

PATRICIA BUCKLEY EBREY

Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China

A Social History of Writing about Rites



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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF
WRITING ABOUT RITES

Patricia Buckley Ebrey

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For my parents

Miriam and John Buckley

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PREFACE

CONFUCIAN scholars wrote books about ritual. Funerals, weddings, and ancestral rites were prominent features of family life in China, giving drama to transitions in people's lives. In this book I try to link these texts to these rituals. I trace the multistranded connections between Chinese family rituals, the Confucian texts that specified how to perform these rites, and the society in which rituals were performed and books written. I try to show the complex interaction of authors' experiences, the ideas they articulated, the common ideas diffused throughout society, the intended and unintended effects of the efforts of the state and other privileged groups to control ideas and practices, and the ritual behavior of people at various social levels. The subtle distinctions among different ways of thinking about ritual are important to the story of this book, but no more important than the social and cultural processes through which texts were written, circulated, interpreted, and used as guides to actions.

Since in this book I emphasize how ideas take shape in social contexts, it is only right to point out how my own have been so shaped. Over the past six years, my approach to the subject of this book has been sharpened and redirected as a result of interaction with other scholars at conferences, meetings, and colloquia. These include the conferences on Neo-Confucian Education (1984), Death Rituals (1985), Religion and Society in the T'ang and Sung (1989), and Rituals and Scriptures in Chinese Popular Religion (1990), as well as seminars and colloquia at Columbia, Harvard, Illinois, Michigan, and Princeton. Similarly the final shape of this book reflects my response to the comments of scholars who read one or another of three successive drafts. These include four colleagues at the University of Illinois: Ann Anagnost, Kai-wing Chow, Peter Gregory, and JaHyun Haboush; and seven colleagues from elsewhere—Peter Bol of Harvard University, Beverly Bossler of Connecticut College, Wing-tsit Chan of Chatham College, Robert Hymes of Columbia University, Frederic Mote of Princeton University, Kidder Smith of Bowdoin College, and Rubie Watson of the University of Pittsburgh. All of these readers made remarks that sent me back to my material and forced me to rethink inferences I was drawing from it. Even when I did not follow their advice, it shaped my next draft, as I presented more evidence, brought in new arguments, or shifted my emphasis. I am thus very much in their debt.

Material circumstances also influenced the course of my work on this book. I probably would not have translated Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals* without the released time made possible by grants from the translation program of the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1986 and 1989. And I would not

have written this book had I not been forced, when translating that text, to come to grips with the social, intellectual, and political context in which it was written and used. A grant from the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China for short trips to China in the summers of 1988 and 1989 made it possible for me to locate and read the Ming and Ch'ing ritual manuals central to my arguments about texts. I would not have been able to complete this book as quickly without the research assistant supported by funds from the Research Board of the University of Illinois during the final year of my work. Miss Chiu-yueh Lai kept me from sinking under the weight of endless details by cheerfully and conscientiously checking citations, comparing texts, and typing the bibliography into a Chinese word-processing system.

Need I add that my family situation was not irrelevant. As always, I have found it easier to absorb myself in the history of China because I have a husband who assumes my work is important and two good-natured sons who make sure I do not let it become too important. Moreover, the typically American ways they keep ritual to a minimum in our family served to remind me that I was studying a phenomenon relatively far from my own experience.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCSLCT	<i>Chih-chai shu-lu chieh-t' i</i>
CL	<i>Chu Tzu chia-li (Chu Tzu ch' eng-shu ed.)</i>
CLCS	<i>Chia-li chi-shuo (1589 ed.)</i>
CLIC	<i>Chia-li i-chieh (Ch' iu Chün's)</i>
CLHT	<i>Chia-li hui-t' ung (T' ang To's)</i>
c.s.	<i>chin-shih degree</i>
CTC	<i>Chang Tsai chi</i>
DMB	<i>Dictionary of Ming Biography, ed. Goodrich and Fang</i>
ECC	<i>Erh Ch' eng chi</i>
HLTC	<i>Hsing-li ta-ch' üan (1415 ed.)</i>
NHC	<i>Nan-hsüan chi</i>
NP	<i>Chu Tzu nien-p' u</i>
PHTCC	<i>Pei-hsi ta-ch' üan chi</i>
SKCS	<i>Ssu-k' u ch' üan-shu</i>
SMSSI	<i>Ssu-ma shih shu-i</i>
SMWCKCCC	<i>Ssu-ma Wen-cheng kung ch' uan-chia chi</i>
SS	<i>Sung shih</i>
TLC	<i>Tung-lai chi</i>
TSCC	<i>Ts' ung-shu chi-ch' eng</i>
WC	<i>Chu Wen-kung wen-chi</i>
YL	<i>Chu Tzu yü-lei</i>

Citations of the classics generally give first an indication of the chapter or section, numbered in the *Analects* and *Mencius* but romanized in the other classics. After this is given a page reference in the *Shih-san ching chu-shu* edition and where available a page reference to an English translation. These references are for convenience only; all of the translations given here are my own.

