

## **CAN RITUAL BE MODERN? LIQUID MODERNITY, SOCIAL ACCELERATION AND LI-INSPIRED RITUAL**

GEIR SIGURDSSON  
UNIVERSITY OF ICELAND

**Abstract.** Our late modernity has been characterized by Zygmunt Bauman and Hartmut Rosa as, respectively, “liquid” and “accelerated”. These are demanding aspects of reality that have elicited both adaptive and resisting responses. While the drive to adapt has generally been favoured, especially by the corporate sector, a certain resistance to the tendency is also notable among ordinary citizens. It will be argued in this paper, first, that while adaptation evokes Daoist insights, such an association is misleading and an unqualified kind of adaptation is not a viable option; secondly, while many ritualistic and ceremonial practices are being revived as a part of the resistance, many of these are undesirable; thirdly, that an introduction of ritual inspired by the ancient Confucian understanding of li 禮 is a beneficial way to alleviate the harmful effects of late modernity; and fourthly, that this understanding of li can be strengthened and clarified through Neo-Daoist interpretations.

“We have inherited a complex ethical practice from those who came before us, and we take it to be authoritative except where we can find ways of improving it.” (Philip Kitcher)

### **I. INTRODUCTION: WHY RITUAL TODAY?**

What if anything is desirable about strengthening a ritual mode of life in our late-modern societies? Ritual would generally be considered antagonistic to our modern ways of living. We would tend to associate it with reactionary and ultraconservative tendencies, traditionalism, rigidity, fixed class structures, patriarchy, not to speak of imitation over creation, superficiality over depth, and conformity over individuality — all characteristics that supporters of modernity find anachronistic and unattractive. Considering the anti-modern associations of ritual, should we then perhaps ask for less of it rather than more?

In this paper I venture to do the exact opposite, not because I oppose modernity per se, but because I am not convinced that rituals ought necessarily to be associated with all the pejorative aspects listed above, and also because I believe that rituals are not only inescapable but also indispensable for human social environments. Almost any social organization, be it school, workplace or a club, requires structures that are ritualistic to at least certain degree in order to provide those who belong to it with a symbolic framework for properly addressing both organization as well as one other. *Qua* social beings, therefore, human beings are also largely ritual beings. In this regard, however, I argue that distinctions must be made between different kinds of ritual. With different kinds, I have in mind not only particular ways of performing ritual, but also how we conceptualize rituals and conceive of their role(s) in our societies, in short, how we formulate their active presence in our societies. I shall outline a certain theory of rituals, one that I find not only compatible with our modern ways of living, but even beneficial and conducive to better ways of living. This theory is heavily based upon what I take to be the ancient or pre-Qin Confucian approach to rituals, or to be more exact, to li 禮, which is often translated as rituals and certainly includes them, while being a much broader notion encompassing a number of other associated social expressions and activities, such as ceremonies, courtesy and etiquette to name just a few.

As it plays itself out philosophically in some of the ancient Confucian core-writings, li, I argue, is suggestive of a “modern” kind of ritual. After being, so to speak, “updated,” which I believe is in perfect con-

formity with the spirit of Confucian philosophy, li could fit in well in a social setting where individualism and creativity continue to be respected and endorsed, but where, at the same time, a sense of social integration and responsibility could afford to be reinforced. I find that a Neo-Daoist interpretation of Confucian ethics, which will be outlined briefly, underscores this unique quality of li-inspired ritual.

## II. THE ACCELERATING FLOW OF MODERN LIFE

In at least Euro-American societies, many people experience their daily lives as both amorphous and fluctuating while increasingly exigent. Such experiences conform to two rather well-known analyses of late modernity from which I would like to draw in this paper, namely Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" and Hartmut Rosa's "social acceleration." Although I shall argue that li-inspired rituals may be capable of alleviating to some extent the pain accompanying the emergence of these conditions, I believe that the conditions as such have become rather firmly embedded in contemporary cultures of post-industrialist societies and cannot be changed or modified to any significant degree through laws, regulations or some kind of reorganization. They are parts and parcels of our social economic system, founded upon the ideas of free-market capitalism, individualism, and negative liberty, while significantly modified and accelerated through technological advancements, especially in the field of information technology. Now obviously if the structures of the economic system are undermined or shaken, as has happened during COVID-19 pandemic, it also affects the conditions of living described above, but at the time of writing (May 2020), we do not know whether and what long-term changes can be expected to result from this temporary rupture.<sup>1</sup>

The symptoms of this post-industrial situation are of course numerous and have been discussed from many angles and to great lengths. Here I will only outline a few that I find to be most relevant to my present discussion. Persons born no later than in the 1980s have experienced most tangibly the changes occurring in our cultures and societies — although the symptoms have only become prominent and conspicuous in the last couple of decades. The 1990s were marked by curious contradictions in Euro-American cultures. We felt that what seemed to have been secure and solid before was coming apart at the seams. Ironically, the suggested "end of history" quickly turned into an "end of certainty." Truth became less truthful, the foundations less secure and most things began to seem fuzzy. This is when the so-called post-modernity entered the scene, namely the end of modernity with its ostensibly secure architectonics as we had known it up to that time, involving anti-foundationalism, decentralization, pluralism, globalization, etc. Since then we have had the invasion of alternative truths, political populism and most possibly a move toward a transition during which intersubjectivity will gradually be taking over from objectivity.

