

Religions in China, 1500 BCE - 500 CE (HPAH7017)

5000-6000 words

Essay Question:

How does ritual interact with state formation in early China, considering its agency in terms of cause and effect. Refer to the ritual theory of Xunzi in your answer.

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Introduction

Considering the essay question, it is important to first define ritual. Ritual can be fully subjective, therefore I will consider two definitions.

“Formalized, communicative action that relates its performer in some way to a superhuman power” (Lewis, 1997, p. 74)

“The performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers.” (Rappaport, 1999, p. 24)

Lewis is addressing ritual specifically in a Sinological context. Therefore, the understanding of it relating to a superhuman power is retained for this essay. Rappaport is addressing ritual in a comprehensive anthropological context. He also breaks it down into constituent features which Lewis does not, I am therefore able to use this as a framework by which to compare against.

Rappaport 5 features of ritual are:

1. “The first feature of ritual: encoding by other than performers . . . [and]
2. The second feature: formality (as decorum) . . . [and]
3. The third feature: invariance (more or less) . . . [and]
4. The fourth feature: performance (ritual and other performance forms) . . . [and]
5. The fifth feature: formality (vs. physical efficacy)”

These will be used as part of a framework by which to identify ritual aspects against those of other societal changes, which will be referred to later in the text.

The period of focus for this essay will loosely be from late Shang to Zhou hegemony (1041 BCE), through the Warring States period to unification under the Qin (221BCE) (Chen, 2024, p. 694). This is generally considered a watershed moment in Chinese history when the feudal system of ruler hegemony transitioned into an imperial state structure based on bureaucratic administration (Chen, 2024, p. 695).

A large focus of surviving records, particularly classical and Confucian texts such as the *Zuozhuan* and the philosophy of Xunzi, attribute successful rule to ritual propriety (Gentz, 2012). The *Guanzi* refers to the Four Cords of a state, the First Cord is ritual itself (Goldin, 2011, p. 97). Thus the cause of any changes, such as the decline of Zhou hegemony, featured ritual as an integral element. It was ubiquitous throughout the societal changes of the period

therefore it's interactions with other societal changes over the period can be analysed. Despite its importance being a relatively accepted point, it is less clear what role ritual actually played during this period, in terms of whether it causally facilitated change or whether it was merely an effect of it. The contemporary texts and philosophies developing at the time appear to focus on ritual propriety as a prime causal element to societal stability, presumably because this is what would have been most evident during the breakdown of order. However this essay looks at the relationships ritual had to society and finds that it was interwoven at every level proving it's agency in terms of both cause and effect. It is accepted that a retrospective understanding of something as ethereal as historical ritual, based primarily on partial qualitative evidence is naturally limited. Therefore a broader generalised perspective is taken where appropriate.

Mark Edward Lewis's *Ritual Origins of Warring States* (1997) defines an evolutionary path of ritual from the feudal Zhou system to the later administrative state hierarchies and frameworks. To avoid any repetition from my previous essay it is suffice here to say that this model is used within this essay. The same deep structure I identify as referred to by Lagerwey and Kalinowski (2019, p. 664) in other terms, as the transformation of the religious space structured by the cults into bureaucratic entities. In other words, that ritual adapted to serve the evolving needs of the region, transforming from localised royal traditions into dynamic instruments of political and cultural innovation. It should be recognised as well that this perspective often focuses on the rituals concerned with the ruling elite and thus focuses on power ordaining rituals. However it is a useful model when demonstrating the evolution of ritual elements in this societal sphere.

Discussion

The general trend towards state formation was a period of territory amalgamation and administrative centralisation. That is, from the feudal system of Shang through Zhou, Spring and Autumn Period (770-481BCE), Warring States Period (480-221 BCE) and to unity under the centralised imperial bureaucracy of the Qin dynasty (221 BCE) (Chen, 2024, p. 691). It is understood that although the Shang and Zhou had administrators and bureaucrats supporting the ruling elite, it was a administratively decentralised feudal system connected through ritual and familial ties and was not a sophisticated centralised bureaucracy as later seen under the Qin. There were originally many autonomous polities connected via feudal rites. For example during the seventh century BCE, over one hundred independent regional states (zhuhou guo)

in China were under the control of warlords and their vassals (Chen, 2024, p. 691). It is self-evident to suggest that when there were periods of peace, ritual was performed, and order continued. It is however not so self-evident to suggest a causal effect of ritual propriety on chaos and instability, as authors such as Confucius and Xunzi would put forward. It is therefore worth analysing the relationships of other societal elements with ritual.

