

China's New Confucianism

Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society

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3. Hierarchical Rituals for Egalitarian Societies

One of the most puzzling features of East Asian societies is that they seem both rigidly hierarchical and strongly egalitarian. On the one hand, they have incorporated hierarchical rituals in everyday social life. In Japan and South Korea—perhaps the most hierarchical societies in East Asia—the greeting and parting rituals between persons of different social status are governed by bowing practices that vary in accordance with the social status of the person. Those with less status bow at sharper angles to their social superiors, and vice versa. In Korea, close friends seem relatively formal no matter what the setting; for example, two university colleagues will refer to each other as “Professor so-and-so” in the midst of late-night drinking sessions even with no one else around.

Yet Korea and Japan have relatively equal distributions of wealth compared to most countries in the industrialized world. How can it be that the same society emphasizes both social hierarchy and economic equality? One possibility is that East Asian societies simply prioritize different values. Western societies emphasize social rather than material equality. An average American would never dream of bowing to an aged person yet might not be perturbed by the gross inequalities of income in the United States. In contrast, East Asians typically feel much stronger about economic inequity than about hierarchies of status. Of course, the Chinese Communists tried to eliminate social hierarchies—all Chinese referred to each other as “comrade” during the Cultural Revolution—but traditional hierarchies have reasserted themselves with a vengeance over the past three decades or so.

In any case, I would like to make a different argument. It's not just that East Asians worry less about social than economic inequality. My

view is that social inequality can actually *contribute* to economic equality. In that sense, social inequality is something positive, a value worth defending. I don't mean to sound overly bookish, but I came to this counterintuitive conclusion by reading the works of the ancient Confucian philosopher Xunzi (ca. 310–219 BCE). In this chapter, I will begin by explaining Xunzi's philosophy of ritual. Then I will show how hierarchical rituals contribute to economic equality in contemporary East Asian societies. I will end by drawing implications for political reforms in China and ask whether Xunzi's defense of hierarchical rituals has universal validity.

Xunzi on Ritual

Xunzi is widely regarded as one of the three “founding fathers” of Confucianism (along with Confucius and Mencius). He has been tainted because of his supposed influence on the Legalists—the arch-rivals of Confucians—but his ideas, arguably, did more to shape the actual politics of East Asian societies than anyone else. His writings are relatively clear and systematic, and he deliberately avoids utopian assumptions about human nature and society. In fact, he begins with the assumption that “human nature is bad” (23.1). If people follow their bodily natures and indulge their natural inclinations, aggressiveness and exploitation are sure to develop, resulting in cruel tyranny and poverty (19.1). In his own day—the Warring States period—Xunzi thought that natural desires had gotten out of hand: “In these times, people lack good teachers and models, so they are prejudiced, wicked, and not upright; there are no rituals or conceptions of moral duty, so there's rebellion and chaos and it's impossible to govern society” (23.3).

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story. Human beings can be “made good by conscious exertion” (23.1). They can learn to contain their natural desires and enjoy the benefits of peaceful and cooperative social existence. The key to transformation is ritual (23.3). By learning and participating in rituals, people can learn to contain their desires, there will be a better fit between people's actual desires and the goods available in society, and social peace and material well-being will result (19.1). Rituals provide bonds not based solely on kinship that

allow people to partake of the benefits of cooperative social existence. But what exactly is ritual? Xunzi's account of ritual has the following features:

- Ritual is a social practice (as opposed to behavior involving only one person). Xunzi's examples of ritual include musical performances, marriage ceremonies, and village wine ceremonies (20.12). He discusses the treatment of the dead—funeral and mourning rites—in greatest detail (19.10–19.22). Note that rites may involve one living person and one dead person, as when the dead person's body is bathed and the dead person's hair is washed (19.16). Hence, the word "social" should be extended to mean interaction between the living and the dead, not just interaction between the living.