What matters for this discussion is that the values, expectations, and structures on which human beings have constructed their life-plans have become much less predictable than before. We do not anymore seek an identity through our profession or main activity which is supposed to last us a lifetime. Our present identity may in fact be just temporary or one out of many. This can be confusing and even traumatic for many people. It should be noted, however, that some aspects of this process can be considered positive, for instance the gradual erosion of patriarchy and male-dominated societies, although that symptom appears to be resilient, especially in the business sector.<sup>2</sup> Among other positive examples one could point out that previously marginalized groups of people and individuals have gained more attention, consideration and respect than before, as clear definitions or visions of what is "right" or how things "ought to be" are not as easily available as before. These circumstances provide freedom to, say, invent and constantly modify one's identity according to one's preference, but they also give way to expectations of continuous changes in our social environment and people's adaptive response to them.

A 2018 strategy article published by the management consulting firm McKinsey & Company entitled, ominously, "Organizing for the age of urgency" is a good case in point. First, it provides some

1 Hartmut Rosa, "Coronavirus: Chance zum Innehalten", interview, April 9, 2020.

2 Nima Sanandaji, "The Nordic Glass Ceiling", *Policy Analysis*, no. 835 (2018).

metaphors describing the changing times: “If the old world was a master composer like Mozart, planning every detail for every instrument, the new world is organizational jazz.” The article then states that those “who get it right [...] create adaptive, fast-moving organizations that can respond quickly and flexibly to new opportunities and challenges *as they arise*.” Under the heading “Worship Speed,” there is a reference to Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, who highlights the importance of “high-velocity” decisions: “Most decisions should probably be made with somewhere around 70 percent of the information you wish you had. If you wait for 90 percent, in most cases you’re probably being slow.”<sup>3</sup>

The McKinsey article is expressive of the cultural condition that Zygmunt Bauman has referred to as “liquid modernity”. In Bauman’s analysis, “liquid” has taken over from what used to be “solid”. It has to do with an emphasis on being immersed in the flow of time rather than located in occupied space. Liquids only fill a certain space “for a moment” and then must adapt themselves to their new surroundings. Incidentally, the metaphor of fluidity is suggestive of the metaphorical language used in Daoist philosophy, where water features prominently and being “light” or adaptive is preferred to the fixed and predetermined. I believe this is of significance and will return to the Daoist connections later. As Bauman writes, “We associate ‘lightness’ or ‘weightlessness’ with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, modernity in Bauman’s analysis is characterized as “fluid”, as melting the solids, but is it perhaps only in order to introduce new solids? Is this just an intermittent stage during which one solid state is changing to another? Obviously, this cannot yet be known, but it certainly seems not to be the case. The reason we need to be both flexible and fast in the modern world appears to have something to do with the continuous, seemingly endless and last but not least always faster evolution of technology, which requires changes with more frequent intervals and obviously makes it possible to do things quicker than before. Technical acceleration induces acceleration of social change and acceleration of the pace of life, which, in return, will also induce technical acceleration. Thus, as Hartmut Rosa observes, “a potentially endless spiral of acceleration” ensues.<sup>5</sup> We are in this sense heavily influenced by technology in how we lead our lives, even if technology does not have a direct bearing on it. To speak with the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, we might be in the process of developing a “machine heart” (*ji xin* 機心), a heart that only conceives of our surroundings as a technological means to another end.<sup>6</sup> It appears, in any case, to be the name of the game today that we must be ready for change and that we must act quickly.

Interestingly, Bauman associates this change with a return of the anti-civilizing element of nomadism, indeed “the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement.”<sup>7</sup> Civilization, at least in its classical sense, seems to require solidity, consistency in time, a certain repetitive pattern to boost the solidarity on soil. These associations are particularly interesting when considering the case of China where these historical contrasts are rather stark: on one hand the often illiterate, “barbaric” nomads surrounding the Chinese Empire, adapting themselves to circumstances as they are encountered, perhaps even suggestive of the Daoist aimless wandering (*xiao yao you* 逍遙游); and on the other the sedimentary Chinese nation with its elaborate social customs, rituals and literary tradition. With the advent of liquid modernity, where solidity and stability are progressively undermined (albeit from a micro-perspective), pressure builds up against the communal tradition involving social customs and rituals. Globalization also helps to push such traditions away or perhaps more appropriately, to melt them.

I am not sure that I agree with Bauman’s insinuation that barbarism is a necessary consequence of liquid modernity. However, our times have certainly become more demanding. As Bauman has phrased it:

3 Aaron de Smet and Chris Gagnon, “Organizing for the Age of Urgency”, *McKinsey Quarterly* (2018).

4 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Blackwell, 2000), 2.

5 Hartmut Rosa and Jonathan Trejo-Mathys, *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2013), 167.

6 The notion of the “machine heart” appears in chapter 12 of the *Zhuangzi*, cf. *Laozi Zhuangzi zhijie* 老子庄子直解, annotated by Chen Qinghui (Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 169.

7 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 13.

These days patterns and configurations are no longer “given”, let alone “self-evident”; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. [...] The liquidizing powers have moved from the “system” to “society”, from “politics” to “life-policies” — or have descended from the “macro” to the “micro” level of social cohabitation. Ours is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual’s shoulders.<sup>8</sup>

It clearly varies considerably how well people can cope with this situation: “Some of the world’s residents are on the move; for the rest it is the world itself that refuses to stand still.”<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this has a bearing on social equality and our access to opportunities in the present world: “The game of domination in the era of liquid modernity is not played between the ‘bigger’ and the ‘smaller’, but between the quicker and the slower.”<sup>10</sup>

People who move and act faster, who come nearest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule. And it is the people who cannot move as quickly, and more conspicuously yet the category of people who cannot at will leave their place at all, who are ruled.<sup>11</sup>

This vision is confirmed by the McKinsey article quoted above where the categorical imperative is formulated as: “adapt or die.”