Centralisation vs Decentralisation

Chen (2024) has provided a quantitative analysis of patterns of warfare and state building from the Spring and Autumn period. Her results are quite revealing and are summarised in her own words:

“I demonstrate, both in theory and empirics, that decentralization serves defensive needs by incentivizing local administrators to participate in defence, and that centralization serves offensive needs by giving the ruler greater personnel control over her agents in attacks.”
(Chen, 2024, p. 723).

Considering the Warring States Period and eventual centralisation of the region under the Qin in 221BCE, it is evident to note that centralised systems serving offensive needs overcame decentralising, defensive ones. It therefore infers that centralising practices served offensive actions better than decentralisation served defence. This implies the likelihood that the evolving nonhereditary meritocratic bureaucracy won out over hereditary noble feudalism. In the perspective shared with Lewis' (1997) and Kalinowski and Lagerwey (2019), it would be appropriate to say that the new system of ritual administration and governance that had evolved was more effective than the ritual propriety of feudal frameworks. When one considers the meritocratic nature of increasingly centralised states run by shi (“men-of-service” (Pines, 2021, p. 87)), it is perhaps unsurprising to see centralisation triumph as it did. That is to say that those more suited and skilled in their roles would eventually triumph over those employed through feudal nepotism alone.

Pines (2021, p. 88) elaborates on unity as a regional principle that was laid down prior to the Warring States period, contributing inevitably, although not necessarily intentionally, to an eventual centralisation. The development of various schools of thought appear to all support the idea of unity as below:

“Some, as Confucius connected it to the putative legacy of the early Zhou sage kings. Other, like Confucius' great rival, Mozi (c.460–390 BCE), traced it back to the very origins of organized society. Other, like the authors of an immensely influential text, the Laozi (c.4th

century BCE), sought metaphysical justifications for political unity: the singularity of the monarch on earth should parallel the singularity of Heaven, Earth and, most importantly, of the cosmic Way (Dao)." (Pines, 2021, p. 87)

Pines explains that ritual texts proposed the idea of a universal sociopolitical hierarchy with the Son of Heaven at the top as the ideal structure, rejecting the legitimacy of all the current disunited polities with multiple competing centres of power. In fact, Pines points out that it is remarkable that not a single individual text from the period refers to the independence of any regional state. This perspective would place the roots of centralisation at the political doctrine of unity formalised during Zhou rule. It is interesting to note that this doctrine gained ground towards the end of the Western Zhou, indicating that it was increasingly used over a long period to justify rule (Lagerwey & Kalinowski, 2019, p. 150).

The term "legalism" has been often used to describe centralised elements of the system that evolved from the feudal Zhou system. However, this term arises from an imprecise translation of the Chinese term "fajia". This term originates from Sima Tan around 110 BCE (Goldin, 2011, p. 88). It is associated with law and justice as the use of the legalist term indicates, however as Goldin explains, it is by no means limited to just law. It also refers to administrative recruitment, management and what A.C. Graham sums up as "amoral science of statecraft" (Goldin, 2011, p. 95). The use of the term is understood to be a semantically charged and subjectively contextual issue, as addressed by Goldin (2011).

However, what is important to note for this essay is that the initiation and use of these terms show developments in philosophies which sought to make sense of the increasing complexity of an evolving Chinese civilisation. Rituals that evolved during this time were perhaps not identified at the time as ritual, in the way Lewis has subsequently outlined them, in terms of broader ritually defined networks.

It is interesting to see ritual playing a causal role, but also a symptomatic role. That the non-adherence to localised ritual propriety was also a symptom of the growth of offensively favoured centralising systems. To be clear, centralising systems were more likely to use county contracts and not fief contracts. Therefore, a centralised system would not have the necessity to adhere to the feudal rituals utilised in a previously decentralised system to maintain their fief contracts. But rather would necessarily dispense with any feudally related redundant rituals as a symptom of centralisation. This appears to some to have been a departure from ritual, particularly those authors following Confucian thought, such as the writing in the Zuo zhuan and the Guanzi. However, the broader form of ritualistic frameworks which later evolved from the Zhou feudal system, that Lewis describes, retained all the qualities of ritual in its broader repurposed form. A form that resulted in a more effective

centralised system, thus linking the ritual system to state formation. In fact, the rescaling of traditional ritual traditions into larger administrative and governance frameworks would have worked to incentivise nonadherence to the feudal ritual propriety - as traditionally viewed.

