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Research Trends

State Ritual and Political Culture in Imperial and Late Imperial China: Research Reflections on *Li**

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In the late nineteenth century, the Guangxu 光緒 emperor commissioned an update of the collected rules and regulations of the Qing dynasty. It was called the *Da Qing huidian* 大清會典, and it had served as the foundation for running the Qing state and its multiethnic empire for more than two centuries.¹ “The spirit of this book is to make clear established regulations of *li* 禮 for administration,” the emperor wrote in his preface. “Following and practicing [*li*] will achieve perfect goodness and perfect beauty [in governance].”² Continuing this theme of state organization and operation, he emphasized in an addendum the importance of *li* as a disciplinary mechanism. “No matter if an official is civil or military, of the inner or outer court, pure or impure—no matter if his position is superior or inferior, major or minor—all are fully subsumed by *li*.”³ For the Guangxu emperor, administrative procedure and its regulation were embodied in *li*.

The Qing emphasis on *li* was not unusual. Often translated as “ritual” or “rites,” *li* has long been the organizational principle of moral and social action in China.⁴ Confucius put *li* at the center of his teachings, while Xunzi 荀子

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1 For an extended discussion of the *Huidian* and its administrative uses, see Keliher 2016.

2 *Da Qing huidian* (1899). 至於本雖麟之精意，著官禮之成規，是訓是行，盡善盡美。

3 Quoted in Lu Li 2001. 官無論文武內外清濁，秩之崇卑大小，咸一禮之所彌。

4 As McDermott (1999, p.1) wrote in the opening lines of an edited volume on state ritual in China, “Ritual has been a central concern of Chinese culture for at least four thousand years.”

refined the concept to give it an institutional form that subsequently served as the foundation for the organization and operation of the imperial state from the Han dynasty onward. State makers of each successive dynasty built their institutions and political operations from *li*, and implemented various practices of statecraft and social organization as part of the repertoire of *li*.⁵ Even leaders in contemporary China have recently taken to explicitly articulating and enacting *li* as a means of bureaucratic management.⁶

At the core of the institution of *li* is the notion of a hierarchical sociopolitical order with prescribed sets of behaviors and actions for all social actors. As it related to statecraft in imperial China, *li* constituted a system that included a range of ritual and ceremonial activities, from court audiences to annual sacrifices. At the state level, these practices did far more than simply project symbolic power and arrange legitimizing symbols of the ruler and state, as scholars have argued in recent years.⁷ More fundamentally, *li* constituted politics. Recent developments in ritual theory and Chinese statecraft show that the practices of *li* put political and social actors into particular kinds of relationships that facilitated politics and administration, and in doing so gave some people greater access to political and material resources, which enabled them to set the terms over what others could and could not do.⁸

An official of a certain rank, for example, would come to know his place in the political and social order through his position and role in ceremony and sacrifice, as well as in how he was prescribed to interact with other officials of other ranks through greeting rites, clothing, attendants, and written correspondences. At the top, the emperor occupied a superior position and was symbolically placed at the head of the state when leading a ceremony or rite, while all other political actors had to kowtow and express subservience; he was also given control over the court audience rite, where policy decisions were made and political orders issued. In this way, *li* served as the basis of the rules and regulations for administrative activity in imperial China, as articulated by the Guangxu emperor in the quote above.⁹

Given the importance of *li* in Chinese history, scholars have spared no effort in investigating and analyzing the concept and its associated prac-

5 Chen Shuguo, in his survey of the practices of *li* in each dynasty (2002), offers a good overview of *li* in Chinese history.

6 In recent years, Chinese president Xi Jinping has embraced Confucianism and spoken of *li* in ways reminiscent of the Guangxu emperor. See Keliher and Wu 2016.

7 For a representative study of *li* as ritual and symbol, see Zito 1997.

8 For an expression of advances in ritual theory, see Seligman et al. 2008. For a discussion of these themes through Chinese ritual theory, see Ing 2012.

9 Ch'u T'ung-tsu (1961) spoke of this as the Confucianization of law.

tices.¹⁰ The proliferation of research in these areas has meant that scholars have examined the meaning and form of *li*, either through an investigation of developments in early China, or by exploring practices across dynasties in pursuit of a comprehensive understanding of the concept and the ritual and ceremonial practices often associated with it. Existing studies are universal in scope and do not discriminate across time, however. Whether they pursue an understanding of the philosophy or examine the manifestations and prescribed actions, these studies illuminate the characteristics and nature of *li*, and often do so by delving into one aspect of *li*, which is generally understood as ritual, i.e., formalized acts done repeatedly and involving more than one or more actors. What they leave untouched is how the practices and concepts of *li* changed over time, and how such changes facilitated unique political cultures in different dynastic states, from the Han to the Qing.

