Is the Weissean Surrogate the Latest Philosophical “Development” of the Confucian Ritual? †

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† Presented at the International Workshop Habits and Rituals (H&R 2021), IS4SI Summit 2021, Online, 12–19 September 2021.

Abstract: What is meant by ritual (li) in the Confucian tradition—mostly Xunzi—might be said to be the root of three different concepts—“stages” or concept—“developments” in European philosophy. The first stage is the concept of habit, from the Aristotelian “hexis” to Bourdieu’s “habitus”. The second is the sign, as developed by the American Pragmatists and, in Europe, by Saussure. There is a third, relatively recent stage, as I would classify it, which is Paul Weiss’ surrogate. Weiss uses the pragmatist theorization of habit to construct his original concept of the surrogates. The above stages might be chronological in the way they appear (habit, sign, surrogate), but one does not erase the other. They have the same root—which I would like to argue is the ritual—and they build on it, while each differentiates ritual in its own way. They are distinctive concepts but, at the same time, are related to one another.

Keywords: ritual (li); habit; hexis; habitus; sign; surrogate(s); Chinese philosophy; Confucianism; Xunzi; pragmatism; Paul Weiss

1. Introduction

What is meant by ritual (li) in the Confucian tradition—mostly as elaborated by Xunzi—might be said to be the root of three different concept—“stages” or concept—“developments” in European philosophy.

The first stage is the concept of habit, from the Aristotelian hexis to Bourdieu’s “habitus”. The second stage might be said to be the sign, as developed by the American Pragmatists (especially Peirce), and in Europe, by Saussure, in a different way.

There is a third, relatively recent stage, as I would classify it, which is Paul Weiss’ surrogate. Weiss uses the pragmatist theorization of habit, which is mostly a sign, to construct his original concept of the surrogates.

The above stages might be chronological in the way they appear (habit, sign, surrogate) but one does not erase the other. They have the same root—which I would like to argue is the ritual—and they build on it, while each differentiates ritual in its own way. They are distinctive concepts but, at the same time, are related to one another. Ritual, I think, is their conceptual root, and Chinese (Confucian) philosophy is the one place where ritual is extensively discussed philosophically. Therefore, I will start from the origins of li (ritual), then the adaptation from Chinese philosophical schools—for example, the Confucian ritual (especially Xunzi)—and show how ritual becomes habit, sign and, most recently, surrogate. The ritual is the most primitive term/concept, both chronologically and semantically. It is the simplest one, and the closest to everyday life. It connotes narrow physical practicalities, while the habit, the sign and, especially, the surrogates, end up including and connoting metaphysical theorizations.
Through the course of this investigation, I will also stress how ritual (li) and its developments are the source or origin, and the original problem and preoccupation, of all Philosophy.

Methodologically speaking, I will greatly stress the Chinese conceptualization of the ritual as Li, with many of its shades and modifications through time, and thinkers; while doing so, it will be accompanied by what I call its “philosophical developments” in a comparative or other way.

2. Traditional Views of Li and Their Modifications by Chinese Philosophical Schools

Humans began arriving and settling in China around 5000 B.C.A. This period, lasting about two millennia, is known as the Period of Jade. The word Jade is representative of a ritual culture developed at this time. Jades were offered for sacrifice rituals [1] (p. 448). The newly arrived people there, as in every other newfoundland, needed a connection with something to keep going, as a kind of security, a sense of belonging, team connections, and identity. This was achieved in China, as elsewhere, through the worship of ancestors and of natural spirits. First of all, these worship rituals were needed, before the formation of a people, which came much later in the agricultural times, for the formation of family ties, clans, and tribes.

Li (ritual) is a factor that helped establish hierarchies between people of different ages, and a relationship between the spirits of nature and the ancestors (ancestral spirits), which is an establishment of a sense of a past, present, and future and, in general, a sense of time [1] (pp. 448–449). Li was a way of preserving and protecting life, which, as Chung-ying Cheng notes, along with reality, constitute the two main problems that Philosophy invents or discovers (doubtful which of the two), and is occupied with [1] (p. 446). Therefore, the origins of philosophy in general, and in particular, here, of Chinese philosophy, are to be found in the li, which, at first, was translated as rite or ritual, and, when taken by the first theoreticians—that is, thinkers or philosophers—was transformed in a plurality of ways, but at the core is always the basic etymology of the ritual.