Ritual Framework

I would like to secure Lewis' (1997) broader ritual framework of governance which replaced feudal ritual traditions, under the definition of ritual, by identifying its features as broken down by Rappaport (1999, pp. 24–50).

1. “The first feature of ritual: encoding by other than performers . . . [and]”

Since the “Late Western Zhou Ritual Reform” of ca. 850 BCE (Robinson, 2023, p. 27), power had been ritually endowed by the Zhou, with bronze vessels now not awarded based on familial relationship alone, but that of one's position within the administration. The concept of “Hua”, members of the same culture sphere, and the concept of “All under Heaven” was a shared cultural system, rather than an allegiance to any state. However, this ideal of cultural unity is what endured throughout the periods of division (Pines, 2021, p. 88). This is the unity that persisted and was inherited by the Warring States and Qin empire. It is this unity that permitted and facilitated the evolution of the ritual framework under one ruling entity. Thus the network is encoded by others, specifically strong ancestral traditions through the mandate of sequential rulers.

2. “The second feature: formality (as decorum) . . . [and]”

Formality in ritual was a persistent theme and follows from the issuing of bronze vessel by the Zhou through to the elaborate rules administering and managing officials in the Qin state (Yates, 1995).

3. “The third feature: invariance (more or less) . . . [and]”

This is the most interesting feature, as the period in question is defined by change and the blending of old and new systems. However, the individual rituals still retain invariance as an inherent feature. For example, as the Zhou monarchy and ritual service of altars began to crumble, political ties were increasingly solidified with sacrificial blood oaths (Lewis, 1990, p. 52) and honoured aristocratic relationships (Pines, 2021, p. 83). The invariant element here would be the traditionally presumptive power of blood sacrifice and its alignment to aristocratic familial hierarchies and ancient tradition. Furthermore, the general unifying

concepts of Hua and All under Heaven, unites the evolving ritual traditions under a broader invariance.

4. “The fourth feature: performance (ritual and other performance forms) . . . [and]”

Performance of the grand Feng and Shan sacrifices (Watson, 1961), to the jiao, tan, xiang and other ancestral sacrifices (Hutton, 2014, p. 203) is self-evident. From the production and awarding of bronze vessels to blood oaths, through to the recruitment and management of magistrates and administrative officials, the performance of ritual is an inherent feature seen throughout the period and persistent in the transition to a broader ritual framework.

5. “The fifth feature: formality (vs. physical efficacy)”

What is essentially defined as ritual, in and of itself provides no material purpose (Rappaport, 1999, p. 46). This is evident within the broader ritual framework of those claiming ritual authority and ruling under ethereal concepts such as heaven. However, the meritorious awarding of positions and replacement of hereditary aristocracy with “men of service” (Pines, 2021, p. 84), or a more professional elite class, demonstrates a functional aspect. Therefore, this is one feature that departs from the ritual definition provided above by Rappaport, however it is understood as a functional aspect nestled within the broader ritual framework. Something that Goldin (2011) would likely classify under A.C. Graham’s definition of “amoral science of statecraft” or aligned with the philosophy of Han Fei (to avoid using the term “legalist”). It is therefore interesting to note that when Lewis’ ritual framework is broken down into its features, it somewhat departs from the definition of ritual in that it does indeed have physical efficacy. Therefore, I would confine my definition of ritual framework as described by Lewis’ to the broader network of state structure and not extend it to the [legalist] practices of administrative management. Albeit with the understanding that their relationship is strong and that they nestle themselves under the evolved ritual framework as described by Lewis.

The concept “rectification of names”, as in Confucian thought (Durrant et al., 2016; Lewis, 1997, p. 86) and the Theory of Hunzai and Xunzi (Hutton, 2014, pp. 236–247), is seen as integral to the correct application of divine rule under heaven. Therefore it should be stated that our definition of a ritual framework could potentially have extended itself further into the state administrative structures. On the basis of its prime purpose being to honour divine rule and merely fulfilling the divine order of things, thus satisfying feature 5, i.e. no physical efficacy. However this nuanced view is understood when referring to ritual and highlights the interwoven nature of ritual and statecraft.

Hierarchy and Cohesion

Considering the nature of changing diplomatic and governing structures during this period, it is worth acknowledging some of the philosophy of ritual with respect to social hierarchy and cohesion, particularly the ritual theory of Xunzi as read in Hutton (2014) and Goldin (1999).

