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<i>Student Name:</i> Siyao Zeng	
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An Inspiration of the Rite of Passage from Ancient China

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Respected Provost, Miss Deng and my classmates, good afternoon. My name is Siyao Zeng. The topic I would like to share with you today is ‘An Inspiration of the Rite of Passage from Ancient China’.

The presentation is separated into four parts: first I would give you a brief introduction. Second, I would introduce the main process of capping ceremony. Third, I would explain the significance of an etiquette *Jiabei* at the ceremony. After that is my personal understanding.

Introduction

Many nationalities in the world have their own rite of passage. Today I would like to introduce the rite of passage of nobleman in ancient China. In ancient China, the rite of passage was different between male and female. For boy's ceremony is called capping ceremony, which is *Guanli* 冠礼 in Chinese and for girl's is hair-pinning ceremony, which is *Jili* 笄礼. According to the etiquette system of Zhou Dynasty, boy's capping ceremony usually held by the age of 20. Today in Chinese, the word *Guan* 冠 generally refers to crown, but in ancient times, it usually means cap. The main process of capping ceremony, is to add three kinds of caps, i.e. *Zibu* 緇布, *Pibian* 皮弁 and *Juebian* 爵弁, to the head of the person who turned 20 years old. That's why called ‘capping ceremony’.

The Main Process of Capping Ceremony

On the ceremony day, the first cap presented is *Zibu* 緇布 cap. The word *Zibu* 緇布 means a piece of black cloth, which is the most primitive cap in shape in ancient time. The purpose of presenting *Zibu* cap first is to remind the youth not to forget the hardships of their ancestors.

The second cap called *Pibian* 皮弁. The original shape of *Pibian* is similar to skullcap. It is sewn with white deer skin, which had been a decoration of prominent people at those times.

According to the annals of the chariots and suits of the later Han Dynasty, that is 《后汉书·輿服志》, *Pibian* was generally used for formal occasions in Han Dynasty, but it gradually became a daily cap in the Eastern Jin Dynasty.

The third cap presented is called *Juebian* 爵弁. The pronunciation of the word *Jue* 爵 in Chinese is similar to *Que* 雀, which is a kind of rosinches with red plumage, while the material colour of this cap resembles the colour of the bird's head, this is how the name *Jue* had been given. *Juebian* has the most respected status of the three, it used for solemn occasions such as assisting the monarch at sacrifice ceremonies or royal celebrations.

According to *the Book of Rites*, the process of capping ceremony is not only presenting caps, but also formal dresses matched with caps. The process of replacing caps and dresses three times with respect increased at each time symbolize that a few social rights are given and the capping person turns to a qualified adult. It is also a metaphor for the virtues of this person is increasing day by day. This is why *the Book of Rites* said, 三加弥尊, 加有成也, which means the three-time cap replacing makes a person more and more respectful, wishing him an active and aspiring person.

Significance of *Jiabai* 夾拜

It is worth mentioning that *Jiabai* 夾拜 is a typical etiquette of women meeting male adults in ancient times. In the ceremony, at the time of capping, mother is absent. After capping ceremony, the new adult must visit his families and relevant elders. First, he should visit his mother and bring her gifts. The original text is 'Seeing his mother, mother gives a salute; seeing his brothers, brothers give salutes; for he has become a respectable adult.'¹ It means that after the new adult presents gifts to his mother, his mother will first salute her child. The new adult will bow as a return, and then mother will salute again. In other words, the salute from the new adult is sandwiched between the two salutes from his mother, so it is called *Jiabai*, which means sandwiched salute.

¹ Sun Xidan 孫希旦, *Liji Jijie* 《禮記集解》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), p. 1413.

Maybe someone would ask, why should mother salute her child first? Here is an important education for both mother and child in the ceremony. Mother salute her child first is to remind that her child has grown up and his social status should be respected. Mom should be aware of that she could no longer treat her son as a child like before, instead, treat him like a respectable male adult.

On the other hand, it also reminds the child that he used to salute his mother first, but after experiencing this ceremony, mother would salute him first. From mom's reaction that the child can see something has changed and he will not be treated like before. To a child who grows up in a context of ancient Chinese culture, in that era, a simple bow from parents can cause great shocks and feelings to a child.

As for his brothers, he used to roughhouse with them, joke with them, but now, after walking out of the ceremonial venue and seeing his brothers again, he finds that brothers must bow to him, this is not a familiar scene to him, and so do his brothers, but one thing can be sure that, by this way, everyone realizes that this boy has turned to a man, all of us should respect his new identity.