- Ritual is grounded in tradition (as opposed to newly invented social practices). In Xunzi's view, "Rituals have three roots: Heaven and Earth are the root of life; our ancestors are the root of commonality; rulers and teachers are the root of order" (19.4). The exemplary rulers of the past self-consciously implemented and promoted the rituals to limit human desires and establish social order: "The ancient rulers abhorred such chaos, so they established the regulations contained within rituals and moral principles in order to civilize human desires and to supply the means for their satisfaction. They ensured that desires should not lack the things that satisfy them and goods would not be exhausted by the desires. In this way, good and desires sustained each other over the course of time. This is the origin of rituals" (19.1). By identifying the social origin of rituals with the great sage-kings of the past, Xunzi endowed rituals with the authority of tradition that would increase the likelihood people care for and follow the rituals.

- Ritual involves emotion and behavior. As Xunzi puts it, "Rites reach their highest perfection when both emotion and form are fully realized" (19.7). The main point of ritual is to civilize our animal natures,¹ and if people are just going through the outward routines without any emotion, they are not likely to transform their natures. The ritual needs to involve, or trigger, an emotional response, so that it will have an effect on the participants during the ritual and

beyond the ritual itself. An "empty ritual" performed without any emotion is not a ritual in Xunzi's sense.

- The details of rituals can be changed depending on the context. As Xunzi puts it, "Rituals rely on valuables and goods to make offerings, use distinctions between noble and base to create forms, vary the quantity to make distinctions, and elaborate or simplify to render each its due. . . . Thus, exemplary persons could make the elaborate forms of ritual more florid or its simplified forms leaner, but they dwell in the mean of its course" (19.9). The relatively intelligent person who is aware of the main point of ritual—to civilize human desires—can adjust the details of the rituals in accordance with the situation so that the rituals are made to serve their point. To be effective, as noted previously, they must involve expressions of emotion. The rituals should be proportionate to the emotions involved, so the mourning rituals should last three years to deal with occasions when the pain of grief has reached its pinnacle (19.18). The exact period of mourning can be modified depending upon the context and the nature of the emotions involved (for example, Xunzi notes that there should be little or no mourning for criminals after they are buried; 19.10). Elsewhere, Xunzi notes that the period when the dead body lies in state should not be rushed so that it lasts less than fifty days partly because those coming from far away should have enough time to arrive (19.11). In the contemporary era, with periods of travel drastically shortened, Xunzi would probably agree that the changed empirical circumstances mean that the period when the dead body lies in state could also be shortened.

However, Xunzi suggests that it may also be important to impose somewhat arbitrary limits that are not perceived to be subject to individual choice. He notes that it is important to specify an end point so that daily life can be resumed: "That the mourning rite is finished in the twenty-fifth month means that even though the grief and pain have not ended and although thoughts of the dead and longing for him or her have not been forgotten, this ritual practice cuts off these things, for otherwise would not sending off the dead have no conclusion, and must there not be a definite interval for the return to daily life?" (19.18). The implication is that such limits are necessary but

somewhat arbitrary; to allow for the resumption of everyday life, the limits must be perceived as coming from outside and restricting individual choice. So the rituals should not be changed too frequently or without good reason, or they will begin to be seen as wholly determined by individual choice.

- Rituals specify different treatment for different people (as opposed to practices that are meant to treat everybody equally). As Xunzi puts it, "The exemplary person has been civilized by these things, and he will also be fond of ritual distinctions. What is meant by 'distinctions'? I say that these refer to the gradations of rank according to nobility or baseness, differences between the treatment of old and young, and modes of identification to match these with poverty or wealth and relative (social) importance" (19.3). Rituals involve people with different power in common social practices that treat people differently. As we will see, such practices are essential for generating a sense of community and the emotional disposition for the powerful to care for the interests of the weak and the poor.

