒祭而已哉！三年之喪，身有瘍則浴，首有瘡則沐，病則飲酒食肉。毀瘠而為病，君子不為也。毀則死者，君子為之，且祭之沐浴，為齊潔也，非為飾也。』」

Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 103.

²⁷ Original texts: 「孝子之事親也，有三道焉：生則養，沒則喪，喪畢則祭。養則觀其順也，喪則觀其哀也，祭則觀其敬而時也。盡此三道者，孝子之行也。」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: lijì*, p. 830–31.

²⁸ Original texts: 「身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。」 Tang Xuanzong 唐玄宗, Xing Bing 邢昺, and Lu Deming 陸德明, 'xiaojing zhushu' 孝經註疏, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 182 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 40.

the factor of ritual revision in this relationship can be understood as the specific relational moral demand of affection.²⁹

4.2 The ruler-minister relationship

This relationship is the major focus of the existing Confucian literature, with five examples. A detailed analysis shows that Confucius revised the rites in two ways: to visit the leader and to remonstrate with the leader who did not follow ritual.

First, modifying rites for visiting. Confucius twice revised prescribed rites by visiting someone under circumstances where such contact was normally forbidden—specifically, visiting the crime minister Jikang Zi 季康子 (d. 468 BCE) without an invitation,³⁰ and visiting Nanzi 南子 (d. 480 BCE), the notorious wife of Duke Ling of Wei 衛靈公 (r. 543–492 BCE), under ritually inappropriate conditions.³¹ Despite these procedural violations, Confucius’

²⁹ Another example of revising rites out of sorrow in the parent-child relationship occurs in a funeral setting, though this case involves Confucius approving someone else’s ritual revision rather than performing it himself. Confucius once observed a funeral where the son, while escorting the coffin to the outer hall, changed his clothes only after exiting the outer door. According to established mourning rites, the son is required to change his clothing after encoffinement and before escorting the coffin to the outer hall, where he would first encounter visiting mourners, as changing attire serves as a formal means of expressing filial sorrow at the moment of public appearance. The son’s conduct therefore clearly failed to conform to the prescribed sequence. However, recognising that his genuine sorrow for his mother left him no attention for self-presentation, Confucius stated that one should not judge a son’s genuine feeling toward his parents. In doing so, he acknowledged the legitimacy of this ritual revision.

This instance is recorded in both the *Dialogues of Confucius* and the *Records of Ritual*, though the latter presents a more concise version. Original texts of the *Dialogues of Confucius*: 「叔孫武叔之母死，既小斂，舉尸者出戶。武孫從之，出戶，乃袒，投其冠而括髮。子路歎之。孔子曰：「是禮也。」子路問曰：「將小斂，則變服。今乃出戶，而夫子以為知禮，何也？」孔子曰：「汝問非也。君子不舉人以質事。」」 Wang Su, ‘kongzi jiayu’, p. 105.

Original texts of the *Records of Ritual*: 「叔孫武叔之母死，既小斂，舉者出戶，出戶袒，且投其冠括髮。子游曰：『知禮。』」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 142.

³⁰ This example appears in both the *Garden of Eloquence* and the *Dialogues of Confucius*.

Original texts of the *Garden of Eloquence*: 「孔子見季康子，康子未說，孔子又見之，宰予曰：『吾聞之夫子曰：「王公不聘不動。」今吾子之見司寇也少數矣。』孔子曰：『魯國以眾相陵，以兵相暴之日久矣，而有司不治，聘我者孰大乎？』於是魯人聞之曰：『聖人將治，何以不先自為刑罰乎？』自是之後，國無爭者。」 Liu Xiang 劉向, “shuo yuan” 說苑, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 696 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 62–63.

Translation of the *Garden of Eloquence* in this essay referenced from Henry (2021), with modifications. Henry, Eric, trans., *Garden of Eloquence Shuoyuan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021).

Original texts of the *Dialogues of Confucius*: 「孔子為魯司寇，見季康子，康子不悅，孔子又見之。宰予進曰：「昔予也常聞諸夫子曰：『王公不我聘，則弗動。』今夫子之於司寇也，日少而屈節數矣。不可以已乎？」孔子曰：「然。魯國以眾相陵，以兵相暴之日久矣。而有司不治，則將亂也。其聘我者，孰大於是哉！」」 Wang Su, ‘kongzi jiayu’, p. 48.