For full bibliographic information, see Sources Cited.

Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China

INTRODUCTION

SCHOLARS of Chinese civilization have often identified ancestor-oriented family rituals as keys to Chinese culture. In 1849 the missionary and later diplomat S. W. Williams wrote that ancestral rites had had “an influence in the formation of Chinese character, in upholding good order, promoting industry, and cultivating habits of peaceful thrift, beyond all estimation.”¹ Benjamin Schwartz has described “the orientation to ancestor worship” as “central to the entire development of Chinese civilization”² and Francis L. K. Hsu as “an active ingredient in every aspect of Chinese society.”³ Distinctive features of Chinese family organization have been attributed to ideas about ancestors; Maurice Freedman, for instance, explained that the popular idea that “the dead are somehow dependent on the living for sustenance and support” made it “essential that men and women leave behind them offspring, borne or adopted, to serve them in their mortuary needs.”⁴ Most observers have judged the social effects of ancestor-oriented rites in largely positive terms. Criticisms have also sometimes been voiced, however. James Addison charged these rites with fostering extreme conservatism: “any change appears disrespectful to the departed; and the dead thus rule the living.”⁵ Edwin D. Harvey argued that they threatened “the welfare and standards of living of the masses” by promoting large families.⁶

Periodic offerings of food and drink to ancestors were the ancestor-oriented ritual par excellence, but ancestors were also central to the other family rituals: cappings and pinning (initiation ceremonies for men and women respectively), weddings, and funerals. Capping and pinning introduce family members to the ancestors as adults and prepare them for marriage. Marriages provide for new family members who will serve the ancestors. Funerals and burials concern the gradual transformation of the dead into ancestral spirits. The way people performed these rituals not only enhanced their understandings of an-

¹ Williams, “The Worship of Ancestors among the Chinese,” p. 30. Cf. Johnston, *Lion and Dragon in Northern China*, p. 349.

² Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China*, pp. 20–21. Cf. Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, p. 133.

³ Hsu, *Americans and Chinese*, pp. 230–31.

⁴ Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*, p. 88. Cf. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p. 296.

⁵ Addison, *Chinese Ancestor Worship*, p. 56.

⁶ Harvey, *The Mind of China*, p. 230.

cestors, but also contributed to the relatively high degree of social integration in late imperial China. James Watson and Evelyn Rawski have asserted that “the rituals performed at marriage and at death were central to definitions of Chinese cultural identity.”⁷

The importance of family rituals in Chinese society and culture is not surprising in comparative terms. Anthropologists studying a wide variety of societies have repeatedly shown how rituals create and convey basic cultural premises.⁸ Through the performance of rituals people act out many of the most fundamental structures of meaning in their society, the sets of ideas and discriminations that help them interpret themselves and their relations to others. Ritual action, thus, helps reproduce culture, especially the realm of culture that seldom enters into conscious choice, the realm taken for granted, left outside the limits of debate. The principles conveyed in this way frequently serve to legitimate the social and political structure, making social distinctions part of what is taken to be in the nature of things. Participation in rituals is a public and bodily way to acknowledge these social and cosmic orders. Yet rituals do not simply express distinctions. Through a symbolic logic special to rituals, distinctions can be both expressed and denied; a single ritual or ritual sequence can both confirm distinctions and overcome them, creating sentiments of solidarity and unity. Rituals, thus, do not simply reinforce the principles of a society that exists for other reasons; they are implicated in the creation of the distinctions on which the society is based and the dynamics of resolving conflicts.⁹ In the Chinese case, it has long been recognized that notions of patrilineality and assumptions about the mutual dependence of the living and the dead—ideas that structured Chinese kinship organization—were conveyed through family rituals. Conceptions of gender inequalities and social hierarchies that were basic to social relations beyond kinship—how to serve and be served, the ambiguities of dependence and deference—were also re-

⁷ Watson and Rawski, eds., *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, p. ix.