- Rituals are noncoercive (in contrast to legal punishments). Xunzi contrasts three types of societies: one governed by the Way and its authority, one governed by harsh and judicial investigations, and one governed by deranged madness (16.2). They are arranged in order of desirability, and the first type relies on ritual and music to secure social order. Although punishments are not used, the people willingly obey the ruler, and awesome authority holds sway (16.2). Xunzi is pragmatic, and he recognizes that punishments and legal coercion may be necessary in nonideal contexts, but if possible it is best to rely on noncoercive rituals that command willing assent and participation. It is when ritual principles are cast aside that people are deluded, and penal sanctions and punishments are numerous (27.13). There is, one might say, an inverse correlation between the use of rituals and the use of punishments in society.²

- Rituals are socially legitimate (as opposed to practices that are not endorsed by society at large, such as blood oaths between criminal gangs). Xunzi does not make this condition explicit, but the rituals he invokes are drawn from everyday social life and seem to be supported by social legitimacy. At the very least, they would not be undermined

by laws that prohibit their expression and induce a sense of fear among practitioners.

Like other Confucians, Xunzi intended to persuade political rulers to adopt his ideas because such rulers had the most power to transform society in the desired way. In an ideal society, the wise and benevolent ruler would implement such rituals, and the whole society would be harmonious, peaceful, and prosperous. But what about nonideal society? Xunzi is famously sensitive to context and advocates different prescriptions for different contexts. So the question is how to persuade rulers to adopt rituals if the rulers have yet to be morally transformed. For such purposes, Xunzi had to appeal to their self-interest.³ The problem, however, is that the powerful have the most to benefit from "uncivilized" society, where the strong can rely on brute force to exploit the weak. Those with power need to be persuaded that they benefit from a social system that seems to place constraints in their desires. Hence, much of Xunzi's discussion of ritual is designed to persuade political rulers that it is in their own interest to promote rituals in society. Ritual, he says, is the root of strength in the state (15.8) and the right sort of music can strengthen its military forces (20.5). One would expect most rulers to be receptive to this sort of advice.

But rituals do not only benefit rulers. Both Marxists and liberal democrats have denounced hierarchical rituals because they seem designed to benefit the ruling classes of feudal societies and thus are inappropriate for modern times. But this is a misreading of Xunzi's intentions. For Xunzi, hierarchical rituals also have the effect of benefiting the weak and poor, those who would fare worst in a "state of nature": "Without rituals, desires are unlimited, leading to contention, leading to disorder, and leading to poverty" (19.1). Of course, the tyrant himself won't be the worst hit by a system where he can exercise power without constraints. It is the weak and vulnerable who are worst hit by disorder and poverty: in a situation without ritual civility, Xunzi says, "the strong would harm the weak as well as rob them (23.9)."⁴ Putting ritual in practice means "being kind to the humble" (27.17). But why does Xunzi seem to emphasize rituals involving people with different power?

Hierarchical rituals seem more attractive if they are contrasted with practices that exclude people of different status: the rich and powerful

do their own thing, as do the poor and the weak (consider the Indian caste system). The choice, typically, is not between hierarchical and egalitarian rituals, but between rituals that involve the powerful and the vulnerable and two different sets of rituals for those with power and those without.⁵ Xunzi argues for the former. The village wine ceremony, for example, is praised because young and old take a drink from the wine cup, and "in this way we know that it is possible for junior and senior to drink together without anyone being left out" (20.12). Rituals such as common birth, marriage, and burial practices also have the effect of including the poor and the marginalized as part of the society's culture and common understandings.⁶ Even castrated criminals, in Xunzi's view, are entitled to funerals (19.10).⁷ The powerful are made to think of the powerless as part of the group, and they are more likely to do things for them (or at least, to refrain from the worst forms of rapacious behavior). It is no coincidence that Xunzi devotes a great deal of attention to the proper treatment of the dead. The dead, for obvious reasons, are the least capable of protecting their interests.⁸ They are the worst off of the worst off. Hence, those with power—the living—need to be trained by means of certain rituals to treat them with respect. Xunzi carefully specifies the need to adorn the corpse because "if the corpse is not adorned, it becomes hideous, and if it is hideous, no grief will be felt" (19.12). He also specifies that the corpse must be gradually moved further away each time it is adorned because "if it is kept close at hand, one begins to scorn it; when having it close at hand makes it the object of scorn, one begins to weary of it; when one wearies of it, one forgets one's duty to it; and if one forgets one's duties, then one no longer shows proper respect" (19.12). The ritual should be gradually phased out so that it allows for a smooth transition to everyday life as well as an extension of the cultivated emotions of proper respect and mindfulness of duty to the needy in the world of the living: "With each move he takes it further away, whereby he ensures continued respect. With the passage of time he resumes the ordinary course of life, whereby he cares for the needs of the living" (19.12).

