



Confucius and the varifocal stance

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 10 November 2022

Karyn Lai  and Mog Stapleton 



Karyn Lai

Affiliation: School of Humanities and Languages, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW 2052, Australia
k.lai@unsw.edu.au <https://research.unsw.edu.au/people/professor-karyn-lynn-lai>

Mog Stapleton

Affiliation: Department of Philosophy & Institute of Wisdom in China, East China Normal University, 200241 Shanghai, P. R. China
mog.stapleton.philosophy@gmail.com <https://philpeople.org/profiles/mog-stapleton>

Commentary

Related commentaries

Metrics

Article contents

Abstract

We put the bifocal stance theory (BST) into dialogue with the Confucian approach to ritual. The aim of the commentary is two-fold: To draw on BST to provide an explanatory framework for a Confucian approach to social learning and, while doing so, to show how Chinese (Confucian) philosophy can contribute to debates in cultural evolution.

Type

Open Peer Commentary

Information

Behavioral and Brain Sciences, Volume 45, 2022, e260

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X22001303>



Copyright

Copyright © The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press

The idea of ritual as an integral aspect of life features prominently in the Confucian tradition, elements of which have been embraced by some East Asian societies for over 2,000 years. We see in the *Analects* (1965) (a pre-200 BCE multi-authored text capturing the lives of the early Confucians; see Nylan, 2014; Olberding, 2014) close alignments with the claim in the target article. Among these is the commitment to behaviours which strongly activate the ritual stance, that include relatively mundane behavioural conventions. In Confucian philosophy, appropriate ritual practices (*li* 禮) were to guide human interactions not only in the formalized contexts of official courts (e.g., *Analects* sects. 3.17–3.19), but also in daily life and domestic contexts (A2.5, 3.26). There is emphasis on both strict adherence to ritual (A3.17) and ritual's being indispensable in human relationality – and hence on ritual's centrality to human wellbeing (A2.3, 8.2). Ritual practices were closely aligned with music (*yue* 樂), both being important features of cultural evolution and human collaboration (A17.11; see Lai, 2003). Also in line with the target article's emphasis on flexible shifting between the ritual and instrumental stances, the Confucian approach to ethico-social learning encompasses and interweaves both stances: A person participates in social life via engaging in ritual but may at the same time forge new practices in being goal-oriented. In this way, individuals participate in and contribute to the ongoing evolution of their cultural tradition.

Approaching the role of Confucian ritual through the lens of the bifocal stance theory (BST) provides a new interpretive framework for understanding famously intriguing passages such as *Analects* 9.3. There, Confucius abandons the requirement of a linen cap at a ceremony, instead wearing one of silk (as silk was more economical) but, in relation to another ritual, he adheres to the traditional practice of bowing *before* he ascends the steps to an altar (as he deemed the emergent practice of bowing *after* ascending the steps irreverent). The flexible shifting between ritual and instrumental stances in BST thus aptly captures the way in which ritual in the *Analects* is not merely focused on compliance but on the continual development of cultural forms that enable human flourishing, and is thus open to ongoing evolution (Lai, 2006; Olberding, 2012).

In the exploration of Confucian ritual through BST, we also propose that Confucian ritual may serve as a helpful case study of BST in practice, prompting some questions about BST. It is likely that ritual has played a significant role in the successful transmission of Confucian culture across millennia; this is partly fuelled by Confucian ritual's being fundamental to, and partially constitutive of, human interactions and relationality. Here, we focus on two interrelated tensions that emerge when BST is placed in dialogue with the Confucian approach: The relation between the ritual and instrumental stances, and the tension between transmission and “tailoring.”