⁸ For the purposes used here, *ritual* may be defined as culturally constructed, patterned sequences of acts. Although anthropologists offer a wide variety of definitions of ritual, few are so narrow as to exclude the consciously staged, special-occasion rituals discussed in this book. Anthropologists often phrase their topic in terms of ritual rather than religion to avoid having to distinguish religion from the sorts of activities generally considered magic, superstition, or dabbling in the occult and also to bring out the structural similarities of religious and secular rituals.

Focus on ritual also works well in the Chinese case, as the religious dimensions of family rituals not only varied from ritual to ritual (weddings were less involved with the realm of ancestors than funerals were), but from person to person as understandings of ancestors were highly variable. Ritual as a conceptual focus also works well because there are broad similarities between modern ways of thinking about ritual and Chinese conceptions of *li*. For a discussion of these similarities, see Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk*, pp. 20–30.

⁹ For a variety of good discussions of anthropological approaches to ritual, see Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, pp. 19–35; Bloch, *From Blessing to Violence*, esp. pp. 1–11; Tambiah, *Culture, Thought, and Social Action*, pp. 123–66; Moore and Myerhoff, eds., “Introduction,” in *Secular Ritual*.

produced through the performance of weddings, funerals, and ancestral rites.¹⁰

What does make the Chinese case unusual is the longevity of much of the symbolic content of these family rituals. Many steps described in the early classics as aristocratic practice continued to be performed two thousand years later by common people, despite great changes in social structure and the introduction of radically different cosmological conceptions with Buddhism. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, nearly every home had an ancestral altar where offerings were made at regular intervals. For major rites all the members of the family would assemble and show obeisance.¹¹ Betrothals were negotiated between family heads with the help of go-betweens and confirmed with the exchange of gifts. Grooms fetched their brides to their own homes, where the major festivities took place.¹² Funerals regularly involved wailing, placing food and drink before a symbol of the deceased, mourning garments, notification of friends and relatives, and visits of condolence. Bodies were laid out in clothes, wrapped in shrouds, and placed in thick coffins. The procession to the graveyard was a major public ceremony, and post-burial rites of various sorts were commonly performed.¹³ If rituals convey basic cosmic principles legitimating the social order, how could the same principles legitimate markedly different social formations? If family rituals validate the social distinctions underlying family organization, how could they work as well in different types of families? Historical investigation can provide insight into these questions because it allows one to see the effects of change and thus to distinguish correspondences and co-occurrences from causes and effects.¹⁴

¹⁰ Despite general recognition of these relationships, there have been relatively few detailed analyses of the meanings conveyed by Chinese family rituals. But see Thompson, "Death, Food, and Fertility," for an analysis of the "semantics" of food in funerary rituals in modern Taiwan; Martin, "Gender and Ideological Differences in Representations of Life and Death," also on funeral rituals; and Zito, "City Gods, Filiality, and Hegemony in Late Imperial China," on imperial ancestral rites. See also, for a more general account, Freedman, "Ritual Aspects of Chinese Kinship and Marriage."

¹¹ Descriptions of how people performed ancestral rites are found in Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* 1:217–35; Gray, *China*, pp. 84–85, 320–22; Johnston, *Lion and Dragon*, pp. 276–81; Duara, *Culture, Power, and the State*, pp. 96–100; Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*, pp. 50–52, 183–92; Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors*, pp. 93–102; Ahern, *Cult of the Dead*, pp. 91–174; Harrell, *Ploughshare Village*, pp. 194–206; Weller, *Unities and Diversities*, pp. 24–28.

¹² For descriptions of weddings, see Doolittle, *Social Life*, 1:65–98; Gray, *China*, pp. 189–212; Fielde, *Corner of Cathay*, pp. 35–44; Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions* 1:29–39; Freedman, *Study of Chinese Society*, pp. 235–72; Cohen, *House United, House Divided*, pp. 149–91; Rubie Watson, "Class Differences and Affinal Relations in South China."

¹³ The fullest description of mortuary rites is de Groot, *Religious System of China*, but see also Doolittle, *Social Life* 1:168–216; Gray, *China*, pp. 278–328; Fielde, *Corner of Cathay*, pp. 49–70; Doré, *Researches* 1:41–68; Walshe, "Some Chinese Funeral Customs."