The real (moral) value of Xunzi's work, in my view, is that he shows how rituals—more than laws and more than verbal exhortation—have the effect of promoting the interests of those most likely to suffer from a "war of all against all." And the real cleverness of his philosophy is

that he proposes a mechanism that can also be made to seem to be in the interest of those most likely to benefit from a "war of all against all."⁹

Rituals in Contemporary East Asian Societies

So now we can answer the puzzle with which we began: why are East Asian societies characterized by both social hierarchy and economic equality (relative to most countries at similar levels of economic development)? In most (if not all) societies, the rich and powerful members typically desire to distinguish themselves from the rest, and it is a challenge to motivate them to do otherwise. In socially egalitarian societies like the United States, the way to express superior power typically takes the form of wealth. But in societies governed by informal rituals that express differences in social status, the powerful need not rely on material wealth to show their "superiority" to the same extent.¹⁰ And if the rituals involve the powerful and powerless in shared rituals, the rich are made to feel a sense of community with the powerless, and they are less likely to seek other means of domination such as material wealth. At the very least, they will feel guilty about displaying excessive wealth, and they are less likely to oppose government measures designed to secure material equality (such as high inheritance taxes, as in Japan).¹¹

Unfortunately, perhaps, some hierarchical rituals have been replaced by the more egalitarian, "Western-style" handshaking rituals in mainland China, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Egalitarian rituals, however, will take place largely among members of the same class, and the powerful are less likely to learn the emotional disposition to care for the interests of the vulnerable.¹² The powerful are more likely to be physically separated from the rest, and there may be less of a sense of community between the powerful and the vulnerable. The interests of the weak and the vulnerable need to be secured primarily by means of coercive measures, such as redistributive taxation backed by harsh punishments for defectors, but the rich and powerful will often find ways to defect, and it will be difficult to enforce such laws, particularly in large countries (tax evasion by the rich is one of the most widespread and

difficult-to-remedy social ills in contemporary China). Nonetheless, informal rituals still have an important role to play in securing a sense of community in China. For example, the rituals governing gift-giving, with gifts that vary in accordance with the social status of the recipient, are common in all East Asian societies. The greeting of guests and parting rituals are far more elaborate than those in most Western societies. It is common for parting guests to be accompanied all the way to the physical point of departure, and the host doesn't leave until the guest has physically disappeared from view.¹³

I would like to discuss three different settings for hierarchical rituals widely practiced in China and other contemporary East Asian societies that have the effect of promoting the interests of groups of people likely to fare worst in a "state of nature" where the powerful could otherwise freely indulge their natural inclinations. If such rituals exist and work in the way they're supposed to, the aspiration to promote rituals in modern-day society may seem more realistic. The rituals mentioned were not specifically discussed by Xunzi, but they illustrate his point that hierarchical rituals have the effect of civilizing—making civil—hierarchical social interaction that would otherwise expose the nasty underside of human beings and be particularly problematic for the weak and vulnerable.

Note, however, that my main point here is normative—to show that hierarchical rituals can have egalitarian consequences. The key argument has been inspired by reading Xunzi, but I reject those parts of Xunzi that do not bear on (or seem inconsistent with) the main argument. For example, Xunzi's main target seems to have been to limit the desires of political rulers by means of ritual. In contemporary society, however, it is not just political rulers that exercise power: socialists thinkers have shown that capitalist organizations exercise power over workers, anarchists have shown that bureaucrats exercise power over citizens, feminists have shown that men exercise power over women, Foucault has shown that hospitals, prisons, and other social organizations exercise power over individuals, and so on. My aim is to suggest that hierarchical rituals can limit the powerful and protect the interests of the disadvantaged in the various spheres of social life where power is exercised.