The BST proposes that the ritual and instrumental stances are the mechanisms by which human culture is both transmitted in high fidelity, and evolves through innovations. These are presented as a binary, of flexible shifting between the two stances as a result of attending to different aspects of the learning environment. Nevertheless, the use of the “bifocal” metaphor indicates that one is either taking one

stance or the other. And yet the authors also talk about “the flexibility with which humans alternate between varying degrees of high-fidelity copying and innovation” (target article, sect. 1, para. 3). This indicates that they have in mind something rather less binary than the bifocal metaphor suggests, with the stances having gradations within and between them that are activated in a context-sensitive manner. Perhaps we should think of the glasses through which the observer views others' actions rather as having *varifocal* lenses; lenses that have the ritual and instrumental binary at their extremes but a gradation between these, allowing the wearer to slip between degrees of the stances spontaneously, unreflectively and in quick succession. Such fluency is underscored in Confucius' adept handling of ritual such as we see in *Analects* 9.3.

Looking at how ritual is embraced in Confucianism can give us some conceptual tools for capturing the subtleties of the appropriate movement between stances in response to contexts. We have seen above that while it was important for Confucius to transmit ritual faithfully, nevertheless there is some place for innovation. But, more than this, Confucius seems to expect a measure of discretion in ritual behaviour. On one occasion he expressed disappointment that his followers engaged in culturally refined behaviours, but did not know how to tailor (*cai* 裁) their responses fittingly to the situation (A5.22). The Confucian tradition is acutely aware that such capacities, to tailor one's responses fittingly, need to be honed and cultivated (Cua, 1978; Lai, 2018; Li & Ni, 2014). The transmission of culture is not through those who mindlessly imitate or comply with ritual behaviours – what the text calls the “village worthy,” who is a “thief of virtue” (A17.13, see also 6.13; see Slingerland, 2003, pp. 205–206).

A ritual is not merely performed; it is enacted within a community that embraces it. This makes rituals similar to communal memory traces, in that they are re-activated when retrieved and are therefore vulnerable to changes (insertions, deletions, etc.). Their transmission relies on a delicate balance between high-fidelity imitation and differences in each enaction; differences which are physical and temperamental, but also a result of tailoring the specific ritual to the relevant context. The entire process, moreover, derives legitimacy (or not) within the inherited cultural tradition. How should we understand this “tailoring” within the BST? Tailoring is not mere innovation. It seems to neither be quite captured by the ritual stance, nor the instrumental stance: While it takes place within the ritual stance it requires a context and goal-sensitivity that is more akin to the instrumental stance. Does tailoring therefore emerge as a function of the movement between the stances? Or should we perhaps be looking to include it as a new capacity in the cognitive gadget toolbox?

Financial support

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest

None.

References

- ⤴ Cua, A. (1978). Dimensions of moral creativity. Pennsylvania State University Press. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Lai, K. (2003). Confucian moral cultivation: Some parallels with musical training. In Chong, K. C., Tan, S.-H. & Ten, C. L. (Eds.), *The moral circle and the self: Chinese and western approaches* (pp. 107–139). Open Court. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Lai, K. (2006). *Li* in the *Analects*: Training in moral competence and the question of flexibility. *Philosophy East and West*, 56(1), 69–83. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Lai, K. (2018). Learning to be reliable: Confucius' *Analects*. In Lai, K. L., Benitez, R. & Kim, H. J. (Eds.), *Cultivating a good life in early Chinese and ancient Greek philosophy perspectives and reverberations* (pp. 193–207). Bloomsbury. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Li, C., & Ni, P. (Eds.). (2014). *Moral cultivation and Confucian character: Engaging Joel J. Kupperman*. State University of New York Press. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Nylan, M. (Ed.), Leys, S (trans.). (2014) *The Analects: A Norton critical edition*. W. W. Norton. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Olberding, A. (2012). *Moral exemplars in the Analects: The good person is that*. Routledge. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Olberding, A. (Ed.). (2014) *Dao companion to the Analects*. Springer. [CrossRef](#) [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ Slingerland, E. (trans.) (2003). *Confucius Analects: With selections from traditional commentaries*. Hackett. [Google Scholar](#)
- ⤴ *The Analects with Commentaries (Lunyu yi zhu)* (1965). Yang Bo-jun, Beijing Zhonghua shu ju, Beijing. [Google Scholar](#)

✔ Access

In response to: **Tradition and invention: The bifocal stance theory of cultural evolution**

[Related commentaries](#) (25) [Author response](#)