¹⁴ Anthropologists are coming to recognize the importance of historical investigations into questions of this sort. Bloch, in *From Blessing to Violence*, p. 9, argues that only by studying "the reality of the historical process" can one account for "the complexity and the many facets

In order to explore the historical relationship between Chinese family rituals and Chinese society, in this book I focus on the mediating role of texts. In the case of a highly literate, stratified society like China, it is too simplistic to talk simply of rituals and social organization. The production, interpretation, certification, circulation, and use of texts all played major roles in perpetuating and redesigning ritual forms.¹⁵ The most relevant texts were ones tied to the Confucian intellectual tradition. One of the early Confucian classics, the *I-li* [Etiquette and ritual], provided step-by-step instructions on how *shih* (lower officers, gentlemen) should perform family rituals. Another of the classics, the *Li-chi* [Record of ritual], provided interpretations of these and other rituals. From Han times (202 B.C.–A.D. 220) on, these texts set many of the parameters of debate within Confucianism about how family rituals should be performed. Nevertheless the imperial governments regularly issued detailed liturgies for the emperor, his relatives, and officials, and some scholars wrote unofficial guides to proper official performance. From the Sung dynasty (960–1279) on, liturgies were available for people in general, not divided by political rank, most notably the *Family Rituals* compiled by the great Neo-Confucian philosopher Chu Hsi (1130–1200), using an earlier manual by the statesman Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086) and the ideas of the philosopher Ch'eng I (1033–1107).¹⁶ After the publication of Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals* in the early thirteenth century, it quickly became the standard reference work on the proper way to perform these family rituals. In less than a century two commentaries had been written for it, and a set of illustrations had been prepared that commonly came to be published with it. In Ming (1368–1644) and Ch'ing (1644–1911) times, dozens of expanded, revised, and simplified versions of it were published, the best known of which was by Ch'iu Chün (1421–1495). These Confucian liturgies were among the most common books in circulation in late imperial China. Familiarity with them shaped how people approached the performance of rites: they saw family rituals not simply as sets of gestures and words, but gestures and words for which there were written sources of authority. Those who had power over the production of these texts had influence over the ritual behavior of both the educated and uneducated and through

of rituals" and thus avoid the reductionism that implies that rituals were created to communicate cosmological schemes or to give solidarity to groups. For the efforts of both historians and anthropologists to explore the historical creation of rituals, see Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*. Quite a few historians of Europe have recently written sophisticated studies of ritual in historical context. A few that concern rituals analogous to Chinese family rituals include Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, esp. pp. 178–260; Brown, "Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages"; and Davis, "Ghosts, Kin, and Progeny."

¹⁵ For analyses of the ways the existence of texts changes many basic social and cultural processes, see Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*, and Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*.

¹⁶ I have translated and annotated this book; see Ebrey, trans., *Chu Hsi's Family Rituals*.

that the creation of some of their most deeply held mental, moral, and emotional constructs.

In other societies besides China, texts have played significant roles in mediating the relationship between ritual and society. In both Christian and Islamic societies there were liturgical texts that described how rituals should be performed and experts who claimed special knowledge in the interpretation of these texts. China's experts, however, were not clerics, invested with special powers beyond literacy. In China there was no institutional structure comparable to the ecclesiastical establishments of the West or the Islamic world able to rule on the interpretation of canonical texts, to enforce adherence to Confucian liturgical schedules, or to provide trained experts to officiate. In China the *Family Rituals* may have become orthodox, but interpretation of it remained elastic and adherence to it remained voluntary. Not only did the church in the West regularly issue rules on key family ceremonies (baptism, confirmation, weddings, last rites, funerals, masses for the dead), but it had ways to discipline both church members and clergy in case of deviations.¹⁷ The Chinese state did regularly issue guidelines for the performance of these rites, and made considerable efforts to publicize them. Yet it provided very little in the way of discipline for either ordinary people or the experts they employed. Moreover, the state did not deny support for Buddhism, even though Buddhist practices were invariably rejected in Confucian liturgies. Thus Confucian texts influenced ritual performance through social and political processes rather different from those in the premodern West. Understanding these distinctively Chinese mechanisms for achieving social and cultural cohesion is a major goal of this book.

In Confucian theory, ritual was seen as an alternative to force. People who routinely performed proper rituals were expected to recognize their social and ethical obligations and act on them. Yet power clearly entered into the relationships of rituals, texts, and society. Power is an intrinsic aspect of ritual itself. Those participating in a ritual are constrained to act in highly invariant ways.¹⁸ Ideas, including ideas about how to perform rituals, also have power, a power that can be enhanced through publication, certification, and promotion. The state frequently asserted its supremacy in the realm of instituting rites. When private scholars wrote or edited liturgies, they were intruding on this role, attempting to redefine and reformulate the standards of ritualized behavior and often to appropriate to themselves established traditions that in the process they subtly altered.¹⁹

The ways texts mediated between ritual and society can be roughly divided

¹⁷ See Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, on making marriage into a sacrament, and Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, pp. 140–201, on the “clericalization” of death rituals.