As one commentator puts it, also invoking a Daoist image: “Where once we valued durability, now we value flexibility. Transience. Because that which cannot easily bend will instead snap.”<sup>12</sup> It is tempting to formulate the changes in terms of Confucian-Daoist tensions: The formerly “Confucian” world of stability and structures is about to transform to a “Daoist” one of continuous change and fluidity. Not that their worlds are different, but that they respond to it in a slightly different manner; the Confucians no less than the Daoists fully accept that we must seek to adapt to the constant flux of the world, but they propose a certain degree of “artificial” human order to reduce the impact of the flux and facilitate human adaptation. The problem is that many people are unable to cope with such a world without imposing some structure upon it. Living like a Daoist sage who can respond to the ascending flow of everyday with ease and tranquility is most likely beyond the capabilities of most people, while a response modelled on the Confucian philosophy, though certainly demanding, may in my view be a more realistic strategy to adopt for a reasonable adaptation to a continuously changing world.<sup>13</sup>

### III. THE PRESENT USE AND ABUSE OF RITUAL

Hence, the present world demands of us to be adaptive. Our arrangements or the frameworks within which we operate should be as flexible as possible so that we can quickly reinvent ourselves according to circumstances. This may very well be of benefit to the world of business in an increasingly faster environment. From a social point of view, however, being too adaptive can also present serious dangers. Let me take an example from Woody Allen’s *Zelig*, a “mockumentary” from 1983 about a person who is so adaptive to his environment that he literally changes his outward appearance according to his surroundings. Trying to make sense of this “disorder” as it is called in the movie, the psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, appearing as himself, makes the following comment:

8 Ibid., 7–8.

9 Ibid., 58.

10 Ibid., 188.

11 Ibid., 119–120.

12 Chris Kutarna, “Living in Liquid Modernity”, *Psychology Today*, 2018.

13 This is not to deny that Daoist practices, exercises and outlooks can be instructive and helpful, but they are notoriously hard to master, and their coherent adoption seems to demand a somewhat radical change in one’s outlook on life and human existence. While such a change may in fact be what we strictly speaking need, I prefer, on this occasion, to stick to a more moderate suggestion based on Confucian insights. For an intriguing discussion of Daoist responses to everyday life in modernity, however, see Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio, *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2017).



The question of whether Zelig was a psychotic or merely extremely neurotic was a question that was endlessly discussed among his doctors. Now I myself felt his feelings were really not all that different from the normal, what one would call the well-adjusted, normal person, only carried to an extreme degree, to an extreme extent. I myself felt that one could really think of him as the ultimate conformist.<sup>14</sup>

When Zelig, who is Jewish, later turns out to join the Nazi party as a Brownshirt, Bettelheim adds that it made all the sense in the world, because although he wanted to be loved, craved to be loved, there was also something in him that desired the immersion in the mass and anonymity, and fascism offers Zelig that kind of opportunity, so that he could make something anonymous of himself by belonging to this vast movement.<sup>15</sup>

The slogan suggested by McKinsey & Company, “adapt or die,” could just as well have been the official trademark of the Nazi party during the Third Reich, or for that matter, of any authoritarian regime. A passive and noncritical policy of adaptation can easily overstep all reasonable boundaries. In other words, while the ability to change and adapt to new circumstances is of clear advantage, it can also be dangerous if it involves a blind submission to external forces. Adaptation must be limited by critical endeavors.

The following saying attributed to Confucius is quite germane in this regard: “If you study but don’t reflect you’ll be lost. If you reflect but don’t study you’ll get into trouble.”<sup>16</sup> Reflection without studying could be understood as following certain principles, e.g. adaptation, without properly considering the cultural context within which we operate and the values belonging to that context. This can be precarious in the sense that constant and continuous adaptation may eventually cause us to be immersed in activity that turns out to be utterly meaningless to us. It could thus be understood as losing one’s foothold in reality, a reality that can only be adequately apprehended through the categories shared by one’s culture. It is a form of alienation lost in skepticism, a loss of meaning, even a Durkheimian form of *anomie*. On the other hand, that studying without reflection should lead to being lost is a clear disapproval of mere preservationism. The word *wang* 罔, here translated as being “lost,” is explained by a commentator on the *Analects* as “disorientation that leads to nothing.”<sup>17</sup> Evidently, those who simply stick to old methods and norms without reflecting on how to adapt them to new situations are unlikely to be successful in their efforts. They will effect nothing at all. In the *Zhongyong* 中庸, Confucius is reported to have said that those who are “born into the present age and yet return to the ways of the past will cause themselves misfortunes.”<sup>18</sup> In the *Analects*, Confucius also says that “a person who can bring new warmth to the old while understanding the new is worthy to take as a teacher.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the Confucian recommendation is that there should be a proper balance between reflection, i.e. adaptation, and learning, i.e. preservation.

The contemporary demand to adapt and be liquid is clearly in opposition to any kind of ritual action. Ritual action has to do with the formation of structures that resist radical change, in short, a level of invariance. It is therefore not surprising that a certain response to the contemporary situation consists in resistance, a yearning for past structures and thus the reintroduction of earlier rituals. Rituals are, I would argue, still — or perhaps rather: once again — very much present in our modern “secular” societies. This can be seen at two levels: on one hand, in the form of ceremonial behaviour that is meant to provide a sense of belonging or identity, and, on the other, in the revival of established rituals of the past with the explicit intent to resist specific changes perceived as undesirable. Let us look briefly at each of these in turn.