In the 12th Century B.C.A, the Zhou dynasty was responsible for integrating a large number of groups and for unifying them into a larger one under its control. The socio-economy of agriculture appeared at the same era, and li became more institutionalized “as a system of social ordering” (Ibid., p. 450). The institutionalized li served as a social factor and resembles the familiar li from Chinese philosophy, especially the well-known Confucian tradition. In this sense, li came to imply “an existential communicability and required mutual acknowledgement between two different entities in a framework of totality” [1] (p. 450). Li, therefore, is the means towards a harmony of different entities (jing), which is the necessary condition for a society to exist and to function. This universal ideal unity (of nature/cosmos and humans) is what characterized ancient philosophies and is very much preserved in modern-day Asian philosophy. The ruler/king/sage had to possess the necessary virtues (de) derived from heaven (tianming), to unite the people and to make them live in harmony. In other words, the role of the ruler was to drive humans towards what is mandated by the heavens.

Maybe the fact that zhi (habits of thought) and li (rituals/habits of affection) exist side by side in Chinese thought sends the message in the contemporary debate about emotions, that the intellectual (thought) is not separated from affection (emotion). They both come down to rituals, and they are interconnected in many ways, maybe even inseparable.

Each philosophical school was formed as a response to each disturbance of li. The two main traditions that attempted to re-define li can be categorized as the tradition of humanism and the tradition of naturalism. Before moving on to see how li appears in each tradition and the representative philosophical schools, it should be stressed that, as already briefly mentioned, ritual (li) is the causation of philosophy, and all philosophy starts from it, as it is the causation of life in a civilized society, and all societies start from it. All other concepts of (Chinese) philosophy are secondary to ritual and are formed in order to accompany and support its meaning and its modification and direction as a concept,
always having, at the end of the teleological line, the preservation of life (in a civilized society, which demands sociopolitical stability, unity, and harmony—ding in Mencius terms). Differences within philosophy itself—that is, theories, which evolve into philosophical schools—“differ in their attitudes towards preserving or casting off the tradition of li” [1] (p. 460).

Li and the philosophical schools that arose from its discussion can be categorized into three developments, according to Chung-ying Cheng: first, the deconstructive position, development, or attitude of Daoism; second, the reconstructive position of Confucianism and Mohism; and third, the constructionism of Legalists [1] (pp. 468–478). Of course, there are schools that are not included in any of these categories.

3. From Ritual (Li) to Habit

The theoretical development of habit began with the Aristotelian hexis. For Aristotle, the habits that one has lead him to virtue; with virtue, one achieves eudaimonia, the telos of his ethics. Similarly, the Stoics saw happiness as a result of askesis, which is training, and which presupposes certain routines, rituals, or habits. This is similar to the Confucian understanding of the connection between virtue and habit.

For Montaigne, habit is a “second nature”, which is something made, i.e., artificial; the same applies to Xunzi’s understanding of ritual as an artificial convention added to the nature of humans, as analyzed later.

In modern and later times, habit became much more complicated and penetrated all different levels of epistemology, ethics, metaphysics, neurophysiology, etc. The only contribution I will mention here is that of Catherine Malabou and her notion of the plasticity of the brain, which, in a long line of similar approaches, means that the human learns habits that change the brain, and can then re-learn different ones, after which the brain will change again, and so on. This shows that the conception of habit as second nature, while still becoming part of the human’s nature (brain, or body, or soul) persists.

In recent approaches, habit has been applied as a method or a process of non-alive objects as well, e.g., the artificial intelligence and the web, which learn by repetition.