¹⁸ Cf. Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power*, pp. 19–45.

¹⁹ On the power that comes from being able to establish the general symbolic framework of a society, see Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony.”

into three processes: authorship, certification and circulation, and influence on performance. Each of these processes was complex in its own right. Authors were never passive vehicles for generating the rituals appropriate to a given society. Authors' mentalities were shaped in diverse ways by the social world around them. They had personal experience of the performance of family rituals and these experiences informed what they considered true and desirable. They had ideas not directly tied to ritual but that impinged on their thinking about how rituals should be performed, such as ideas about death and souls, the differences between men and women, and the sanctity and authority of the classics. Moreover when they wrote a book, they were not merely expressing ideas; they were performing an act that had social and political implications.

After texts were written, they needed to circulate to have much influence on how rituals were performed. Scholars, officials, and readers all took part in the process of certifying and circulating texts on ritual. Scholars attempted to establish the validity or invalidity of each others' texts in intellectual debate. The government, through its officials, encouraged adherence to particular texts. The readers of texts participated in granting them authority by buying the ones they found most useful. Those who wished to promote the use of particular liturgies were thus constrained by a partially free market: a book would not be widely purchased if it specified ritual forms most people found impossible to follow.

The circulation of liturgical texts could have shaped ritual behavior even of illiterates who had never seen a copy of any text. Knowing that such books existed, they would have assumed that there was a textual explanation for any step in a rite, much as we assume there is a physical explanation for the weather without being able to state it; this assumption would affect in subtle ways their notions of what they were doing and their willingness to improvise. But texts can also be consulted to decide what to do in a rite. Consulting a text is an act of interpretation. Even highly educated scholars disagreed on how to consult the *Family Rituals*. Did one take a free interpretation, seeking to distinguish essential principles from trivial, amendable details? Or did one take a literal interpretation, attempting to enact all of the steps and procedures described? In China there was no clerical hierarchy to rule on the validity of conflicting interpretations, so differences of opinion were accepted as inevitable.

Influence in the Chinese case was also made more problematic because Confucianism was not the only set of ideas present in Chinese society. The Confucian discourse tended to dominate discussion of family rituals, but it never succeeded in excluding all rivals. Temple-based worship of gods communicated ideas about the ways spirits were most efficaciously served. Buddhist and Taoist priests professed expertise in performing ceremonies that would aid the salvation of the dead. Astrologers and geomancers claimed special knowledge about how to select spouses and grave sites and decide on the

best timing of each step in funerals and weddings. It was not enough for Confucian prescriptions to be widely known: they also had to be as compelling as alternatives or reconcilable with them.

The historical sources I have been able to draw on to study these processes are inevitably uneven. Confucian writings are best suited to presenting an internal view of the Confucian discourse on family rituals, of showing how authors interpreted earlier texts, analyzed contradictions among them, and shifted the issues of debate. To examine as well the ways external social, political, and cultural circumstances shaped their interpretations, I have tried to draw attention to the historical context in which writers lived. Scholars like Ssu-ma Kuang, Ch'eng I, Chu Hsi, and Ch'iu Chün negotiated between two complicated worlds. One was the world of the people they knew, a world that included people who sang at weddings, made offerings to their ancestors on Buddhist holidays, and who consulted experts to select burial sites. This world of people and their ritual practices was confusing and inconsistent. People admitted to contradictory beliefs; their practices derived from divergent traditions; and those in one place did things differently than those in another. We often stress the more regular features of this world and label them society or social structure. But to the individual author the particularity of his own experience—what he saw and did—was as powerful as more general patterns, even ones he could explain.

The other world these scholars lived in was the world of books and theories. Books included above all the classics, but also the histories, poetry, essays, and other works that were commonly known to well-educated men. Writers were often deeply influenced by philosophical currents of their time, especially perhaps the ideas they learned from their own teachers. From books and intellectual discussion, scholars acquired visions of society more systematic than the world of living practice they found around them. But certainly this world was also not without its inconsistencies, confusions, and tensions. Even the most educated men grasped ideas in ways that reflected their experiences. In the case of family rites, these experiences included what their own family did, what they had seen those ranked socially higher or lower than them do, and what they had learned of the practices of people in other parts of the country or world. They read the classics with perceptions and feelings deriving from their social experiences and they interpreted their experiences in terms of ideas that came in part from books.