After this ceremony, the new adult is eligible to participate in many social events and carry out other life experiences that followed. For example, at that time, wedding ceremony always comes next, and there are also public activities, such as township drinking ceremony, which is 鄉飲酒禮 and archery ceremony, which is 射禮. Therefore, *the Book of Rites* says, 'Capping ceremony is the beginning of rites.'

Personal understanding

Due to the evolution of traditional rites, the concept of the rite of passage is very vague for Chinese people today, and even if there are coming-of-age ceremonies, they are easily to be formalistic, and even has evolved into a revelry or vanity party, rather than spiritual growth and behaviour maturity of a person. In fact, my 18th birthday didn't make me feel any

different from my previous birthdays, and I didn't feel any change in my life. The time when I really grew is often the time when I take stock and reflect myself after a fall or injury in my life. For example, the first loss of faith established my own opinion and judgment; the first time I lost my loved one made me realised that there is no medical miracle in the world, even it do exist, it probably will never happened on me. Then I learned to cherish my families and the time I spend with them; Besides, when a spoiled child like me eventually survives independently on the salary I earned for a few months, it was thankfully to know my education experiences did not waste and I am able to support myself and even save money to return to my families, this gave me a strong feeling of being an adult. These experiences changed me and gave me self-confidence. These kinds of experiences can make me feel I am really different from before.

As the world has changed, the cumbersome rite of passage of ancient Chinese can no longer be carried out widely, but the significance it carries can be very valuable for young people today. I broadly summarised them into three points.

1. Gratitude: Gratitude to our ancestors and the elder, for what they have created for us. And gratitude to our parents, our families, for bringing us up.
2. Responsibility: This means taking responsibility for one's own words and deeds, and be responsible for one's work and family life.
3. Respectfulness: It is not easy to maintain a respectful and humble attitude towards others at all times, that requires a rational, tolerant and self-controlled mindset, I think this is the crucial point as being an adult.

So the question is, what does it take to make a child feel he or she has truly grown up? As we all know, the young generation today don't like orthodox teaching. From my personal experiences I would say, a mere ceremony with a few teachings is not impressive and powerful enough to change a person, only experiences can educate and transform a person's mind. Therefore, if I am in charge to design the rite of passage for modern Chinese youth, I would suggest:

1. Break away from your family financial support, live on your own for at least 5 months based on your own abilities and salary, and end up with a surplus.
2. Return 30% of your salary to meet the needs of your parents, or give back to them in a way that makes them happy.
3. After completing the above two things, donate the rest of your salary to a public welfare project, or handed them out to those in need.

The significance of the first point is a test of independence, to let the young know what kind of work he can do now and how his ability is, and next, what kind of career he would like to engage in, and how can he reach his aim step by step in a so real workplace. In the mean time, to let him see how he had performed, for example, his relationships with colleagues, boss and families, the balance between personal matters and official business, can he deal with all these well? This 5 months is a small but important reminder for the young, prompting him to think about which quality or ability I should further develop, what kind of life I would like to live? This experience can trigger a series questions and feelings of life inside a young head. And he may start to find out, he may start to changed. So this is the primary step of my rite of passage.

The purpose of returning 30% of salary to parents, is to stay grateful. The young ought to know how hard his parent had raised him and how deep they loved him so that they had dedicated most of their energy and income to cultivate and give their child a better life, all these should be remembered, respected and returned. However, if the return is merely money, that is poor. Because the purpose of return is to give them happiness, not loads of materials. Hence, I would like the young to return in a way that can make their parents happy, to do so, the young must observe and care for their parents carefully to find out what are their parents really need? A comfortable pillow? More phone calls? A hug and kiss? Maybe all of these. What I meant to say is, look after them as they looked after us, give back to them just like how they gave us.

The donation of the rest of salary, meant to point out what's the money for? I would like my participant realise, that money comes from the public, and finally should return to the public and benefit the public. Of course we made efforts for money, we fight for it, but all we actually need just a little part of it. Money can make us happy, but true happiness has nothing to do with money, and sometimes it is the most helpless of all. I hope they could start thinking and try to find out the most important and valuable thing of their lives, and then, let go of the others. I mean, money is important, but more important, we should mind how we treat it, how we use it. And further find out what is the true meaning of our life.

In conclusion, no matter how the world changes, no matter in what form, as an adult, we should think deep, learn more, and experience more towards the right goal.

That's all for my presentation, thank you for listening.

Bibliography

Books (Chinese)

Sun Xidan 孫希旦., Liji Jijie 《禮記集解》 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989)