4. From Ritual (Li) in Xunzi, to Sign (Semiotics) in Pragmatism

Xunzi’s idea of how the Chinese society would become united and orderly was the conceptualization of the ritual (li) as convention. Without conventions, civilization is impossible, because the nature of humans—if left unchecked and to its own devices—is selfish and infant-like.

Conventions in Xunzi include a large spectrum of “conventional signs” [2] (p. 153), namely, anything from “styles of movement, gestures for communication, language, the habits forming social institutions, and the formal and informal dances of social intercourse” [2] (pp. 18–19) to “court rituals”, etc. [2] (pp. 153–154).

For Xunzi, the basic human feeling that nature (Heaven and Earth) grants to humans is desire. However, the direction of this desire—that is, what to desire—is not engraved in the human naturally. Nature gives humans senses, emotions, bodies, and a governing mind, but no instructions of how to use them. Thus, conventions need to intervene in order for a society to be sustained: “Human beings cannot be human without the ritual conventions” [2] (p. 155)—that is, ritual is necessary for humans in civilization, as we define it, to exist and to remain in ordered societies, with co-operation towards certain goals.

In William James’ words, everything that nature deposits on the human is a “blooming, buzzing confusion” [2] (p. 28, cited in). Conventions are learned signs; therefore, for Xunzi, learning (xue) is an important part of his theory, because it brings humaneness (ren) to the human organism and turns it into a human being. Learning is ritualizing. Here, once more, one can see how additive concepts, in this case, xue, ren, and zhi (the rational mind), have developed in order to accommodate the original problem/solution/preoccuption of li. Zhi, yi, qi, sheng, zhong, ming, ren, dao, are all helping to define and theorize the ritual (li). John Dewey similarly viewed education as having a “social function” [3] (p. 71), [4] (p. 10).
In order to better understand the theoretical positions and connections of these terms inside Xunzi’s theory of ritual, it is important to note that there are two kinds of li. Li as used here, which is ritual, and a broader sense of li, which signifies “pattern” or “coherence” and includes li as ritual [3] (p. 79). Li as pattern also includes yi, which is appropriateness [3] (p. 79). This interpretation of li, as pattern, responds more to natural patterns or principles, while li as ritual corresponds to how these patterns are brought into human society [3] (p. 79). The correlation of nature as a paradigmatic axis of signs for human thought and behavior (action), once more, echoes the pragmatists.

Rituals are conventions and conventions are signs; semiotics is the study of these signs. American pragmatists (Peirce, Dewey, James, Schiller, Mead, and others) were occupied with semiotics; in Europe, it was mainly Saussure who focused on semiotics, but his take was mainly semiotics as a study of signs in a text, which is language-semiotics. For the pragmatists, semiotics is more nature-semiotics, because nature sets the paradigm, whereas, in Saussure, it is language that does this. The civilized society’s core definition is ritual or semiotics, that is, all societies are defined by specific conventional signs.

For Confucians, including Xunzi, the origin of the specific rituals are the sage-kings. They set out what the appropriate rituals would be for the ideal society. John Dewey modernizes this with his contribution on the method of imagination [2] (p. 21). Instead of the sage-kings as the deciders, it is imagination that imagines solutions and sets them to rituals.

The innovations of the pragmatists are, of course, many more, as, for example, the fact that they extended the analysis of signs by categorizing them into three parts, according to Peirce’s mapping of the categorization [2] (pp. 30–32).

In other words, both semiotics and the theory of ritual contribute to integrity within the human, as a personality, within family and other relationships, and within the whole of society. For Xunzi, music, which can be extended to mean art — for the Chinese was anything that had beauty, as a “perfection of civilized life” [2] (p. 36) — also contributes to making all the above coherent and integral. As I see it, art has its own rituals, conventions, or signs that are in a rhythm or “ritual propriety” (to use a Confucian term); therefore, it motivates society to embrace its perfect arrangement rituals.