Modern scholars of Confucianism recognize the centrality of *li* (ritual, manners, propriety) in Confucian thought and have analyzed the relationship of *li* to other Confucian ethical and metaphysical concepts.²⁰ My focus differs in

²⁰ See, for instance, Tu, "Li as a Process of Humanization"; de Bary, "Human Rites: An Essay on Confucianism and Human Rights"; Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, pp. 83–110; and Kao, *Li-hsüeh hsin-t'an*.

two major ways. I look at ritual not from within the Confucian tradition, where *li* is seen as a virtue, an undeniably positive force, but from a contemporary Western viewpoint in which the role of ritual in society is not analyzed in moral terms. Second, I pay less attention to Confucian scholars' most general statements about ritual and more to their concrete ideas about what to do, such as when a bride should be introduced to her husband's ancestors or whether one can make offerings to a deceased grandfather if one's father was a younger son. These topics were not considered trivial or derivative by Confucians of the past, who wrote on them extensively. Lower-order ideas of this sort are the ones most directly tied to social practice; they grew from it, represented it, and generated it. To analyze how texts mediated the performance of rituals, attention must be given to what texts said at this level. This level of ideas is also important because it linked Chinese of all degrees of education; all adults had some understanding of how to act in these ritual situations, and the influence of their understandings constantly crossed class lines. Sometimes ideas of what to do may have changed because of major restructuring of Confucian theoretical orientations at the highest levels of abstraction. At least as often, however, theory was stretched to accommodate or encompass changes in what people, both educated and illiterate, had come to think most fitting to do.

A major advantage of focusing on lower-order ideas is that their concreteness makes them less susceptible to misinterpretation. To understand general claims about ritual (such as "In ritual time is of great importance," or "Ritual is moral principle"), we need to know how those who repeated these claims extended them. How did believing ritual was identical to moral principle affect how a person performed any particular ritual, or which ones he performed, or which ones he told other people to perform? Inferring answers to these questions is risky because it assumes that an author's most general statements adequately sum up his thinking. Men like Ch'eng I and Chu Hsi had participated in weddings, funerals, and ancestral rites long before their philosophical positions became fixed. Their reactions to their experiences played a part in forming their views on what should be done in particular circumstances, even when they cited philosophical premises. This is not to deny that there was coherence in much of what these men thought or wrote, but it is to doubt that their own philosophical generalizations are a fully adequate guide to this coherence.

Texts, of course, are produced by members of an educated elite. In focusing on their mediating role I inevitably give considerable weight to the ways the intellectual elite shaped culture. Undoubtedly there were oral traditions concerning how to bedeck a bride, dress a corpse, and locate a grave. The intellectual elite did not simply impose its interpretations on the rest of society. As I try to show, the creation and certification of texts were dynamic, two-way processes, involving negotiation and conscious and unconscious influence and adaptation. In China as elsewhere the high culture of intellectuals was in con-

tinual dialogue with the official culture of the state and the common culture of everyday work, family, and gender relations.²¹ Scholars regularly made a distinction between *li*, and *su*. *Li* were authentic rituals, universally valid patterns of acts that had clear relationships to textual sources and could bring about the moral transformation of those performing them. *Su* were customs, the vulgar, familiar traditions that developed in particular times and places, which ordinary people generally followed out of habit and which even the educated might find themselves adopting if they were not on their guard. The elite view of the differences between themselves and ordinary people is certainly not the whole story of their interaction, but given the various sorts of power the intellectual elite possessed, it is an important part of it.²²

The ways texts mediated between rituals and society is best seen over long periods of time: key texts had effects many centuries after they were written. To allow me to trace some of these effects I have chosen to cover in at least cursory fashion much of Chinese history. The drawback to this approach is, of course, that I have not been able to analyze all facets of my topic in equal depth in each period. I have had to balance the goal of highlighting major changes (a goal requiring some consistency in treatment from one period to the next) with the goal of exploring the complexities of the creation, certification, and use of texts (a goal requiring close attention to selected incidents). The compromise I settled on was to structure the book as a series of case studies linked through time by their association with a key text, Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals*.