In addition, Xunzi's point that the rituals were first implemented by the exemplary rulers of the past cannot seem plausible in a modern

context. Xunzi himself may have had political purposes in mind: perhaps he thought that identifying the origin of rituals with the great sage-kings of the past would make people more likely to follow the rituals he describes. Put another way, if people regard such rituals as arbitrary human creations or as practices that could be invented or changed at will by themselves or their less-than-perfect contemporary political leaders, the rituals may be subject to ongoing questioning and may be less effective. Just as the monarchy loses much of its magic if it's viewed simply as a conscious human creation by people just like us, so the same may be true of rituals. If the origin of an institution or practice is somehow shrouded in the mysterious past, it is more likely to command allegiance.

Fortunately, rituals needn't be seen to originate from the sage-kings to command allegiance in contemporary societies. What matters is that the ritual itself be held in awe, partly because of the authority of tradition. The ritual should also be seen to contribute to a common good or ideal valued by human beings past and present. The common good itself need not be fully attainable by reason; perhaps it is more likely to be revered if it is regarded as somewhat mysterious yet important for human well-being. As Stephen Angle puts it (drawing on Paul Woodruff), "It is crucial that reverence (and awe) be reserved for ideals of perfection that lie beyond our full ability to grasp, and thus have a tinge of mystery associated with them" (paper on file with author). Rituals should be animated by reverent feeling, so that emotions are created that forge a sense of commonality among otherwise different participants.¹⁴ As a by-product of this process, the powerful become motivated to do more for the interests of the vulnerable in their society. Those who participate experience some sort of reverence for rituals and for the common ideals expressed by the rituals, and the feeling of solidarity emerges as a by-product of participating in the ritual: and the powerful members of the rituals are more likely to develop a concern for the disadvantaged. In sum: if the rituals are shrouded in the mysterious past, and the ritual practices and ideals expressed by the rituals are held in awe and revered without being completely understood, the rituals will more effectively serve the purpose of generating a sense of commonality among participants, including the powerful who begin the care more about the interests of the disadvantaged participants.

Let us now turn to the examples. They may seem like small matters, but as Xunzi says, "When the observance of small matters is neglected, the disorder that results is great. Such is ritual" (27.42).

- The teacher-student relationship. In East Asian societies with a Confucian heritage, the teacher has relatively high social status.¹⁵ The teacher is typically held in high regard not just by the educated classes, but also by the bottom social and economic rungs of society.¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the teacher-student relationship is relatively hierarchical (compared to Western societies), even in universities. Students rarely, if ever, address teachers on a first-name basis, and they show the kind of deference and respect that is initially off-putting for the Westerner who values social equality.¹⁷ For example, in drinking sessions (the modern equivalent, perhaps, of Xunzi's account of village wine ceremonies) the student typically serves the professor and refrains from drinking before the professor, even if both parties have had a fair amount to drink. Such rituals are meant to show reverence for the ideal of commitment to learning (the pursuit of truth, in Western terms) and respect for those who have demonstrated lifelong commitment to that goal.

Such hierarchical arrangements, however, are also advantageous for the student. The teacher is meant not simply to provide a fair structure for learning and to transmit knowledge in the most effective way. The teacher is also supposed to care about the student's emotional well-being and moral development.¹⁸ The relationship between professor and graduate student is many-sided, and it would be an important moral lapse if the teacher focused only on the student's job prospects and neglected the student's emotional and moral well-being.¹⁹ The obligations of the teacher put additional (again, compared to Western societies) pressure on the teacher;²⁰ he or she is also meant to set a good moral example for the student and to gain the student's respect in nonacademic spheres of life.²¹

- Mealtime. In the animal world, the powerful beasts typically get first dibs at the food. Even communal animals, such as lions, make few allowances for the weak and the vulnerable in their community. When lions make a kill, the toughest animals eat first, and the oth-

ers get the scraps. In times of scarcity, the young, the sick, and the aged are the first to perish.