While the relative evanescence of ritual forms in our modernizing societies may have indicated that they would disappear altogether, they have in recent times been conspicuously returning in various guises, perhaps in particular in the form of emotional ceremonies and ritualism associated with sports, where they seem not only acceptable but desirable. Most prominently the opening ceremonies at the Olympics,

14 Woody Allen, *Zelig* (Orion Pictures, 1983).

15 Ibid.

16 Confucius, *Analects*, ed. R. Eno (2015), 2.15.

17 *Lunyu zhijie* 论语直解, annotated by Zhang Weizhong (Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 1997), 12.

18 *Liji zhijie* 礼记直解, ed. Ren Ping (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 448.

19 Confucius, *Analects* 2.11.

the UEFA Champions League, and even more so at the FIFA World Cup are attended by a significant part of the global population. Undeniably, these ceremonies come close to Émile Durkheim's and Clifford Geertz's characterization of what constitutes practices as being religious in nature.<sup>20</sup> "The World Cup," it has been suggested, "provides a [sic] experience of communal emotion that few other events can offer, and that religion now fails to offer."<sup>21</sup> In this regard it is also significant that followers of grand sport events such as the World Cup, coined by one commentator as "a ritual World War"<sup>22</sup>, have been increasing considerably in the last decades, even including individuals who normally take no interest in football.<sup>23</sup>

In order to bring about or enhance the feeling of belonging, people need rituals, coordination, rhythms and of course meanings. Practical rules and regulations can work for some particular regulatory systems belonging to our societies, e.g. traffic rules, take-a-number system for queues, bureaucratic organizations, in fact in any aspect of social interaction where we expect everyone to be on an equal or the exact same basis, but the fact of the matter is that human interaction often requires differentiation in terms of status, power and simply circumstances. In fact, there are even symbolic gestures bordering on the ritualistic that take place in traffic systems when the basic rules are bypassed in order to show respect or courtesy to someone else. Now this is not to deny that there are no problematic issues that follow from ritual practices, but in this discussion I would merely like to propose a sociological/anthropological argument for the inescapability of ritual in human societies but not argue for the need for some particular rituals.

Currently in parts of the Western world, there seems to be a sense of nostalgia for and even return to religious and ritual practices that belonged to the "solid" world in the past. Some of these could be termed rituals of difference or distinction. The resurgence of such practices almost certainly rests upon the fear of liquid modernity, of vague distinctions, of globalization, and returns in the guise of xenophobic nationalism or exclusive religion, both of which often operate in tandem. As it says in a recent article about this phenomenon:

It pits a vision of a clearly defined (and confined) national identity against the globalist ideals of universalism and diversity. In Britain, David Goodhart has termed this the divide between "somewheres" and "anywhere." Others refer to it as the divide between a "closed society" and an "open society", between "nationalists" and "globalists," or "communitarianism" and "cosmopolitanism."<sup>24</sup>

The choice of religious beliefs and practices in this regard often involve clear inconsistencies, which can be another consequence of social acceleration, as it also involves "contraction of the present," meaning that social beliefs and actions have a shorter and shorter period of validity and are often even contemporaneous with other beliefs and actions with which they are radically inconsistent. Among such examples is the veneration by the French right-wing party Le Front National (now renamed Rassemblement National) of Joan of Arc, even though it maintains an anti-clerical position in terms of strict *laïcité* or secularity.<sup>25</sup> In Germany, the Dresden-based anti-Islamic movement Pegida (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) carries Christian crosses in its demonstrations, while not being a Christian organization at all.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch right-wing Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid), makes frequent "reference to the Netherlands' Judeo-Christian culture, while defying Christian teachings on topics from refugees to gay marriage."<sup>27</sup> All these are cases of identity

20 Michael Mutz, "Patrioten für drei Wochen. Nationale Identifikation und die Fußball-Europameisterschaft 2012", *Berliner Journal für Soziologie* 22, no. 4 (2012).

21 Theo Hobson, "The World Cup: a ritual that works", *The Guardian*, June 12, 2010.

22 Antonio de Loera-Brust, "What the World Cup can teach us about everything", *America. The Jesuit Review*, May 30, 2018.

23 "More than half the world watched record-breaking 2018 World Cup", 2018.

24 Tobias Cremer, "Defenders of the Faith: why right-wing populists are embracing religion", *New Statesman*, May 30, 2018.

25 Dimitri Almeida, "Exclusionary Secularism: the Front national and the reinvention of *laïcité*", *Modern and Contemporary France* 25, no. 3 (2017).

26 Matthew Bell, "Never mind the cross, Germany's "anti-Islamization" movement isn't really Christian", *Pri* (2015).

27 T. Cremer, "Defenders of the Faith: why right-wing populists are embracing religion", *New Statesman* (2018).

politics where a highly selective and arbitrary use is made of Christianity to distinguish an “us” from the “them.” As one commentator has phrased it:

Given this religious definition of the “other,” Christianity must be the cultural identifier of “us.” Yet, instead of following church teachings on public policy, such as on welcoming strangers, the new right-wing populists often marry religious language, symbols and rituals with predominantly secular policies.<sup>28</sup>

People may, in other words, feel a need for the reintroduction of rituals. However, it greatly matters what sort of rituals we adopt. Their symbolism can be decisive for the society we want to construct, they can be exclusivist and they can be downright racist (e.g., KKK, Nazi rituals). What form of rituals can then be regarded as desirable?