In Chapter Two I provide a broad sketch of the ideas expressed in early Confucian texts concerning family rituals. Later scholars' understandings of ritual were shaped not simply by the *I-li* and *Li-chi*, but also by other important early texts that dealt with ritual, including the *Analects*, the commentaries to the *Ch'un-ch'iu*, and the works of Mencius and Hsün Tzu. These texts express a wide range of views on what ritual does, how it is constituted, and how it can be used. This classical discourse assumed a society with kings, feudal lords, ministers, high and low officers, and common people, all of whom passed on their rank and distinct ritual traditions from one generation to the next. After this system was abolished, both the government and private scholars took to writing new manuals more suited to enhancing their authority and standing. These texts preserved much of the classical vocabulary despite the competition of ideas about death, souls, and bodies from outside the Confucian tradition, especially from Buddhism, religious Taoism, and geomancy.

Of all the family rituals, ancestral rites were the most closely tied to rank in Confucian theory, undoubtedly reflecting ancient ideas of ancestors as a

²¹ For a discussion of how recognition of these processes has influenced the work of intellectual historians of Europe, see Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn."

²² For a good discussion of recent studies on Chinese elite and popular culture, see Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture."

source of power and legitimacy. Canonical rules for the performance of ancestral rites were largely concerned with setting limitations by political rank on how many ancestors could be served, how often, and with what kinds of offerings. By the Sung period the discrepancies between these specifications and both common practice and the actual social hierarchy were too acute for Confucian scholars to ignore. In Chapter Three I examine the efforts of eleventh-century Neo-Confucians to design a form of ancestral rites that would be appropriate to their class. I devote a chapter to this one issue because it highlights a central theme of the book: the complex and ambiguous relationship between class and ritual.

A key element in the later Confucian discourse on family rituals was the contention that the educated elite and the state should attempt to change the customary practices of ordinary people as part of their efforts to eliminate heterodoxy. To understand why eleventh-century scholars saw deviate practices as dangerous, in Chapter Four I describe how the performance of weddings and funerals impinged on the lives of key figures, especially Ssu-ma Kuang and Ch'eng I.

Chapter Five is devoted to Chu Hsi's work on family rituals, not simply because he was the author of the *Family Rituals*, but also because he left so much evidence of what he thought and how he arrived at his ideas, thus allowing a close analysis of what his experiences had to do with what he wrote about ritual. This chapter, then, is the one in which authorship is most fully explored. I try to explicate not merely why Chu Hsi took the stands he did on the issues raised by his predecessors, but why he wrote for a broader audience than any of them had. Close examination of Chu Hsi's letters and discussions also reveals the social processes through which issues were debated and the influence that existing liturgies, such as Ssu-ma Kuang's *Shu-i* and the Sung government's *Cheng-ho wu-li hsin-i*, had on the behavior of well-educated scholars like Chu Hsi and his students in the twelfth century.

The dimension of power is more fully explored in the next two chapters on the orthodoxy granted Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals* and on scholars' efforts to revise its content. The imperial state recurrently asserted its authority in all matters of defining or establishing correct rituals, an authority scholars would sometimes dispute. Moreover, the state made sporadic attempts to outlaw undesirable ritual practices and to teach correct ones. But power entered into shaping the discourse in other ways as well. The proliferation of books that "revised" the *Family Rituals* can be seen as part of an attempt to control or appropriate the discourse about correct ritual forms. Chapter Six also provides a case study of one of the clearest cases of a dynamic relationship between rituals, ideas about rituals, and social organization: the adaptation of ideas about ancestral rites to emerging forms of descent-group organization.

To see how liturgical texts structured the way people performed rites, it is also necessary to examine what the liturgical texts they used actually specified.

Toward this end, in Chapter Seven I examine the content of a dozen revised versions written in the Ming. The adjustments made by these authors were the ones they found necessary to make in practice. Moreover, the influence of Chu Hsi's ideas on common practice was largely filtered through these books, which circulated in larger numbers than Chu Hsi's *Family Rituals* itself.

The story of Confucian liturgies for family rituals roughly parallels the overall intellectual history of the Ming–Ch'ing periods. If the only sources available for reconstructing Chinese intellectual history were the revised versions of the *Family Rituals*, one could still infer that people deferred to Chu Hsi's teachings and state proclamations in the first century of Ming rule but that a major change had occurred by the mid-sixteenth century, probably associated with Wang Yang-ming (1472–1529) and an expansion of printing activity, when short versions of the *Family Rituals*, highly accommodating to popular customs, began to appear in large numbers. Yet it would be difficult to discern any major effects of the philosophical positions argued in leading intellectual circles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Intellectuals' reassertion of the importance of rooting ritual behavior directly in the classics led them to question the validity of using the *Family Rituals*, but as discussed in Chapter Eight, their qualms did not undermine the broader popularity of the *Family Rituals* in its various versions.

