

Geir Sigurðsson: *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning: A Philosophical Interpretation*

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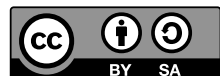
*Reviewed by Jana S. ROŠKER**

The study of rituals has been important in many different academic disciplines, because they are most often understood as formal procedures, which facilitate the fusion of rational and sensitive elements within the human psyche. The contemporary Chinese philosopher Li Zehou describes them as important social techniques, which lead at the level of external standardisation to the rational internalisation of regulations that determine human behaviour. In other words, they are significant tools for the rationalisation of collective demands and purposes and to the integration of social ethics. Due to such integral procedures, rituals have led to the formation of the essence of being human.

If we consider the central role of ethics in the Chinese philosophy, it is not surprising that the concept *li* 禮, which is most often translated into English with terms such as rituality or ritual propriety, also belongs to the crucial notions of the Chinese, and especially Confucian, ideational tradition. In the context of the presently very fashionable Confucian revival, we have been inundated with by all kinds of Confucian studies. However, most investigations of the ancient Confucian tradition from over the past three decades have neglected or ignored the important historical phenomenon of the establishment of ritual institutions and the significant philosophical grounds on which they were based. As Sigurðsson explains in the “Introduction” (p. 17), Confucian rituality is often still seen as a relic of some of the most archaic and conservative aspects of the Chinese tradition.

What sparked Geir Sigurðsson’s interest in the issue of the Confucian notion of *li*, was therefore his first intuitive insight into the fact that there must be something more important hidden beyond such superficial understandings (or prejudices), and underlying the genuine tradition of this important Confucian concept. In this interesting and valuable book, he shows why and how we should rather look upon it as an important guideline for socialisation, which can lead people through the opaque jungle of ethical and social dilemmas towards their own, most

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intimate humanness, or towards that which makes human beings human. The book also demonstrates how in the course of these transformations, the Confucian ritual moves from experience to the transcendental, from habit, tradition, and education to a common mindset.

Even though the book was published more than three years ago, it is still quite topical and remains unsurpassed. The *Outstanding Book Award*, which was presented to it last year by the *Society of Professors of Education*, was therefore well deserved and not surprising. In this work, Geir Sigurdsson reconstructs the meaning, role and manifold significance of the Confucian rituality by considering the spatial and temporal context of the present situation. This does not only mean that he wants to elaborate upon the question of what can Confucian rituality “still” offer to the present, and to select those elements of this rich classical tradition that could prove themselves to be most “useful” and “worthwhile” for such endeavours. It rather means that the author aims to offer the readers his own, often quite topical philosophical insights created upon the inspirational foundations of classical Confucian texts. In this context, he proposes a reconsideration of the notion *Li*, which is among the most controversial concepts in Confucian thought.

At the beginning of his book, the author points out (p. 12) that while ritual (*li* 禮) is one of Confucius’s most discussed notions and an integral component of the entire Confucian tradition, the term itself does not owe its origins to the Confucians. This is not surprising, for rituals belong to the earliest forms of human spiritual civilisation and symbolic production. In China, they go back to the royal families of the first three Chinese dynasties and were only later expanded, deepened, and modified in a multiplicity of ways by Confucius and his followers and commentators up until the present day. On this basis, the author highlights the fact that in the pre-Qin Confucianism, ritual became an important source of establishing moral psychology and spirituality. In the following chapters, the book documents on several levels that this fact is clearly reflected in numerous classical works of this dominant stream of thought. The author shows that in the original Confucian teachings *li*’s role cannot be reduced to the agenda of returning to the ancient tradition of the early Zhou Dynasty. It rather aims to revive its vital force and to inspire people to actively partake in the further development and evolution of this stimulating tradition. In this respect, Confucian rituality manifests itself in an “endeavour to continue forging the path that constitutes the tradition, to continue making the tradition—for without such an endeavour, the tradition runs the risk of becoming a thing of the past, a dead tradition” (p. 31). Here, it has to be noted that it is precisely this “traditionalism,” i.e. this positive evaluation of its past offerings to humankind, which leads many contemporary scholars to criticise Confucian rituality and its alleged “obsession” with propriety as outmoded and

even reactionary. Against this background, the author critically questions the instrumental rationality that was brought about by global modernisation processes and references in this context several important theoretical works of modern and contemporary Western philosophical and sociological production. Besides, the Chinese classics are in this work often examined in dialogue with both Chinese and Western interpreters and the most influential theoreticians.

The main body of the book is structured into three main chapters or “assemblages,” dealing (roughly described) with Confucian rituality and propriety through the lens of the problems linked to

- traditions and the concept of time,
- the concept of reason or “the reasonable” (in the sense of a dialectic relationship between ritual and the sense of the appropriate), and
- education as personal cultivation, internalisation of skills and values, and humanisation.

These three parts eventually flow into the “Concluding Remarks,” where Sigurðsson, among other issues, exposes the importance of being appropriate, not only for people living in the Confucian tradition, but even in a much more general sense, namely for all people living in human society. The attitude of propriety requires self-cultivation, which is, of course, a lifelong never-ending process, constantly and continuously directed towards an ethical awareness and individual integrity: “Tradition and culture must be continuously revised and reinterpreted in light of the novel circumstances arising in the ongoing transformation to which we refer as ‘reality’.” (p. 121)

In the first part of the book, Sigurðsson exposes the dynamic, flexible and adaptable nature of the Confucian concept *li* by illustrating it against the background of the specific Chinese conceptualisation of time and continuous change. These issues have been studied in detail by the narrow circles of Sinological and Chinese academia, but are doubtless of great interest for Western readers who are not experts in the specific paradigms of Chinese thought.

In the second chapter, he argues against the constricted ideas of the allegedly irrational nature of tradition that have arisen at the edge of European modernity. In contrast to such ideas, based upon an artificially constructed and allegedly absolute dichotomy of “rational enlightenment” and “irrational indoctrination” (see, for instance, p. 52), the author shows how Confucian rituality could teach us to become more “reasonable,” i.e., more open to—and, at the same time, more morally aware of—the diverse particularities of the situations in which we find ourselves. In such a form of rituality, ethics and morality become the individual’s own

self-conscious understanding of the meaning of life, value and his or her ultimate concerns.

In the third assembly, Geir Sigurðsson elaborates upon the role of education in the context of the Confucian rituality and propriety. He shows that in this respect, education is mainly seen as a tool for personal growth (in the sense of *Bildung*, pp. 81–83). He also points out the importance of the relation between ritual knowledge and aesthetic education, revealing hereby why it is important that the rituals must always be personalised. On such grounds, the role of Confucian rituality in the field of personal cultivation becomes more apparent and much more understandable. Hence, it becomes very clear why in the world of Confucian propriety education lies at the root of human existence. In the world of *li*, being human always means learning to be human. This becomes also apparent in the archaic mother tongue of Geir Sigurðsson, the Icelandic language, in which the word for education, *menntun*, is derived from the etymological meaning of “being human” (p. 84). In the endless change of our human societies, being human is always necessarily linked to the notion of becoming human, which is a never-ending process in which people can actively mould and shape new images and conditions of reality. On such grounds, the author successfully shows that both propriety and ritual learning as such are tightly linked to the issues of humanness. Hence, one could conclude that they are still of utmost importance as a precious tool which helps us in valuing ourselves and our fellow human beings in spite of all difficulties we encounter (and create) in today’s strange world.