#### IV. REFORMULATING RITUAL ON A CONFUCIAN BASIS

The modernist criticism of ritual consisted mainly in seeing it as constraining individualism, thinking and creativity, as a kind of alienating, mystifying, mechanistic imitation of old practices that have lost their meaning a long time ago and merely serves to preserve the status quo in terms of power relations.

This view has gradually been giving way to more positive images of the function of ritual action. What we need is some kind of reassessment or reconsideration of ritual, disconnecting it from that sort of reactionary tendencies and appreciating instead what it has to offer to the individual as a source of integration, a sense of belonging and even of creativity. Ritual action is not merely a mechanical repetition of movements and gestures. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, such a view, which is common in scientific (anthropological, sociological) theories, comes about due to the discrepancy between the pre-supposed notion of time in the scientific outlook and the way in which time unfolds in actual practice. Scientific analysis is inherently detemporalized in the sense that it arrives after its object of analysis, and then reconstructs the events according to a synchronized or static scheme or synopsis. In the case of a ritual performance, then, a gap arises between the supposedly “objective” spectator and the “subjective” agent. The former, when reconstructing the process, tends to see a fixed or mechanized sequence of actions each of which has a determinate symbolic reference to the culture to which the agent belongs, while not necessarily transparent to the agent. The latter, however, being immersed in and living the process, obviously sees it in a very different manner. He experiences all the uncertainties and cognitive challenges that accompany practically any temporal succession of action. If the social scientists had considered closely the rituals that they themselves perform every day, Bourdieu writes, such as a polite conversation, “the seemingly most mechanical and ritualized of exchanges,”

they would have discovered the unceasing vigilance that is needed to manage this interlocking of prepared gestures and words; the attention to every sign that is indispensable, in the use of the most ritual pleasantries, in order to be carried along by the game without getting carried away by the game beyond the game [...] the art of playing on the equivocations, innuendoes and unspoken implications of gestural or verbal symbolism that is required, whenever the right objective distance is in question, in order to produce ambiguous conduct that can be disowned at the slightest sign of withdrawal or refusal, and to maintain uncertainty about intentions that always hesitate between recklessness and distance, eagerness and indifference.<sup>29</sup>

A well-performed ritualized action, while certainly following a pre-established pattern to a certain degree, is performed well precisely by *not* being a simple automatic repetition. Bourdieu makes a compelling comparison with the performance of music:

Practice unfolds in time and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys. Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning. As with music, any manipulation of this structure, even a simple change in tempo, either acceleration or slowing down, subjects it to a deconstruction that is irreducible to a simple change in an axis of reference. In short, because it is entirely immersed in the current of time, practice is inseparable

28 Ibid.

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *The logic of practice* (Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 80–81.

from temporality, not only because it is played out in time, but also because it plays strategically with time and especially with tempo.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from reminding us of the inevitable gap that arises between “external reconstructors” and “internal agents,” Bourdieu’s observation also prompts us to observe that one’s way of relating to practices and events will be largely influenced or even conditioned by one’s presupposed, and, for the most part, implicit notion of temporality. I think this is important when considering Confucian ritual, because the very particular Chinese conception of time suggests that the notion of ritual necessarily involves individuality, creativity and a keen sense for the situation at hand, as I will discuss shortly.

For Confucians, the li-customs are the primary tools or techniques to absorb and *embody* tradition. They are certainly presented as stylized or ritualized practices to be emulated and learned, not unlike the elementary forms or patterns in martial arts (xing 形 or shi 式). In this sense they are certainly formalized. However, if they are considered primarily as pedagogical methods, this formalized aspect becomes much less problematic. As children and young persons, we primarily learn from those who have been around longer than we have and are therefore more experienced. Certainly, we learn much through our own explorations, but mediated through family members, teachers, and other adults we usually have access to enormously prudent and practical shortcuts. Fortunately, we do not need to learn everything from scratch, but can profit from the experience or knowledge of those who have been around longer, who in turn had much of that very knowledge handed down from previous generation, etc. As time goes by and we mature, we assume more and more responsibility in educating ourselves until we reach adulthood and can, as a rule, make most decisions in our everyday existence without having to consult others. Confucians expect that by that time we will have gained a profound insight in our own cultural tradition, which will serve, so to speak, as a guiding light in our further development and experience. In time we have, to speak again with Bourdieu, developed a kind of body hexis, individual habits or characteristics that are embodiments of the *habitus*, the system of both structured and structuring dispositions within a culture. *Habitus* “is constituted in practice [i.e., through hexis] and is always oriented through practical functions.”<sup>31</sup>

The body believes in what it plays at: it weeps if it mimes grief. It does not represent what it performs, it does not memorize the past, it enacts the past, bringing it back to life. What is “learned by body” is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, body hexis informs deportment, the way and style in which people “carry themselves” in terms of stance, gait, gesture, etc. This is fully in line with Confucius’s remark in the *Analects* that “If you don’t study li, you will be unable to take your stand.”<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu and Confucius both see the body as a mnemonic device absorbing the basics of culture in a process of learning or socializing. It is through the physical experience of bodily action that the *habitus*, the socially constituted basis for practices, is inculcated in a way more effective than through oral teaching. Through the performance of (formal) actions, one not only “learns” the tradition by constructing a framework of meaningful action, but also how to make such actions one’s own, to personalize them. The process parallels the above-mentioned forms in martial arts. Initially they are learned through constant repetition, perhaps even *ad nauseam*, but eventually — as long as they are kept up — they will be appropriated as personalized responses to one’s surroundings and inform the practitioner how to respond to other situations. Generally speaking, then, ritualistic behavior is a form of learning in much the same way as certain technical training must take place before one acquires a truly profound sense for the task at hand, and can strictly speaking let go of the technical training. With regard to li, a person who has successfully internalized the spirit of a certain ritualistic practice is capable of applying it spontaneously when responding to new circumstances by adapting its primary or initially “stylized” movements to these very circumstances. Ritual, then, provides the body with an

