

1.8 ZHOU RITUAL CULTURE AND ITS RATIONALIZATION

We have observed the presence of ritual in court life during the Spring and Autumn period. Later in the term, we will explore more fully both the origins of ritual patterns in pre-Zhou culture, and the self-conscious celebration of ritual that underlay the rise of Confucian ideology during the late Zhou. In the minds of the people of the Classical period, nothing distinguished China more decisively from the nomad cultures that surrounded and in places permeated it than the ritual patterns of Chinese social life. Ritual, known to the Chinese as “*li*,” was a priceless cultural possession.

Just how pervasive this ritual culture was or what specifically belonged to it is difficult to say and surely varied from period to period. There exist no ritual texts that can be dated with assurance to any period before about 400 B.C. All our accounts of the standard rituals of the early Zhou date from far later times. Some of these texts claim that even common peasants lived lives permeated by ritual – and the verses of the *Book of Poetry* would support such a claim to some degree. Other texts flatly state that ritual codes were restricted to the elite patrician class. A number of texts give very detailed accounts of court or temple rites, but their accounts conflict so starkly that one can only suspect that all are fabrications.

The term *li* (it may be singular or plural) denoted a far broader range of conduct than what we normally label as “ritual.” Religious and political ceremonies were part of *li*, as were the norms of “courtly” warfare and diplomacy. Everyday etiquette also belonged to *li*. “Do not point when standing on a city wall”; “In a chariot, one always faces to the front” – these were as much a part of *li* as were funerals and ancestral sacrifices. *Li* were performances and individuals came to be judged according to the grace and skill with which they acted as life-long performers. Gradually, *li* came to be seen by some as the key to the well ordered society and as the hallmark of the fully humanized individual B the mark of political and ethical virtue.

As our ritual texts are late, we cannot rely on them for specific information concerning early Zhou *li*. But we may assume that the *flavor* of ritual performance may be tasted by surveying the scripts used by late Zhou ritualists – which, after all, must surely have been based on earlier practice. We can also glimpse the way in which ritual as a whole came to be understood as a category of significant activity by reading late texts that attempt to explain the reasons behind the rituals, to make ethical sense of them.

On these pages are gathered together selections from two complementary ritual texts. The first is a portion of a text called the *Yili*, or “Ceremonies of Ritual.” This is a book of scripts that prescribes the proper enactment of a wide variety of major ritual ceremonies; it may date from a time as early as the fifth century. The selection here is from the script for the District Archery Meeting, which was an occasion for the warrior patricians of districts to celebrate their mastery of that martial art. (The translation is based on John Steele’s 1917 version, referenced below.)

The second text is from a later text known as the *Liji*, or “Records of Ritual.” This book was probably compiled from earlier texts about 100 B.C. The selection here is a self-conscious explanation of the “meaning” of the archery match. “The *junzi* never competes,” Confucius is supposed to have said, “but then there is, of course, archery.” The archery match held a unique place as a gymnastic arena of *li*. “They bow and defer as they ascend the platform; they descend later and drink to one another – what they compete in is the character of the *junzi*!” Thus Confucius rationalized the ethical meaning of the archery match, and as we shall see, our second ritual text goes even further.

From the *Yili*: “The District Archery Meeting”

This represents only a small portion of the entire script. A series of dots mark some elisions – portions omitted here – but most of the text does not appear here, and in many cases I have not noted long elisions. This version is based on a translation by John Steele published in 1917.

The li of notifying the guests

The host goes in person to apprise the principal guest, who emerges to meet him with two bows. The host responds with two bows and then presents the invitation. The guest declines. In the end, however, he accepts. The host bows twice; the guest does likewise as he withdraws.

The li of setting out the mats and vessels

The mats for the guests are set out facing south and graded from the east. The host’s mat is laid at the top of the east steps, facing west. The wine-holder is placed to the east of the principal guest’s mat and consists of two containers with footless stands, the ritual dark wine being placed on the left. Both the vases are supplied with ladles The musical instruments on stands are placed to the north-east of the water jar, facing west.

The li for stretching the target

Then the target is stretched, the lower brace being a foot above the ground. But the left end of the lower brace is not yet made fast and is carried back across the center and tied at the other side. . . .

The li of hurrying the guests

When the meat is cooked, the host in court costume goes to hurry the guests. They, also in court costume, come out to meet him and bow twice, the host responding with two bows and then withdrawing, the guests sending him on his way with two more bows. . . .

The li of receiving the guests

The host and the principal guest salute one another three times as they go up the court together. When they reach the steps there are the three yieldings of precedence, the host ascending one step at a time, the guest following after. . . .

From the li of the toasts

The principal guest takes the empty cup and descends the steps, the host going down also. Then the guest, in front of the western steps, sits facing east, lays down the cup, rises, and excuses himself the honor of the host's descent. The host replies with a suitable phrase. The guest sits down again, takes up the cup, rises, goes to the water jar, faces north, sits, lays the cup at the foot of the basket, rises, washes his hands and the cup

[Here follow many pages of instructions on wine toasts.]