³¹ Original texts: 「子見南子，子路不說。夫子矢之曰：『予所否者，天厭之！天厭之！』」

According to the *Corrected Meaning of the Analects*, Confucius should not have met Nanzi for two reasons. First, ritual interaction between men and women was forbidden outside of sacrificial ceremonies. Second, meeting Nanzi might force Confucius to humble himself for the sake of the Way, thereby compromising his moral principles. Nevertheless, Confucius chose to meet her for political reasons. As the wife of Duke Ling of

reason for modifying the rites was consistent: his responsibility to serve the people. In the first case, although he had received no summons, Confucius judged that the political turmoil in the state of Lu was a more urgent matter than strict adherence to the prescribed rite of invitation. In the second case, despite the impropriety of meeting a woman of ill repute under ritually forbidden circumstances, Confucius recognised that seizing the opportunity to influence Duke Ling to follow the Way took precedence over ritual correctness. Instead of following the prescribed rites to wait for the never-coming summons or to refuse to visit a woman in a ritually unjustified situation, Confucius revised the existing rites to serve the people better and find ways to benefit their lives.

Second, modifying rites to remonstrate with leaders who fail to observe the rites. Confucius most frequently modified rites for this purpose. Three recorded cases follow the same pattern: a disciple questions Confucius' conduct, citing a specific ritual rule, and Confucius' behaviour appears to violate that rule. These violations include asking about Jikang Zi's illness when he was not ill,³² removing mourning clothes at the funeral of the wife of Duke Zhao of Lu 魯昭公 (r. 542–510 BCE),³³ and neither eating nor drinking but only complimenting the meal at a feast hosted by a Ji clan leader.³⁴ In each case, however, the leader had first violated the prescribed rites. Jikang Zi remained in his inner chamber during the daytime—a time when a ruler should attend to state affairs. The leader of the Ji clan wore improper funeral clothing at the funeral of the wife of Duke Lu. On another occasion, the

Wei, she was a powerful political figure, and Confucius hoped to leverage this meeting to influence the Duke to adopt his governing principles and thereby benefit the people. Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p.244.

Original texts: 「孔安國等以為南子者，衛靈公夫人，淫亂，而靈公惑之。孔子見之者，欲因以說靈公，使行治道。……古無男女相見之禮，惟祭則主婦獻尸，尸酢主婦，謂之交爵，非祭則否。……竊謂南子雖淫亂，然有知人之明，故蘧伯玉、孔子皆特致敬。其請見孔子，非無欲用孔子之意，子路亦疑夫子此見，為將詘身行道，而於心不說，正猶公山弗擾、佛肸召，子欲往，子路皆不說之比。」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 244–245.

³²Original texts: 「孔子適季氏，康子晝居內寢。孔子問其所疾，康子出見之。言終，孔子退。子貢問曰：『季孫不疾，而問諸疾，禮與？』孔子曰：『夫禮，君子不有大故，則不宿於外；非致齊也，非疾也，則不晝處於內。是故夜居外，雖弔之可也；晝居於內，雖問其疾可也。』」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 99. The *Records of Ritual* documented the similar texts while with no mention of the interaction between Confucius and Jikang Zi. Original texts: 「夫晝居於內，問其疾可也；夜居於外，弔之可也。是故君子非有大故，不宿於外；非致齊也、非疾也，不晝夜居於內。」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 129.

³³Original texts: 「魯昭公夫人吳孟子卒，不赴於諸侯。孔子既致仕，而往弔焉。適于季氏，季氏不經，孔子投絰而不拜。子游問曰：『禮與？』孔子曰：『主人未成服，則弔者不經焉，禮也。』」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 100.

³⁴Original texts: 「孔子食於季氏。食祭，主人不辭，不食；客不飲，而餐。子夏問曰：『禮與？』孔子曰：『非禮也，從主人也。吾食於少施氏而飽，少施氏食我以禮，吾食祭，作而辭曰：『疏食不足祭也。』吾餐，而作辭曰：『疏食，不敢以傷吾子之性。』主人不以禮，客不敢盡禮；主人盡禮，則客不敢不盡禮也。」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 103–104.

same leader failed to speak the humble words required after the premeal offering. Because the leader had already departed from ritual propriety, Confucius' own deviation became justified. His modified conduct served as a form of remonstrance, designed to make the leader aware of his wrongdoings. The form of remonstrance was situation-based: prompting the leader to attend to statecraft during daytime in one instance, and to show proper respect to the Duke of Lu and his own ministers in another. However, the purpose was singular: to urge the leader to work toward bettering the state.