30 Ibid., 81.

31 Ibid., 52.

32 Ibid., 73.

33 Confucius, *Analects*, 16.13.



“understanding” or “sense” of how to “be” and to “function”. Precisely this function of ritual in more general terms has been identified by the artist Linda Ekstrom and the scholar of religion Richard D. Hecht:

In ritual, meaning flows into the individual and is experienced in the body. Ritual constructs the body and also embodies the epistemic dimension of the ritual experience. Ritual is as much epistemological as it is sensual. It is through the senses as well as the intellect that the body is formed and reformed, and only the body makes ritual experience possible. This is not a tautology, but a necessary recognition of how the body is believed to mediate ritual and be transformed by it. In ritual, humans are all experienced learners.<sup>34</sup>

From an individual point of view, moreover, ritual provides frames within which they can orient themselves. Rituals have an integrative function, which can be based on history, myth, values, etc., as long as that *x* is shared among those who share the ritual. Now that there should be frames does not mean that it is not possible to move beyond them, but the frames are there as — certainly normative — guides. This begs the question of the extent to which ritual is or can be invariable, for from one point of view rituals must demand a certain level of invariability — there must be some identifiable consistency between them from one point in time to another — but from another point of view their transformation in time is inevitable, simply because those who perform them and their circumstances are always changing.

I believe that it is in particular here that the ancient Confucian insight is invaluable, for, as mentioned above, it operates within a time-based scheme according to which it is assumed and accepted that no two actions can be exactly the same, since they always take place within unique configurations of their constitutive elements. They are prescribed, but the prescription rests upon the value attached to the extent to which human conduct can be anticipated and made sense of. At the same time, it is implicitly understood that the prescribed forms may call for changes depending on the everchanging circumstances. Such changes, moreover, are initiated by the individuals who enact the *li* customs. They enact them differently based on their endeavour to critically engage themselves with tradition and its potential match with the always unique here and now. This requires a creative approach to *li* whereby the tradition is first and foremost taken as a valuable and resourceful basis for extending oneself into the future rather than an enshrined object of reverence carved in stone for all eternity.

A few examples from the ancient Confucian writings serve to illustrate this feature. First, we should note Confucius’s observation, recorded in the *Analects*, that nothing in the world stands still: “The Master stood on the banks of the river. ‘How it flows on, never ceasing, night and day!’”<sup>35</sup>

Secondly, Confucius himself takes it for granted that *li* has been and will be altered throughout the generations:

Zizhang asked, “May one foretell ten generations from now?” The Master said, “The Yin Dynasty adhered to the *li* of the Xia Dynasty; what they added and discarded can be known. The Zhou Dynasty adhered to the *li* of the Yin Dynasty; what they added and discarded can be known. As for those who may follow after the Zhou, though a hundred generations, we can foretell.”<sup>36</sup>

All these alterations serve Confucius as a criterion to understand the necessary and inescapable historical changes of society.

In a chapter of the *Book of Rites (Liji)* entitled “Li Vessels” (*Li Qi* 禮器), it says that “time is of greatest importance for *li*” and that all other considerations are secondary.<sup>37</sup> This remark, according to Jin Jingfang 金景芳, points out that “*li* transforms by following the times and is not invariable.” He then argues that someone who studies the Confucian *li* and believes that one absolutely must accurately follow every single detail as described in the ancient works is someone who “swallows ancient learning without digesting it, not really understanding the *li* of Confucius.”<sup>38</sup> *Li*, in other words, is embedded within

34 Linda Ekstrom and Richard D. Hecht, “Ritual Performance and Ritual Practice: Teaching the Multiple Forms and Dimensions of Ritual”, in *Teaching Ritual*, ed. Catherine Bell (Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 261.

35 Confucius, *Analects* 9.17.

36 *Ibid.* 2.23.

37 *Liji zhijie* 礼记直解, 186.

38 Jinfang Jin, “Tan li 谈礼”, in *Ershi shiji zhongguo lixue yanjiu lunji* 二十世纪中国礼学研究论集, ed. Chen Qitai, Guo Weichuan and Zhou Shaochuan (Xueyuan chubanshe, 1998), 6.

a time-oriented culture in which mechanistic and thoughtless understanding of li is at least minimally considered if not altogether absent.<sup>39</sup> Robert Eno has pointed out that Mencius proposes a version of such an idea of “timeliness” with his doctrine of “balancing” (quan 權) according to which “moral rules must be applied through ethically trained judgment, not [...] so mechanically that they seem to endorse plainly counterintuitive and utterly unacceptable choices.”<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, Confucianism takes into consideration the role of li in the widest possible way, as belonging to formal ceremonies, more religiously oriented rituals, rites of passage, the treatment of guests, everyday interaction and even the way one should treat oneself or one should behave in private, to name a few circumstances. Li is therefore representative and even normative for any of our specifically human (civilized) actions. We must be ready to perform li in any setting, in particular social ones, and that requires not only knowledge and understanding of what is appropriate in each situation, but in many cases also a creative adaptation of li as the situation one may find oneself in could be entirely new in terms of the configuration between the people present and/or other aspects of the circumstances. Thus, vigilance and swiftness are needed, as is a level of creativity on the basis of the normative level. The li-version of ritual is clearly much broader than our usual understanding of ritual, but as prescribed and formalized actions, they are sufficiently “ritualized” to be considered in this vein.