Ritual in Xunzi's philosophy (Goldin, 1999; Hutton, 2014) plays a dual role, it establishes social hierarchies while fostering cohesion. Xunzi, a Confucian thinker likely from the late Warring States period (403-221 BCE (Hutton, 2014, p. xix)), believed that humans are born with raw desires and tendencies that, if left unchecked, could lead to chaos. Ritual provides the necessary structure to channel these desires harmoniously, balancing individual needs with the requirements of societal order.

Creating Hierarchies Through Ritual

Xunzi emphasized that rituals encode distinctions between roles, statuses, and relationships. According to him, such differentiation is not only inevitable but also essential for maintaining order. Rituals prescribe appropriate behaviours for rulers, ministers, elders, and juniors, reinforcing their respective positions within the social hierarchy. For instance:

- **Hierarchical Roles:** Rituals clarify authority and submission (e.g., the ruler performing grand ceremonies while subjects bow in reverence).
- **Material Distributions:** Rituals regulate the allocation of goods and privileges, ensuring that higher-status individuals receive symbolic markers of their rank, such as fine clothing or ornate rites.

These codified distinctions prevent competition and conflict by setting clear boundaries, thereby stabilizing relationships within the hierarchy.

Maintaining Social Cohesion

While rituals differentiate (Hutton, 2014, p. 201), they also unite by fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose:

- **Channelling Desires:** Xunzi argued that rituals transform base desires into socially productive forms (Hutton, 2014, pp. 201–217). For example, the desire for food is elevated through communal feasts, which encourage gratitude and mutual respect.
- **Promoting Harmony:** Rituals emphasize propriety and mutual respect, preventing excesses of aggression or greed. This helps align individual behaviour with the collective good.

- **Fostering Common Identity:** Participating in rituals reinforces a shared cultural and moral framework. This commonality transcends individual differences, allowing diverse groups to coexist harmoniously.

Resolving the Paradox

The ability of ritual to both distinguish and unite stems from its moral and functional nature in Xunzi's philosophy:

- **Moral Foundation:** Rituals cultivate virtues such as humility, reverence, and self-restraint, making individuals more amenable to their roles.
- **Functional Purpose:** By addressing universal human needs (e.g., the need for recognition, security, and belonging), rituals provide a mechanism for organizing society without suppressing individual aspirations.

In summary, Xunzi saw ritual as an artful tool that constructs a balanced social order. It creates hierarchies by formalizing distinctions but maintains cohesion by instilling shared values and ensuring that everyone, regardless of rank, participates in a structured, harmonious way. This dynamic, for Xunzi, is key to a stable and flourishing society.

Xunzi was well versed in the different schools of thought and concisely elaborates on the conflicts with other thinkers (Goldin, 1999, pp. 5–10). Xunzi especially critiques them for their perceived failures to address human nature and societal needs effectively. Goldin cites Xunzi's famous claim that "Human nature is bad" to contrast him with Mencius, who argued that humans have an innate tendency toward goodness. Xunzi viewed ritual as necessary to instill virtue and maintain social order. Whilst Mencius saw the seat of morality in the mind, Xunzi saw it as merely the agent that incites us to attain morality (Goldin, 1999, p. 36). Xunzi's doctrine of unity similarly conflicts directly with Zhuangzi's Daoist teaching that the mind should reflect like a mirror and engage in no purposive action, claiming it ignores the necessity of focused effort (Goldin, 1999, p. 25).

What Xunzi highlights for the purposes of this essay is that there were advanced schools of thought during his time, where there were active, open and contentious debates. Considering that these philosophies exist to the current day in China, it can be inferred that various aspects of each philosophy were all used at some point to the convenience of those employing them. Ritual was seen by Xunzi as an active agent and not a symptomatic one. Specifically, ritual kept "bad human nature" disciplined and productive. It provided personal satisfaction to the individual and functional order to society. I would suggest that although Xunzi's idea may be very insightful in principle, there are a whole range of ritualistic practices. With ongoing changes in society, some of these rituals inevitably found themselves redundant or reinforced.

The societal need being directed elsewhere or an evolutionary change brings on their abandonment. When this happens ritual must evolve and find a place for itself in the new structure. This is analysed below and its evolution can be seen as developing under the ideological umbrella of unity.