Human beings have developed mealtime rituals that protect the interests of weaker members. In many societies, the weak rely on healthy members of the family to prepare and serve them an individual portion of food that keeps them alive. Unfortunately, the urge to be charitable takes a hard hit in times of scarcity, and in times of famine children and the elderly are often the first to die. But the powerful—in this case, healthy adults—are more likely to be predisposed to caring for the powerless if they are conditioned to suppress their appetites on an everyday basis. In East Asian societies, eating is a communal activity,²² and rituals have evolved that allow weaker member of the family to get their fair share, so to speak. Communal dishes are placed at the center of the table, and healthy adults are often reluctant to be the first to start and the last to finish. They are supposed to constrain their own desires and let others indulge (the Chinese character *rang* 让 best expresses the idea of appropriate mealtime behavior).²³

Typically, the elderly are supposed to go first, and children are conditioned at a young age to defer their gratification and not dive right into the communal food. The idea is to pay homage to the ideal of filial piety as well as to train children in the art of *rang*. In contemporary China, the practice may be breaking down due to the "little emperor" syndrome of single-child families, but many families still criticize children who act "selfishly" at mealtime.²⁴

- The boss-worker relationship. In Japan, the heads of companies often engage in joint rituals with ordinary workers, such as singing company songs, eating at communal canteens, and going on group vacations. Not surprisingly, they often develop feelings for workers and are more likely to stick with workers in hard economic times (thus helping to explain the fact that the practice of lifetime employment is widespread in Japan compared to other industrialized societies). Again, the common rituals involving powerful and vulnerable groups help to protect the interests of the latter.

In China, some high-profile companies are adopting "Japanese-style" rituals in the workplace.²⁵ But the worst-off workers are the

migrant workers. Economic development has been characterized by massive internal migration, composed largely of impoverished farmers and family members migrating to urban areas in search of better work opportunities and higher earnings. China's "floating population" consists of about 120 million migrants, and they are subject to the legal discrimination of the *hukou* (household registration system) regime that deprives them of equal access to health care, education, work, and residence. Moreover, they are routinely subject to the scorn of urbanites and suspected of criminal activity.

Many scholars seek to improve the legal status of migrant workers, but they neglect the way that common rituals involving the manager or boss and worker can improve the social standing, if not material conditions, of migrant workers. In Beijing, it is not uncommon to observe migrant workers in the restaurant trade being "subject" to group lectures, forced to undergo morning exercises, and sing group songs and chant company slogans. These rituals are typically carried out on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant, in full view of the public. They are meant to express commitment to the good of the company, and more broadly, to the ideal of progress for the country (the lectures sometimes include patriotic content).

What seems like militaristic and rigidly hierarchical set of rituals may also have some benefits for the workers. The manager-boss is involved in common rituals—exercising, singing, and sometimes joking with the workers—and he or she often develops care for their interests. The manager-boss may implement these rituals with the intent of generating feelings of loyalty on the part of the worker, but they may also cause the manager-boss to develop real feelings for the workers.²⁶ Such rituals can also lead to after-hours joint meals, singing sessions, and even group vacations.

In short, different rituals serve to protect the interests of different vulnerable groups: the ritual of shared dishes serves to protect the interests of the elderly, the ritual of deference for teachers serves to protect the interests of students, the ritual of morning exercises and group singing serves to protect the interests of migrant workers. Of course, this account of rituals is a bit too neat. On the one hand, it is overly optimistic. Some rituals do not always work as they should. For example, the

exercises involving migrant workers can contribute to alienation if they are carried out in deadly serious ways without any hint of kindness or humor. Some rituals, even if they work as they should, lead to unintended bad social consequences. For example, the family-centered mealtime practices might lead to excessive familism, with the consequence that people are insufficiently concerned with the legitimate interests of nonfamily members.