## V. A XUANXUE DIMENSION OF CONFUCIAN RITUAL

Even if my understanding or interpretation of Confucian culture presented above is flawed or goes too far, there is nothing wrong with reading Confucianism in such a way in order to gain as much as we can from it for our present purposes and needs. The point is not to be an orthodox Confucian, whatever that may mean, but to generate a theory of ritual that is applicable and useful to us and our times. As a matter of fact, I take it to be very much in the spirit of pre-Qin Confucianism that its ideas should always be further developed and not least adapted to the circumstances in which we find ourselves.<sup>41</sup> We can therefore choose to consider our theory a Confucian one or a Confucian-inspired one. The core of that theory is that while it involves a serious effort to maintain invariability, a lucid awareness of the inevitability of change is also present. This is not a contradiction; these are simply two tendencies in tension with one another, an instance of yin and yang logic whereby each receives its meaning from its opposite. The extent to which a ritual is invariable becomes meaningful against the notion of change, and vice versa.

As has been insinuated several times in this paper, however, there is much in the new paradigms emerging in late modernity that reminds of earlier Daoist formulations of its preference for a life that is liquid, flexible and agile instead of solid, rigid and firm. Thus, it might seem that the emerging conditions to which we are increasingly subject in late modern societies would be congenial to Daoist visions of the good life. Certainly, the Daoist stance is very critical of excessive rigour and often seems to accuse Confucians of precisely such tendencies. However, I believe that most readers will be immediately aware that the general features of late modernity would be rather far removed from the Daoist predilection, especially what regards ways of living, worldly values, and perhaps especially all the pointless pressure and speed imposed upon our quotidian lives. Besides and moreover, some classical Daoist thinkers do not necessarily deny the merit of the Confucian teachings. Consider, for instance, the overview of earlier Chinese philosophy in the final chapter (no. 33) of the *Zhuangzi*, which is most certainly a late composition, where it is readily acknowledged that the practices found in the classical Confucian writings, including the action-guiding virtue of li, may be quite beneficial, although, as we might expect, the Daoist “loose” approach is considered superior.

<sup>39</sup> This is essentially my interpretation of li as presented in more detail in Geir Sigurðsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning: A Philosophical Interpretation* (State Univ. of New York Press, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Mengzi, *Mencius.*, ed. R. Eno (2016), 89.

<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that yi 義, which I understand as a sense of what is appropriate in each situation, constitutes the “connecting thread” of the Confucian tradition, e.g., as referred to by Xunzi. Cf. Sigurðsson, *Confucian Propriety*, 79–80.

Certainly, ancient Daoist writings such as the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi* tended to be critical of the social activism endorsed by Confucianism and of the particular Confucian teachings that are sometimes referred to as “virtues,” i.e. “humanness” (ren 仁), “wisdom” (zhi 智), “appropriateness” (yi 義) and “ritual” (li 禮), just to name those most frequently mentioned. Some passages in the *Daodejing* emphasize that a conspicuous allusion to the Confucian virtues is in fact a symptom of a decaying society, and thus that its cure partly consists in disposing of the terms altogether.<sup>42</sup> What seems to be the main object of the Daoist critique is the ostensible Confucian insistence that there is an actual state of affairs that corresponds or correlates to these virtues, in other words and more generally, that there is a correlation between names (ming 名) and actuality (shi 實). In Daoist writings, on the contrary, dao, identified as both the ongoing generative process and the supreme model for human activity, is generally associated with the nameless and the formless, with ineffability.<sup>43</sup> What seems to be a Confucian insistence of internalizing the virtues and finding a match or correlation with them is often ridiculed, not least in the *Zhuangzi*, perhaps in part because of the general assumption of the continuous transformation of reality in its entirety which makes such correlation unstable and at best transient and fleeting, but probably also because of the danger of slipping toward literal, inflexible and dogmatic teachings with all the hypocrisy that such teachings tend to give rise to.

While early Daoist thinkers referred to dao as an ineffable principle with which they confronted Confucianism with their explicitly formulated virtues, some thinkers associated with *xuanxue* 玄學 teachings (sometimes called “dark learning” or “Neo-Daoism”) such as He Yan 何晏 and Wang Bi 王弼 during the Wei-Jin period, whose disposition toward Confucianism was positive, took a step further in reading the virtues themselves as being ineffable. “Virtues are unnamable in the same way that Dao cannot be adequately described in words.”<sup>44</sup> Here is an attempt to interpret the “teaching of names” (mingjiao 名教), which is traditionally identified with Confucianism, through the Daoist notion of what is “natural” or “so of itself” (ziran 自然) or spontaneous.<sup>45</sup> He Yan and Wang Bi seem to have held that the Confucian “system”, so to speak, was more applicable than the Daoist one, but the former’s problem was that it tended, during its institutionalization in the Han dynasty, toward codification of its teaching on names in its insistence of the correlation between names and actuality. It therefore needed some “loosening” up by Daoist argumentation in order to be true to itself. He Yan, for instance, described Yan Hui, Confucius’s favorite disciple, as being “all about” or “complying with” (ren 任) dao, which is why he does not exceed appropriate limitations just like Confucius famously says of himself in *Analects* 2.4. He Yan regards being all about or complying with dao as the same as being emotionally disciplined through Confucian ritual. In a similar fashion, Wang Bi would suggest more vague descriptions appropriate to particular circumstances or instances that would actually correspond to the Confucian “virtues” without, however, falling back to the composition of a dogmatic kind of lists of virtues deemed acceptable; in other words, he would endorse vague moral guidelines which the individual is required to interpret and evaluate in each instance instead of specific and exact moral rules to be applied in the same manner in all comparable situations. Here is an attempt to reimagine the relationship between Confucian “learning” and Daoist “ziran,” which lends support to an approach to the Confucian li that is simultaneously less stringent and more demanding. It is less stringent by avoiding codification but more demanding in the sense of expecting more work on behalf of the individual immersed in the situation to interpret, evaluate and conceive an appropriate response to it.