Ideas of Unity

The transition from Shang through to Zhou showed little change in religious belief but did associate the concept of the Mandate of Heaven with that of the right to rule. This did not happen suddenly but rather gradually, as is evident from oracle bones from the early Zhou, found at Chou-yuan, which show strongly shared beliefs with the Shang (Poo, 1998, p. 30) well into Zhou rule and perhaps indicates at the reinforcing strength that ritual had in retaining stability and the status quo. The development and solidification of the Mandate of Heaven concept is seen by K.C. Chang (in Poo (1998)) as a departure from a predominately “shaman culture” toward the development of the “humanistic spirit”, further redefining relationships with “Shang-ti” and “Heaven”. Poo describes the Shang ruler as more of an arch-shaman in a world where humans lived alongside nature and their future was bound to it. Considering the ritual practice associated with Shang oracle bones:

“There are no tender feelings expressed on the oracle bone inscriptions. Everything is businesslike” (Poo, 1998, p. 28).

There are no apparent ethical or moral qualifications to the inscriptions, thus they appear to be exclusively divinatory and that the fate of humans was perhaps inseparable from the natural and supernatural world. It shows little concern for human agency in directing the future according to ethical and moral actions. In contrast, the Mandate of Heaven (Poo, 1998, p. 30) or the Zhou’s related status as “Sons of Heaven” (Pines, 2021, p. 83) is a political doctrine for the justification to rule. Which is founded on, in principle, correct ethics and morals of the ruler. The Book of History and the Book of Poetry reveal that this was essentially the development of political self-consciousness (Poo, 1998, p. 30). Poo even associates this political philosophy with the religion of the Zhou court. This is most interesting and provides this essay a point at which the ritual ideology of society effectually splinters. Whereby ritual practices concerned with power and hegemony evolve into the broader ritual framework as Lewis describes. Other ritual practices continue as before, however they become increasingly alienated from the broader ritual framework as the ruling elite develop their ritual foci under the Mandate of Heaven. This will be elaborated on below.

It is here important to clarify that ritual was not something practiced or understood only by those leaving evidential records, i.e. predominantly the numerically minor elite of society. It is of course expected that the evidential bias would lay in the favour of those with resources to leave such material and literary records, but it must also be recognised that ritual is a universal aspect of society. Ritual practice among the elite is often focused on extensively in the ancient texts but ritual activities among the common people can also be discerned, as done at length by Poo (1998, p. ix).

The Book of Poetry from the Western Zhou period shows us examples of both similarity and disparity across society, between the elite and the common people, in terms of their ritual practices. Based on a poem which discusses the divination of a shepherd's dream, Poo (1998, p. 34) indicates common persons such as shepherds undertook divination. Based on this inference and others, Poo concludes there was little distinction between the ritual beliefs of the elite and the commoner in this respect. Poo (in Lagerwey & Kalinowski, 2019, p. 282) notes that rituals such as *nuo* and *meng* could be performed at various levels in society. Although this may be the case, it only suggests that the similarity of practicing divination itself is similar, albeit the subject and context is not. The well documented focus of the elite on power struggles is naturally absent in the common people's divinations, or rather their concern for power is focused on overcoming base and agricultural challenges rather than navigating human social hierarchies.

The new idea of a moral heaven was increasingly adopted by the elite (Poo, 1998, p. 40). The separation between the two appears to have been gradual with conscious discourse on the disparities between elite and common persons. During the Shang and Western Zhou it appears the societal classes shared much in common. However, the Book of Poetry indicates non elite members of society began to express some scepticism toward the previously presumed piety in regard to the ultimate justice dispensed by heaven (Poo, 1998, p. 39). Protestations on the way ruling elites practiced human sacrifice is also presented (Poo, 1998, pp. 37–38). The fact that the practice of human sacrifice itself lasted until the Warring States period demonstrates a gradual cultural change and developing interactions between social classes.

It appears that by ritually and philosophically breaking away from the commoner, the ruling classes' ritual foci became distanced from their traditional connections, the natural world and agricultural cycles. It is expected that with any growing polity, hierarchies will develop, specialise and diverge. Defining their own responsibilities and developing their own contexts for ritual foci. The gradual nature of change and interchange of ideas allowed the concept of unity, nurtured by the ruling elite, to become ubiquitous across the region. Unity undermined

traditionally decentralised feudal systems, that is, feudal systems whereby the Lords owned their lands separately and did not necessarily have united interests (Chen, 2024). Unity however reinforced minister controlled centralised systems.

The concept of unity itself was not questioned as it was inherently supported within the interchange of all leading philosophical and belief systems. For example, although Daoism claimed purity from their refusal to participate in traditional Chinese rites, their petitions to the Dao could only be swayed by meritorious action (Kleeman, 2016, pp. 4–5). This blends perfectly with the Mandate of Heaven being awarded to the capable and virtuous. It is interesting to note here, that Daoism rejects traditional Chinese rites, something that likely would have facilitated ideological and thus ritual divergence of ruling elites and common people.