In sum, in the leader-subordinate relationship, Confucius revised rites both to take the initiative in visiting the leader and to remonstrate when the leader failed to follow prescribed rituals. At first glance, these actions appear different. Yet both serve the same ultimate purpose: to better serve the people and to urge the leader to work for the benefit of the state. What ties these two forms of revision together is a shared sense of mutual responsibility. A minister does not act this way for personal gain or out of mere impatience, but because he recognises his duty to guide the ruler toward proper governance.³⁵ Likewise, a leader should devote his time to statecraft and show respect both to those above and below in order to maintain a well-functioning government.³⁶ This mutual responsibility toward the people and the state is precisely what Mencius identifies as rightness in the leader-subordinate relationship—the demand that both ruler and minister act according to their roles, with the welfare of the state and the people as the common end.³⁷ Therefore, according to Confucius'

³⁵ Mencius 4A.20 articulates the minister's duty to guide the ruler toward proper governance. Original texts: 「孟子曰：『人不足與適也，政不足問也。惟大人為能格君心之非。君仁莫不仁，君義莫不義，君正莫不正。一正君而國定矣。』」 Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, 'mengzi zhushu', p. 173.

³⁶ According to the *Analects*, a leader ought to dedicate his efforts to governance (13.1) and treat those below him with respect (8.19). Original texts of 13.1: 「子路問政。子曰：『先之，勞之。』」請益。曰：『無倦。』」 3.19: 「定公問：『君使臣，臣事君，如之何？』」孔子對曰：『君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠。』」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 115, 116, 515.

³⁷ The notion of mutual responsibility, wherein both ruler and minister fulfill their respective roles for the common good of the state, appears repeatedly in both the *Analects* (12.11) and *Mencius* (4A.2). Original texts of 12.11: 「齊景公問政於孔子。孔子對曰：『君君，臣臣，父父，子子。』」 Liu Baonan, *lunyu zhengyi*, p. 499. Original texts of 4A.2: 「欲為君盡君道，欲為臣盡臣道，二者皆法堯舜而已矣。不以舜之所以事堯事君，不敬其君者也；不以堯之所以治民治民，賊其民者也。」 Zhao Qi and Sun Shi, 'mengzi zhushu', p. 160.

It is necessary to distinguish the *yi* operative in the ruler-minister relationship from the *yi* proposed by Shun and Li as the factor for modifying rites. In the latter sense, *yi* denotes a notion of appropriateness or rightness that renders certain grounds sufficient for ritual revision—hence best translated as “appropriateness.” In the former sense, *yi* refers to the moral demand incumbent upon ruler and minister, namely, the obligation to fulfill their respective roles for the sake of a flourishing state—hence more properly translated as “rightness.” This twofold distinction is also observed by Lau (1979), who identifies (1) “right” as a moral quality of an act, and (2) “duty” as an act one ought to perform. Shun, Kwong-loi, Jen and Li in the *Analects*, p. 474. Kim-chong Chong, *Early Confucian Ethics: Concepts and Arguments* (Illinois: Open Court, 2007), p. 3.

own conduct, the moral demand of rightness embedded in the leader-subordinate relationship justifies modifying rites.

4.3 The older-younger relationship and friendship

The two remaining relationships will be examined as further verification that Confucius revised rites according to the relational moral demand.

In the older-younger relationship, the moral demand is orderliness, which manifests as sincere respect from the younger toward the elder. According to prescribed rites, a younger person should offer fine food to an elder as a sign of respect. However, two recorded instances show Confucius accepting offerings that violated the ritual form. In the first instance, a frugal man from Lu offered Confucius simple food in a coarse vessel.³⁸ In the second, a fisherman offered Confucius unsold fish that he was about to discard.³⁹ In both cases, the offering fell short of what the rites prescribed. Yet Confucius happily accepted them. His reasons reveal that what truly mattered was sincere respect: in the first case, the man found the food delicious and regarded Confucius as his close relatives; in the second, the fisherman's willingness to give rather than discard reflected a virtuous spirit akin to that of the sage. Thus, sincere respect from the giver outweighed the prescribed ritual form, leading Confucius to set aside the latter.

In friendship, the moral demand takes the form of faithfulness, understood as preserving established relationships. During the mourning period for his mother, Yuan Rang 原壤 (dates

³⁸ Two examples in this relationship recorded both in the *Garden of Eloquence* and the *Dialogues of Confucius*. Original texts of the *Garden of Eloquence*: 「魯有儉者，瓦鬲煮食，食之而美，盛之土鉶之器，以進孔子。孔子受之，歡然而悅，如受太牢之饋。弟子曰：『瓦甗，陋器也；煮食，薄膳也。而先生何喜如此乎？』」孔子曰：『吾聞好諫者思其君，食美者念其親，吾非以饌為厚也，以其食美而思我親也。』」 Liu Xiang, "shuo yuan", p. 186.