On the other hand, my account insufficiently highlights the positive functions of rituals. Particular rituals can benefit more than one vulnerable group. For example, it is common for migrant workers to send money to disadvantaged relatives and friends in the countryside. Also, particular rituals can instill habits that can have beneficial habits in other spheres of life. For example, the norms of humility and deference at mealtime may produce the sorts of emotional disposition that leads children to be more sensitive to the interests of the elderly once they become productive adults.

There is, then, a need to consider ways that maximize the good consequences of rituals—meaning that they serve to protect the interests of the weak and the vulnerable to the greatest possible extent—and to minimize the bad ones. The next section sketches some possibilities.

Reviving Hierarchical Rituals in Contemporary China

Ritual principles, as Xunzi notes, are the guiding ropes that pull the government (27.24). So the most obvious starting place for reform would be the establishment of a government agency with the specific mission to promote rituals that help the vulnerable members of the community.²⁷ Its task would be to ensure that rituals generate the sorts of emotions that involve care for the interests of the weak and vulnerable, both within the ritual itself and extended to other spheres of life. My hypothesis is that rituals involving interaction between powerful and vulnerable members of society are most likely to produce such emotions. Following Xunzi, it is important not to insist on equal treatment, because unequal treatment can also (and may be more likely to) generate concern for the vulnerable. I would also like to suggest that

the more such rituals govern everyday social interaction, the more likely the emotions generated—the sense of community between rich and poor, the sense of caring for the interests of the worst off—will extend to other spheres of life. If such claims are correct—and they would need further empirical validation—then the agency would have the task of promoting such rituals to the greatest possible extent.

One important task for the agency would be to create the social conditions for different groups to interact with each other. In the socially egalitarian United States, the different economic classes live largely separate lives in separate neighborhoods, and the rich do not commonly interact with the poor, with the consequence that they do not develop the motivation to care for their interests and to address the problem of economic inequality. In socially inequalitarian Japan, by contrast, there is no sharp geographical separation between rich and poor, residences and businesses; different classes interact with each other in common (socially hierarchical) rituals on an everyday basis, with the consequence that the rich are made to care for the interests of the poor. In China, the growing gap between rich and poor is widely considered to be one of the country's most pressing problems, and the agency could look to the Japanese experience in urban planning as one way to address the problem. For example, it could provide tax breaks for mixed-income housing projects that provide public spaces for intermingling between rich and poor.

The agency would also have the power to remove legal regulations that force certain rituals to operate on the boundaries of social acceptability: the idea is that getting the government out of the way is more likely to lead to social acceptance. If migrant workers operate on the boundaries of legality, for example, the fear factor may prevent the emergence of a sense of community between workers and bosses, not to mention extension of affective ties to other spheres of life. But the Confucian approach to promoting rituals would not rely first and foremost on the strong arm of punishment to promote rituals. One of the most famous passages in *The Analects of Confucius* is the following: "Lead the people by means of regulations and keep them orderly with punishments, and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with moral power and keep them orderly by means of rituals and they will develop a sense of shame as well as correct

themselves" (2.3). In the context of our discussion, it means that fear of legal punishment is not likely to produce the sorts of emotions that generate a sense of community. If people engage in rituals because they feel forced to, the rituals are likely to become empty displays of form and devoid of the emotions that show genuine concern for the weak. People should perform rituals because they want to, not because they have to.

So it's best to think of noncoercive means to promote rituals that have the effect of helping the worst off. For example, the agency could provide subsidies for television programming that shows positive examples of how the rituals should be carried out, such as eating practices that let the weakest members of the family eat first and company activities involving bosses and migrant workers. The agency might provide rewards for model performers of rituals, such as prizes for car drivers who let disabled people cross the street. More ambitiously, perhaps, its task would also be to devise mechanisms for extending the emotions generated by such rituals to other spheres of life, similar to Xunzi's account of mourning practices that cultivate the emotions of respect and mindfulness of duty for everyday life.