5. Surrogates Comparatively to Signs and Habits, and Li Comparatively to Surrogates

Paul Weiss introduced the original concept of surrogates to philosophy [5]. We are all surrogates of others, and others are surrogates of us. We all make use of and at the same time we all are used as surrogates; even infants and their parents make use of each other as surrogates of each other. Institutions or abstract concepts, such as languages, habits, techniques, etc., are also used as surrogates. This is how we interact and interrelate in human society and the natural environment. Society, in order to function as such, needs parts of it to take surrogative roles, so that the ones who become surrogates function where and when somebody else cannot. Whether a surrogate fulfills its role is determined by the outcome of its use or function. Society has a surrogative order.

“To be human”, according to Paul Weiss, “is to own and make use of one’s person”; that is, to be human is to own and use surrogates, and be used as a surrogate [5] (p. 44). Perhaps it is society and civilization that made humans accountable and responsible, and there was a time when, in nature, they too were only organisms [5] (pp. 65–66). Accordingly, to be human is to use rituals, as Xunzi argues, and to use habits, as mostly the pragmatists, Hume and others also argued. This stream of ritual-habit-sign-surrogates advances humans from organisms to persons by giving them human responsibility.

How would we, life, being, and reality, be without surrogates? Paul Weiss says that “[w]ithout surrogates, we would rest with or accept what happens to occur” [5] (pp. 53–54). Weiss explains further that “[s]urrogates are accepted because they seem to provide new and perhaps even better opportunities to obtain or to achieve what is desirable” [5] (p. 54). Xunzi again stated that, without rituals, human nature would be uncontrollable, and it
would express itself as selfishness and other infant-like appearances. Society would not be possible.

Regarding the universality of surrogacy, I would add that Weiss states that the sciences, the arts, the explorations, the adventures, and, in general, everything that we do or be can have surrogative roles; even the beating of the heart, can be replaced by a surrogate [5] (p. 68). The same is what Xunzi and the pragmatists theorized art and education to be: social rituals or functions, respectively.

6. Conclusions

I have tried to briefly go through the modifications that produced habit from ritual, sign from habit and ritual, and surrogates from all the others. The Weissean surrogates are, in my view, and my main proposal here, the latest modification, development, or advancement of the very first conceptualization of how being, reality, cosmos, society, and the human being function or should function in order to fulfill their capacities, which, in Aristotle, was expressed as endelecheia (ἐνδελέχεια), and, in Confucian philosophy, which includes Xunzi, is encompassed, I believe, in the word-concept of ren.

Ritual began outside philosophy, as an economics or politics of managing survival and prosperity of humans, given the need to live in societies in order to ensure both of them; it then entered philosophy, in particular Chinese philosophy, for the reason expressed: philosophers were trying to find ways or solutions on how ritual should be modified in order to re-unite and reaffirm society, after the collapse of the Zhou dynasty. Then, for most of the history of thought, this core concept of ritual was expressed as habit, from Aristotle to recent times, followed by another modification or addition to the concept with semiotics; the last addition, which I proposed here, as it has not been proposed elsewhere, is the surrogates.

Every new term brought new theorizations in addition or in place of the ones included in other terms, which I tried to briefly list, especially between the ritual and the sign. The essential advancement and renovation that took place with the surrogates indicates how explicitly surrogates penetrate the fiber of reality, being, society, behavior, action, and all other metaphysical threads of human perceivability, and admit the molecular level of those metaphysics to be ritual, to which everything is deducted and inducted. Moreover, surrogates are used in and include an additional innovative and original level of meta-theorization and ritual-habit-sign—that is, inside the concept of surrogates lies the function of it as surrogative. It is descriptive of itself, as is, in a lesser way, the concept of sign: it describes a function that is its own function. Surrogates describe surrogates that are surrogates for surrogates, as for rituals, customs, and habits (and, given Weiss’s pragmatist background, of sign, too). For this, I repeat this quotation from Weiss: “Languages, techniques, habits, customs, parents, custodians, and officials all carry out surrogative roles” [5] (pp. xvii–xviii; emphasis mine).

What is certainly above all others is this: we are physical beings that function upon metaphysical surmises. Such metaphysical surmises have come in the history of our thought with the names of ritual, habit, sign, and surrogates.

Funding: This research received no external funding.


Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not Applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.
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