Original texts of the *Dialogues of Confucius*: 「魯有儉者，瓦鬲煮食食之，自謂其美。盛之土型，以進孔子，孔子受之，而說，如受太牢之饋。子路曰：『瓦甗、陋器也；煮食、薄膳也。夫子何喜之如此乎？』」夫子曰：『夫好諫者思其君，食美者思其親；吾非以饌具之為厚，以其食厚而我思焉！』」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 17.

³⁹ Original texts of the *Garden of Eloquence*: 「孔子之楚，有漁者獻魚甚強，孔子不受，獻魚者曰：『天暑遠市賣之不售，思欲棄之，不若獻之君子。』」孔子再拜受，使弟子掃除將祭之，弟子曰：『夫人將棄之，今吾子將祭之，何也？』」孔子曰：『吾聞之，務施而不腐餘財者，聖人也，今受聖人之賜，可無祭乎？』」 Liu Xiang, "shuo yuan", p. 41.

Original texts of the *Dialogues of Confucius*: 「孔子之楚，而有漁者獻魚焉。孔子不受，漁者曰：『天暑市遠，無所鬻也，思慮棄之糞壤，不如獻之君子，故敢以進焉。』」於是夫子再拜受之，使弟子掃地，將以享祭。門人曰：『彼將棄之，而夫子以祭之，何也？』」孔子曰：『吾聞諸惜其務餘而欲以務施者，仁人之偶也。惡有仁人之饋而無祭者乎？』」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 17.

unknown) was found singing—a clear violation of mourning rites.⁴⁰ According to ritual standards, such behaviour would warrant disapproval and possibly social distancing.⁴¹ Yet Confucius neither reproaches him nor withdraws but instead assists in preparing the coffin. His reason was to maintain the old friendship. According to the commentary, Confucius believes that one should end a friendship only when the other party commits an evil or outrageous act. Yuan Rang's singing, though improper, did not cross that threshold.⁴² Therefore, ritual thus gives way to the preservation of the relationship, revealing faithfulness toward friends as the decisive factor underlying this deviation.

These cases from elder–younger relations and friendship further confirm that ritual modification in Confucius' practice is explained by the moral demands embedded in relationships. Whether accepting a modest offering out of respect for sincerity, or maintaining a friendship despite the other party's ritual violation, Confucius prioritises relational demands—order in the former, faithfulness in the latter—over fixed forms. Thus, the same pattern observed in parent–child and ruler–minister relations holds here as well.

5. Discussion

In the above analysis based on Confucius' living examples, a new factor justifying ritual modification emerges: the moral demand embedded in relationships. In *Analects* 9.3, the rite in question is an ancestral ceremony. This ceremony involves the relationship between ancestors and descendants, and can therefore be situated within the parent-child relationship.

⁴⁰ This story was documented in both the *Records of Ritual* and the *Dialogues of Confucius*. Original texts of the *Records of Ritual*: 「孔子之故人曰原壤，其母死，夫子助之沐槨。原壤登木曰：『久矣予之不托於音也。』歌曰：『狸首之斑然，執女手之卷然。』夫子為弗聞也者而過之，從者曰：『子未可以已乎？』夫子曰：『丘聞之：親者毋失其為親也，故者毋失其為故也。』」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 199.

Original texts of the *Dialogues of Confucius*: 「孔子之舊曰原壤，其母死，夫子將助之以木槨。子路曰：『由也昔者聞諸夫子，無友不如己者，過則勿憚改。夫子憚矣。姑已，若何？』孔子曰：『凡民有喪，匍匐救之，況故舊乎？非友也，吾其往。』及為槨，原壤登木，曰：『久矣，予之不託於音也。』遂歌曰：『狸首之斑然，執女手之卷然，夫子為之隱佯不聞以過之。』子路曰：『夫子屈節而極於此，失其與矣。豈未可以已乎？』孔子曰：『吾聞之，親者不失其為親也，故者不失其為故也。』」 Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 84.

⁴¹ Original texts: 「然在喪而歌，非禮之甚，夫子為若不聞也者而過去之。從者見其無禮，謂夫子曰：『彼既無禮，子未可休已乎？』言應可休已，不須為治槨也。」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 199.