In sum, there is an important role for public policy, particularly of the indirect, noncoercive variety. Still, it must be recognized that the power of ritual depends upon the kind of moral transformation that makes the powerful care for the interests of the vulnerable, and the less-than-inspiring history of governmental attempts to transform motivation (even of the indirect kind) is reason for caution. So the case for ritual should come largely from schools (e.g., teachers who emphasize rituals and set a good model for students), families (e.g., parents who encourage their children to let the elderly eat first), civil society (e.g., intellectuals who explain the benefits of ritual), and other groups in society that rely first and foremost on persuasion rather than coercion.

Beyond East Asia?

I would like to end with the thought that the defense of ritual has universal validity, as Xunzi himself no doubt believed. In fact, it has validity even if my interpretation of Xunzi is mistaken as an account of what

he really believed or what he was really trying to argue. Qua intellectual historian, I hope my interpretation is correct, but what matters from a contemporary normative perspective is whether the ideas about the positive function of ritual that I've derived by reading Xunzi are applicable and do what they're supposed to do in contemporary societies. If so, they are worth promoting.

There is some evidence for the universal validity of the value of ritual transformation. For example, the rituals of sporting competitions can transform (civilize) the instinct for aggression into socially desirable motivations. As Confucius put it, "Exemplary persons are not competitive, but they must still compete in archery. Greeting and making way for each other, the archers ascend the hall, and returning they drink a salute. Even during competition, they are exemplary persons" (3.7). The task is not to try to eradicate the desire to compete (a futile, if not counterproductive effort), but rather to civilize it by various rituals, such as the rituals of sumo wrestlers or the ritual of shaking hands after tennis games, that produce a sense of social solidarity and concern for the disadvantaged.

Team competitions are perhaps even better suited for this task. By participating in a team, the players learn the value of social solidarity. At the nonelite level, the teams can include weaker players, thus promoting the virtue of concern for the weak and teaching about the need to make social institutions inclusive of the weak.²⁸ At the elite level, the participants and the spectators can learn about the value of good sportsmanship. And the spectators learn to respect and cheer for the underdog, perhaps contributing to more generalized concern for the weak.

Still, the defense of ritual is less likely to be taken seriously in contexts that do not have a Confucian heritage. For one thing, it is difficult to translate the key terms—*li* 礼 and *rang* 让—in ways that sound appealing to, say, English speakers. I have translated *li* as "ritual," but the term often has negative connotations in English; one seems to be defending mechanical and uncreative practices from outdated eras. Other common translations such as "rites" and "ritual propriety" are hardly improvements. The typical translations of *rang*—defer, concede, yield, give in—also seem like outdated notions from aristocratic and hierarchical times.²⁹

More worrisome, perhaps, the project of promoting rituals may seem foreign in cultures that tend to invoke legalistic, rights-based solutions

to the problem of how to care for the interests of the worse off. The whole social contract tradition in Western political theory, from Hobbes to Rawls, appeals to coercive laws as the main mechanism for securing the interests of those most likely suffer in a state of nature. And the rights-based welfare states in contemporary Western societies rely mainly on legal mechanisms to secure the interests of the weak and vulnerable.

Not surprisingly, Western-based human rights groups in China fault the country first and foremost for its lack of adherence to the rule of law, on the assumption that Western-style laws would help to secure the interests of the worst off. I do not mean to deny that the country would be better off with more serious commitment to the rule of law (particularly if the alternative is corrupt political processes that typically benefit the rich and powerful). But excessive focus on legal mechanisms may cause reformers to lose sight of the power of rituals, not to mention the possibility that such legalistic solutions will further undermine the sense of community that makes the powerful care for the interests of the vulnerable. To put it more positively, since rituals are already deeply embedded in the philosophical outlooks and everyday social practices in East Asian societies, it is not far-fetched to believe that social reformers can and should be more attentive to the positive function of rituals in China and elsewhere.