Building upon the foundation of previous research, historians have begun to pry open the historical specifics of *li* and investigate its impact upon the formation and development of particular states. Taking up the practices of different states in Chinese history, historians are now focusing on the integrated development and mutual construction of *li* and the imperial state, whether it be in the Han or the Ming. For example, scholars have shown that Han political actors introduced a cosmological component to *li* when building an empire and confronting Daoist challenges;¹¹ that Tang emperors adapted and adjusted state ritual to accord with a shifting meaning of sovereignty;¹² that Song thinkers grappled with the question of to whom an adopted emperor should offer sacrifice, his biological father or adoptive father;¹³ and that Ming officials changed imperial marriage rituals in order to manipulate the nature of familial relations.¹⁴ In each of these cases, *li* was transformed to accord with immediate political and cultural circumstances, and these circumstances changed, both between dynasties and over the course of any single dynasty.

In addition, it is becoming clear that the different forms of *li* implemented as part of the state building process could determine the structure of the state and shape the fate of the dynasty. Take the Qing as an example. In the 1630s and 1640s, as the power relations and institutions of the Qing state emerged, the form and practices of *li* were simultaneously constituted. The imperial relatives of the emperor initially struggled for power with the ruler and among themselves, but in exchange for their support and acquiescence, they

10 The historiography referred to here is discussed at length in Keliher 2015, pp.39–80.

11 Sato 2016.

12 Chou 2016.

13 Kroher 2014 and Meyer 2012.

14 Zhan 2015.

were given ranks, titles, and positions in the new state. In order to both integrate these relatives into the emergent administrative framework and secure their investiture in the state system of ranks, titles, and positions, they were incorporated into *li*. In contrast to the Ming—or any other dynasty—imperial relatives partook in state ceremony and sacrifices, and they were prescribed specific ritual actions based on their ranks and positions. The inclusion of new political actors here expanded *li* both in content and form, and in so doing restructured the organization and operations of the late imperial Chinese state, giving it a unique Qing orientation.¹⁵

The incorporation of relatives into the political framework through *li* further shaped politics and state administration, making imperial relatives instrumental in government. In 1723, for example, the Yongzheng 雍正 emperor appointed his brothers to the head of three administrative boards. His younger half-brother was placed in charge of a secret military commission that later became the central administrative organ of the Qing, the Grand Council 軍機處.¹⁶ Similarly, in the early nineteenth century, a son of the Daoguang 道光 emperor negotiated the Opium War settlement with the British. And when the Qing fell in the early twentieth century, the generals protecting the capital were all imperial relatives. This group of people could serve the state, not just because decisions were made to give them administrative positions, but because they were incorporated into the Qing meaning of *li* and, being thus incorporated, came to constitute part of the political order and operations of the Qing state.

Similar developments in each period of Chinese history testify to the malleable and indeterminate nature of *li*. Collectively, studies of such events show that there was no set form of *li* that could be indiscriminately applied by a ruler to yield a complete institutional order or offer a range of practices that would determine all political and social action. There was no quintessential Chinese state undergirded by singular philosophical concepts and utilizing a predetermined system of rituals and administrative practices. *Li* changed throughout history according to the immediate political and cultural circumstances of the time; it was refashioned to account for different political actors and their internal struggles for power and position. Although the terminology and principle of a hierarchical organization built upon ritual acts may have been preserved in the concept of *li*, the practices and their meaning shifted as the structure of the state was remade and reimagined. To put it

15 This summary is based on research in Keliher 2015, pp.131–181.

16 Beatrice Bartlett (1991, pp.69–70) remarked, “Prince Yi served Yongzheng in many ways that an ordinary official who was not a close relative could not have done.” She cites his handling of problems of intrigue and treachery in the court, and his role in providing policy suggestions.

another way, the *li* articulated by the Guangxu emperor in the late Qing was not the same *li* employed by Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 in the early Ming.

These insights into *li* help explain the structure and transformation of the imperial and late imperial Chinese states. We know that different dynasties had different levels of political development with varying organizational structures. For example, the Tang had a strong aristocracy with oversized political clout; the Ming lacked a Grand Secretariat 內閣; and the Qing employed different ethnic actors in politics and administration. Even from these simple references, it is clear that it is not tenable to think that the structure of the imperial Chinese state remained unchanged from the Han to the Qing with little variation over time in political organization or practice. Yet this fact must be reconciled not only with an ever present idea of empire, but more fundamentally with the continued reference by contemporaries in each era to *li* as the organizing principle of state and society. Viewing *li* as indeterminate makes sense of this seeming contradiction. Understanding the intertwined development and mutual constitution of *li* and state building brings into focus the logic of the state and its institutions, and enables a better analysis of the changes and transformations throughout history.

This approach helps us move beyond both the traditional understanding of dynastic cycles and the classical notion of a linear development of history. Having cast aside the orientalist view that China was vast and unchanging, it does us little good to embrace a notion that charts a progression through history from one set of institutional arrangements to another in a forward march toward an ideal state, whether that be liberal bourgeois democracy or communism. Not only do such views betray the empirical evidence at hand; they also leave us with little hope for action. If history is determined, then we are not masters of our fate and, like Macbeth, are condemned to succumb to the prophesy of the witch. The insight of institutional variation and the indeterminacy of *li* frees us from historical determinism and opens a path to developing a better explanation of history and of social possibility.

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