⁴² Original texts: 「今原壤是夫子故舊，為日已久。或平生舊交，或親屬恩好，苟無大惡，不可輒離。故《論語》云：『故舊無大故，則不相遺棄。』彼注云：『大故謂惡逆之事。』殺父害君，乃為大故，雖登木之歌，未至於此。」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 199.

As modern scholars have noted, the factor justifying modification in this instance is the preservation of the rite's unchanged content. Confucius' living examples further identify this content as the relational moral demand of affection, which manifests as reverence toward ancestors in the ancestral ceremony. Since the main concern was the overly complicated production process of the linen cap, and since reverence toward ancestors could be fully expressed despite the material change, the simplified silk version is acceptable. Grounded in 9.3, Confucius consistently applied this same factor throughout his living conduct. His recorded examples offer a broader textual basis for explaining the factor that justifies ritual modification.

However, as shown above, even within the same relationship, the manifestation of the same relational moral demand varies by situation. While the factor justifying ritual modification remains constant, its concrete expression is not uniform. Consider the parent-child relationship. The underlying moral demand is affection. In the context of a funeral, it manifests as genuine sorrow toward the deceased parent. During the mourning period, it manifests as concern for physical health, because the body inherited from parents must be protected from harm. In the ancestral ceremony of *Analects* 9.3, it manifests as reverence toward ancestors, which can be fully expressed even when the cap material is simplified.⁴³ Because the manifestation shifts with the situation, the resulting way of modifying rites also differs. In some cases, Confucius revises the rite entirely when the existing form fails to elicit proper sorrow or harm physical health. In others, he makes only a material substitution when the prescribed material is overly complicated. This flexibility resonates with *Analects* 18.8, where Confucius says he has “no preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible” (*wu ke wu buke* 無可無不可). He does not arrive with predetermined rules about revision but has a rather flexible attitude of ethical diversity in the form of different allowable ethical approaches.⁴⁴

⁴³ The same pattern appears in the ruler-minister relationship. Here, the moral demand is rightness, which entails the mutual responsibility of ruler and minister to serve the state and the people. Yet this responsibility manifests differently according to the leader's conduct. When the leader is negligent in governance—staying indoors during daytime instead of attending to state affairs—rightness manifests as prompt visiting. When the leader actively violates prescribed rites—wearing improper funeral clothing or failing to speak humble words after an offering—rightness manifests as remonstrance through suitably revising the rites.

⁴⁴ Original texts: 「逸民：伯夷、叔齊、虞仲、夷逸、朱張、柳下惠、少連。子曰：『不降其志，不辱其身，伯夷、叔齊與！』」調：『柳下惠、少連，降志辱身矣。言中倫，行中慮，其斯而已矣。』」調：『虞仲、夷逸，隱居放言。身中清，廢中權。』『我則異於是，無可無不可。』」

Allen (2025) discusses *Analects* 18.8 and the moral approach embedded within it. He argues that the six noble persons mentioned in the passage follow fixed codes of conduct, whereas Confucius' declaration of having “no

In summary, Confucius consistently adhered to the principle set forth in *Analects* 9.3. The factor justifying ritual modification—preserving the relational moral demand—remains invariant. However, the expression of this demand shifts across situations, giving rise to different modes of revision. Consequently, although the factor is fixed, the methods of ritual revision are not.

6. Conclusion

While existing scholarship has tended to identify only broad and abstract factors for revising rites—such as moral competence or the possession of particular virtues—this study advances an alternative account by drawing on a wider range of Confucian texts. It identifies the moral demands embedded in specific relationships as revealed through Confucius’ lived conduct. Compared with earlier approaches, this account is more closely anchored in concrete situations and thus offers greater applicability to everyday practice and self-assessment. Concerning the extent to which Confucius lived out the principle of ritual revision articulated

preconceptions about the permissible and the impermissible” offers a form of moral flexibility. However, my understanding differs. According to Allen, three of these figures—Liu Xiaohui 柳下惠 (720–621 BCE), Bo Yi 伯夷 (dates unknown), and Shu Qi 叔齊 (dates unknown)—appear elsewhere in the *Analects* and are each regarded as virtuous and loyal ministers. Although their responses to their respective situations differ, the underlying principle that guides them is the rightness embedded in the ruler-minister relationship. Their different responses should not be understood as fixed codes of conduct, but rather as situationally appropriate responses to varying circumstances, where one response might not be applicable in another situation. Confucius’ declaration of moral flexibility makes clear that he does not predetermine any single response; rather, he accepts different responses in different situations, precisely because each response is grounded in the embedded moral demand of the relationship. Allen, Henry, *Flexibility and Moral Cultivation in the Analects of Confucius*, p. 3–7.