This approach is congenial to the flexible interpretation of Confucianism that I discussed earlier as it “provides reasons why morality may transform over time or be expressed differently in various

42 Cf. *Daodejing*, §§18, 19 and 38, in *Laozi Zhuangzi zhijie*.

43 E.g., *Daodejing*, §§1, 32 and *Zhuangzi*, ch. 22, in *Laozi Zhuangzi zhijie*.

44 Paul J. D’Ambrosio, Hans-Rudolf Kantor, and Hans-Georg Moeller, “Incongruent Names: A Theme in the History of Chinese Philosophy”, *Dao* 17, no. 3 (2018): 316–17.

45 Paul J. D’Ambrosio, “Wei-Jin Period Xuanxue ‘Neo-Daoism’: Re-working the Relationship Between Confucian and Daoist Themes: Wei-Jin Period Xuanxue ‘Neo-Daoism’”, *Philosophy Compass* 11, no. 11 (2016): 621, 625.

situations.”<sup>46</sup> At the same time, however, it sheds a light on Confucius’s own method of illustrating morality, including the use of *li*, largely through specific examples instead of providing nominal definitions. In other words, Wang Bi’s interpretation is meant to be a further elaboration of an approach held by Confucius in his days which most likely was dogmatized among some of his later followers. This interpretation clearly has the advantage that it is an internal Chinese one, which relieves us of having to invent anything, but an even more important merit is that it brings together and consolidates the Confucian call for structures and the Daoist one of flexibility, which in combination may be an indication of how to meet present needs.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Considering the present predicament, there are three levels at which ritual action could be essential: First, as an integrative training scheme for young people, perhaps one that could be established and developed in our education systems.<sup>47</sup> Secondly, as a certain kind of self-help, a way to find or rather make some “structure” or “framework” in a social setting that constantly pushes us to remain fluid. I take this kind of ritual to be autopoietic, perhaps even an artistic invention of selfhood. Thirdly, perhaps, ritual could function as a symbolic political action of human collectivities. The latter would be a response to the liquidity that undermines any “patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies” and such political action.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, we might be seeing the construction of such rituals already at present. However, as has been discussed, that sort of ritual seems in many cases to be first and foremost reactionary, an at least partial attempt to return to the past or repeat an imaginary past. This is not viable. We need a different way. Perhaps a *li*-based ritual — a theory of ritual with the flexible kind of Confucian/Neo-Daoist interpretation — can be the answer.

Hartmut Rosa worries that our current state of social acceleration causes much pain and alienation, which undermines our relationship to the world (*Weltbeziehungen*). In this regard, I think it is worth quoting him at length:

I believe that we can only overcome alienation when we develop a new way or form of relating to the world as such. [...] I call this “resonance.” Resonance, for me, is the opposite and alternative to alienation. We are non-alienated from a group of people (for example, your family) or a social condition (for example, your workplace), when there is a resonating, responsive relationship between you and them. We all know what such moments or relationships of resonance are: when we freely moved and connected, but also capable of reaching out and connecting ourselves. Resonance, however, is not an emotional state that we can realize on our own. It is a form or a mode of relationship, and therefore, a feature of the social world. Hence, we can only make our world more resonant and less alienating when we change our own attitudes, but also the structures of our social and economic world. Economic democracy, a basic income, and the idea of resonance might be essential components for such a change.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, one of the questions we might want to ask is whether it can be shown that ritual gives rise to or creates resonance? My thesis is that this would very much apply to *li*-inspired ritual. Its aim or purpose is precisely to stimulate or create such resonance by enabling us to focus our attention to detail in the communication we have with others (and even ourselves), thus also to help us savour the moment we share with them (and, again, ourselves), and to contribute to the formation of non-alienated relationships with the groups we make up a part of in our daily activities. All this requires more attention to the moment, to the present, and therefore also reduces the speed at which we operate.

The greatest challenge may consist in finding ways to introduce ritual into our secularized and largely non-formalized ways of living, but a step in that direction consists in revealing to ourselves that there

46 D’Ambrosio, Kantor, and Moeller, “Incongruent Names: A Theme in the History of Chinese Philosophy”, 317.

47 Colin Lewis provides a discussion of this aspect of the Confucian *li* in this volume, cf. “Xunzi’s Ritual Model and Modern Moral Education”. *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, No.2 (2021).

48 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 6.

49 Hartmut Rosa, “Social Acceleration and the Need for Speed.”, interview by Claudio Gallo, June 21, 2015.



are aspects of our social lives already containing elements that not only could be subsumed under such behavior but could also afford more extension. It is all up to us as social individuals.<sup>50</sup>

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