An example from the Zuo zhuan highlights the divergence of ritual practices with the ruling elite (Poo, 1998, pp. 45–46). A comet appeared in the twenty-sixth year of Duke Chao and the Duke wished to make a sacrifice. He was dissuaded by Yen Tzu on the justification that Heaven punishes the wicked and rewards the virtuous regardless of material sacrifices. This clearly shows a perspective where virtuous moral behaviour was valued above sacrificial ritual. In fact it shows that a deprecatory sacrificial ritual has no value at all in this example, demonstrating not only a difference in perceived value, but possibly an ultimate divergence in belief. This is stressed several other times, such as with an omen of fighting snakes. Where the interpretative answer given to the Duke of Lu stresses the importance of virtue over the importance of ominous events (Poo, 1998, pp. 44–45). There is also an account where dragons fight outside of a city's gates (Poo, 1998, p. 48), something Tzu Ch advises the people of the city on, that it does not concern them, as the dragons did not invade the human sphere. This shows a secular perspective between the human and other realms. Alternatively, it could also demonstrate Tzu Ch's diplomatically sensitive reasoning for not acting on something he did not believe in. It nevertheless shows a divergent perspective to that of the common people (Poo, 1998, p. 48). Hsun Tzu and Han Fei-tzu also make direct comments which deride those who believed in the efficacy of divinations, demonstrating the ritual but also class divide between the societal groups (Poo, 1998, p. 50).

Although omens are seen as inherently linked to the heavens, it is clear that humans, particularly rulers, can affect them through their behaviour. This shows a growing confidence in the core belief that virtuousness brings about Heavenly favour and that human control through influence is possible. This is at least the case within the ruling elite where the justification of their power arises from their behaviour through the Mandate of Heaven. The continued ritual practices of the common people were in contrast still focused on ancestors,

nature and the supernatural, although perhaps increasingly viewed as misguided by the learned, politically and philosophically enlightened.

Conclusion

The evolving ritual framework that splintered off during Zhou hegemony became the scaffolding for new polities through the Warring States period. Exhibiting moral virtue as a ritual practice in and of itself became paramount. Founded on the belief that moral virtue would ensure the Mandate of Heaven was preserved. Modern archaeological evidence, particularly in the form of thousands of inscribed bronze artefacts, suggests this concept together with the notion of the ruler being the “Son of Heaven” was only strongly reinforced towards the end of the Western Zhou. This was 200 years after the founding King Wu and during the gradual political and military decline of the Zhou dynasty (Lagerwey & Kalinowski, 2019, p. 150). These political ideologies therefore strengthened themselves gradually over many generations in response to weakening control. The philosophies being developed over this period show a strong bias towards adherence to ritual propriety. Thus, ritual practices likely played a part in maintaining the status quo as long as it did, which would have given the motivation and the time for ideologies of unity to develop and become entrenched through the societal order.

The ritual framework nurtured centralisation through philosophies of unity, facilitated by stratified administrative hierarchies. This influenced the ruling social class, justifying itself on its divine favour through moral fortitude, rather than familial lineage. This is quite a shift in a civilisation that had sought to reinforce former genealogical models with reverence through ancestor sacrifice since the 5th millennium BC onwards (Lagerwey & Kalinowski, 2019, p. 143). Although we see this model continue to evolve in the form of Lewis’ ritual framework, power is increasingly underwritten by a philosophy of unity and justified by meritocratic practice.

The longevity of any polity relied on its ability to retain power, which naturally favoured those that were most effectively able to manage their resources and govern their people. The theory on Xunzi (Hutton, 2014, pp. 236–247) specifies correct naming as crucial to effective management and likewise Confucian thinkers make the accurate naming of elements within the framework of rites essential for the proper application of law and punishments (Lewis, 1997, p. 86). This is of course important from the ruling elite’s perspective, and provides a practical justification for accurate categories, positions and rites for the application of effective management. This was increasingly possible through interlinked and centralised

bureaucracies which were favoured by reordering and amalgamating conflicts fuelled by ideologies of unity.

Ritual of all types, broad and specific, can be seen to be interwoven throughout society. Some affecting change through their foundational ideologies, others symptomatic of the divergence of social classes. Rituals were used as tools for both satisfying and tempering human vices, as well as cultivating cohesion by instilling shared values. With unity acting as a cohesive ideology, any ritual reinforcing this became interwoven throughout and stratified within the resulting imperial state.

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