Confucius’ principle of a fixed moral demand yet varying responses, is illustrated in detail in *Analects* 18.1. This chapter records three loyal ministers of King Zhou of the Shang dynasty 商紂王 (d. 1046 BCE), whom Confucius praised as possessing *ren*. Although all three fulfilled the relational moral demand of rightness, they each chose a different course of action even when facing a similar dire situation. First, Weizi 微子 (dates unknown), the elder brother of King Zhou, failed to remonstrate the ruler effectively amid the decline of the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE). He then decided to leave the country, taking sacrificial materials with him to preserve the royal lineage. Second, Jizi 箕子 (dates unknown), the uncle of King Zhou, also failed in his remonstrance. However, he refused to leave the state, believing that fleeing would expose the ruler’s wrongdoings and ingratiate himself with the people. Instead, he pretended to be mad and became a slave. Third, Bi Gan 比干 (d. 1047 BCE), another uncle of King Zhou, saw that Jizi’s remonstrance had not been heeded. He believed that a minister ought to risk his life to correct a ruler’s faults for the sake of the people’s well-being. Therefore, he spoke directly to King Zhou and was killed by having his heart cut out. This chapter demonstrates that not only does a given moral demand assume different forms across distinct situations, but an individual’s response may also diverge even when facing comparable circumstances. This chapter further confirmed that while the justifying factor is fixed, the means of ritual revision are not.

The above historical account is based on the “Hereditary House of Song Weizi” (*song weizi shijia* 宋微子世家) chapter of the *Record of Historian* (*shiji* 史記). Sima Qian 司馬遷, ‘shiji’ 史記, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 243 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshu guan, 1986), p. 80–81.

in *Analects* 9.3, the textual evidence suggests that his recorded actions consistently respond to these relationally grounded demands. At the same time, because such demands are expressed differently across contexts, Confucius' practice does not yield a fixed or uniform model of ritual revision. Rather, it points to a mode of flexible responsiveness to what particular relationships require in specific situations.

Despite these contributions, the present study remains subject to several limitations. First, given that the analysis is grounded primarily in Confucius' recorded conduct, further inquiry is needed to determine whether the same explanatory factor can be systematically corroborated across a broader range of Confucian texts.⁴⁵ Second, although this study employs Mencius' framework of the Five Relationships, certain relational contexts—such as those involving human–animal interactions—fall beyond its scope, raising further questions about how such moral demands are to be identified.⁴⁶ Notwithstanding these limitations, this study sheds new light on the alignment between Confucius' teachings and his actions, and in doing so, contributes to offering new insights into what underlies ritual revision in Confucian thought.

⁴⁵ The necessity of corroborating this proposed factor is further underscored by the limited corpus of texts documenting Confucius' ritual revisions. In the absence of additional references to Confucius' teachings in other Confucian texts, it would be arbitrary to claim that this factor possesses general validity within Confucian thought.

⁴⁶ In his practice, Confucius also revised rites in the context of human-animal relationships. When his guard dog died, he instructed Zi Gong 子貢 (520–456 BCE): “The rites prescribe burial under a used cover. However, I have no old cover due to poverty. Therefore, use my sitting mat, so that his head does not come into contact with the earth.” Unable to follow the prescribed form, he substituted his mat while retaining the rite's core function of keeping the dog's head from the soil. Here, the underlying relational moral demand might be Confucius' gratitude for the dog's faithful service, but it required further confirmation.

Original texts: 「孔子之守狗死。調子貢曰：『路馬死則藏之以帷，狗則藏之以蓋。汝往埋之。吾聞弊帷不棄，為埋馬也；弊蓋不棄，為埋狗也。今吾貧無蓋，於其封也，與之席，無使其首陷於土焉。』」

Wang Su, 'kongzi jiayu', p. 106.

The same instance also recorded in the *Records of Ritual*: 「仲尼之畜狗死，使子貢埋之，曰：『吾聞之也：敝帷不棄，為埋馬也；敝蓋不棄，為埋狗也。丘也貧，無蓋；於其封也，亦予之席，毋使其首陷焉。』路馬死，埋之以帷。」 Ruan Yuan, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: liji*, p. 197–198.

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Nanjing daxue 南京大學, Nan da fenghua 南大風華 (n.d.)

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