The music

The mats for the musicians are spread at the top of the western steps and a little to the east. The music master ascends first and stands to the west of the musicians with his face to the north. The musicians number four with two lutes. The lutes are carried in front by two guides, who lay them upon their left shoulders, the heads being in front. They crook their fingers into the sound holes and turn the strings towards themselves while with the right hand they lead the musicians along. Then the mouth organ players enter below in the hall and stand to the west of the suspended bells and drums. Then they unite in performing pieces from the "Songs of Zhou" and "Songs of the South" sections of the *Book of Poetry*, beginning, "*Guan-guan* cry the ospreys," and then, "The kudzu vine spreads far and wide," and, "The mouse-ear plant"

The li for initiating the archery contest

The three pairs of contestants chosen by the director of archery from among the most proficient of his pupils take their stand to the west of the western hall, facing south and graded from the east. Then the director of archery goes to the west of the western hall, bares his arm, and putting in his finger cover and armband he takes his bow from the west of the western steps and at their top, facing north, announces to the principal guest, "The bows and arrows are ready, and I, your servant, invite you to shoot." The principal guest replies, "I am not adept at shooting, but I accept on behalf of these gentlemen"

[After the archery implements are brought in and the targets further readied, the musical instruments withdrawn and the shooting stations mounted:]

Demonstrating the method of shooting

The director of archery stands to the north of the three couples with his face to the east. Placing three arrows in his belt, he lays one on his string. He then salutes and invites the couples to advance He then places his left foot on the mark, but does not bring his feet together. Turning his head, he looks over his left shoulder at the center of the target and afterwards he bends to the right and adjusts his right foot. Then he shows them how to shoot, using the whole set of four arrows. . . .

This concludes the preliminaries of the contest. The actual contest and the carefully staged drinking ritual between winners and losers at the close of the contest are described in similar detail in the following portions of the text. It should be clear now how intricately choreographed these *li* were intended to be, at least in the view of late Zhou patricians. It is worthwhile to pause and consider the amount of training that would be required to ensure that all the participants in this courtly athletic dance execute their roles with speed and precision. When rules proliferate in such number, it is essential that they be followed with all the speed of spontaneous action, otherwise the occasion will become interminable for all involved, and the *li* will simply cease to be followed.

From the *Liji*: “The Meaning of the Archery Contest”

This much briefer text selection is not an instruction manual, but rather a rationalization designed to show the moral significance of the archery meet. Approximately the first third of the text is rendered here without elisions.

In the past it was the rule that when the patrician lords practiced archery, they would always precede their match with the ritual of the Ceremonial Banquet. When grandees or *shi* met to practice archery, they would precede their match with the ritual of the Village Wine Gathering. The Ceremonial Banquet illustrated the proper relation of ruler and minister. The Village Wine Gathering illustrated the proper relation of elder and younger.

In the Archery Contest, the archers were obliged to target *li* in all their movements, whether advancing, retreating as they circuted round. Only once intent was aligned and body straight could they grasp their bows with firm skill; only then could one say that their arrows would hit the mark. In this way, their characters would be disclosed through their archery.

To regulate the archers’ rhythm music was performed. In the case of the Son of Heaven, it was “The Game Warden”; in the case of the patrician lords it was “The Fox’s Head”; in the case of the high officers and grandees it was “Plucking the Marsilea”; in the case of *shi* it was “Plucking the Artemisia.”

The poem “The Game Warden” conveys the delight of having court offices well filled. “The Fox’s Head” conveys the delight of gathering at appointed times. “Plucking the Marsilea” conveys the delight of following the rules of law. “Plucking the Artemisia” conveys the delight of not falling short in performing one’s official duties.

Therefore for the Son of Heaven the rhythm of his archery was regulated by thought of appropriate appointments at court; for the patrician lords, the rhythm of archery was regulated by thoughts of timely audiences with the Son of Heaven; for high officers and grandees, the rhythm of archery was regulated by thoughts of following the rules of law; for the *shi*, the rhythm of archery was regulated by thoughts of not failing in their duties.

In this way, when they clearly understood the intent of those regulating measures and were thus able to avoid any failure in performance of their roles, they were successful in their undertakings and their characters in conduct were well set. When their characters in conduct were well set, there would be no cases of violence and wantonness among them, and when their undertakings were successful, the states were at peace. Thus it is said that in archery one may observe the flourishing of virtue.

For this reason, in the past the Son of Heaven chose the patrician lords, high officers and grandees, and *shi* on the basis of skill in archery. Because archery is a pursuit so well suited for men, it is embellished with *li* and music. Nothing matches archery in the way that full ritualization through *li* and music is linked to the establishment of good character through repeated performance. Thus the sage king treats it as a priority.

When the two texts are compared there seem to be substantial differences in the underlying scripts of the archery ceremony. Even more striking is the degree to which the later text ranges wide of the ceremony itself in reading moral and political meanings into the ceremony.

Once again, it is not the accuracy of these texts nor their specific content which makes them valuable for our purposes. It is their ability to convey the intensity of ritual expectations among at least portions of the elite class that makes them worth reading. All of us encounter from time to time contexts of ritual intensity, religious ceremonies, holiday rituals, and so forth. But they stand as islands in our lives, which are governed by a code of informality – particularly in late twentieth century America. Imagining a society in which the choreography of elaborate ritual encounter is a basic pattern of life resembles envisioning an alien world where one’s skillful execution of mannered behavioral norms counts as self-expression and provides others with a glimpse of the “inner” person.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. *List the ways in which the archery ritual exemplifies the nature of Zhou patrician society as marked by differentiated and stratified roles.*
2. *In what ways have the authors of the second text been selective in their interpretation of the meaning of the archery match? Could you suggest ways in which their main ideas could describe the other roles in the larger banquet gathering?*

Sources

There is only one English translation of the *Yili*, John Steele's *The I-li or Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* (London: 1917). The *Yili* is not thrilling to read. Steele performed a great service in his work, and in nearly a century no one has wished to invest in the dull task of trying to better it. I have joined this tradition by simply appropriating Steele's translation here.

The *Liji* is a much more interesting work, but it is also very large, and the standard translation is even older: James Legge's 1885 version. Fortunately, that translation was "modernized" in an edition published by Ch'u and Winberg Chai: *Li Chi: Book of Rites* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: 1967).

(For the *Liji* translation, the chief commentarial edition consulted was Sun Xidan (1736-84), *Liji jijie*.)