In Chapter Nine I evaluate the influence of the Confucian discourse on what people of all social classes routinely did for domestic family rituals. I argue that Confucian liturgies were particularly influential in establishing a common core of ritual practices. At the same time, liturgies facilitated the elaboration of ritually significant variations by leaving descriptions of many key steps sketchy. To explain why many Confucian injunctions were ignored, I consider the social and emotional context in which rituals were performed and the messages people received from other sources—Buddhist and Taoist clergy, the examples of the rich and powerful, the laws on property transfer, and so on—all of which might pull them in different directions. I also discuss at some length what class had to do with both the performance of rituals and discussions of them.

In the brief concluding chapter I review what has been learned about the role of texts in the creation of ritual forms in China, looking separately at the processes of authorship, certification and circulation, and influence on performances. I then consider the implications of the history of writings about family rituals for our understanding of the history of Chinese society.

Chapter Two

THE EARLY CONFUCIAN DISCOURSE ON FAMILY RITES

When the rituals of funerals and sacrifices are made clear,
the common people will be filial.

—*Ta Tai li-chi*¹

THE OLDEST of the texts that mediated the performance of family rituals in imperial China were written during the Chou and early Han. These texts reflected and helped create early Chinese society and culture. In the early Chou ancestral rites were central features of political rule. In the late Chou critics of Confucians charged them with performing rituals in an exaggeratedly grave or bookish manner to gain attention. In the Han reputations for filial piety were often based on nearly suicidal mortification during mourning for parents. Family rituals clearly tapped into deeply felt emotions connected with life, death, and the survivors' relations with the dead, and were often used for ends beyond the immediate ones of bringing in brides and disposing of or honoring the dead.

Yet the early Confucian discourse on family rituals cannot be understood solely in terms of the social and emotional realities of ritual. The discourse was powerfully conditioned by the basic philosophical premises of Confucianism. Ritual (*li*) became a central concept in Confucian thinking about human nature, ethics, social harmony, cultural identity, and the relationships between the human world and the sphere labeled heaven. The *Li-chi* [Records of ritual] asserts that all moral and social order is attained through ritual, that without ritual no virtues can be perfected, that observing ritual keeps the powerful from arrogance and the humble from exceeding their station, and that a society in which rituals are observed will be a secure and tranquil one.² In passages of these sorts the term *li* was used to encompass the observable actions that constitute rites, ceremonies, manners, and deportment—actions that bind men to each other and link them to numinous realms. *Li* was also culture; Chinese *li* distinguished Chinese from other ethnic groups, each of which had its own *li*.

¹ "Sheng-te," 66:279.

² Outside the Confucian discourse these claims were not always accepted. Within Taoist philosophy in particular there was a strong distrust for ritual as well as for the imposition of conventional social roles and restraints on behavior in general.

The great bulk of early Confucian writing on ritual concerns the rituals of the ruler and those closest to him, his family, nobles, and highest officials. Domestic family rituals of ordinary people or even officials were, by contrast, treated as relatively marginal in early theorizing on ritual. Yet classical Confucian texts provided many basic premises for Confucian discussions of family rituals over the next two thousand years. This chapter, accordingly, concentrates on the formulation of these basic premises.

ANCESTORS

In ancient China, ancestors were central to the religious imagination, to understandings of spiritual realms and of the place of man in the cosmos. Rituals brought the living into communication with their ancestors; they integrated the human sphere with the numinous sphere beyond. Archaeological evidence for the Shang period (ca. 1500–1050 B.C.) shows the importance of divinations addressed to ancestors and sacrifices offered to the dead, including human and animal sacrifices at burials.³ Indeed, divinations were often performed to ask the ancestors what types and numbers of victims they would like at a sacrifice.⁴ The ancestors of the royal line, the object of most of this activity, were served in great temples where offerings of wine and meat were placed in bronze vessels of awesome beauty. The worldly powers of the kings were believed to depend in no small part on their ancestors' favor; at the same time, the kings' ability to influence the ancestral spirits legitimated their political power.⁵ Ancestral rites also linked kings to their kinsmen. The ruling clans had myths of origin from totemic figures, and rites to these and other ancestors were important to the clan's identity and organization.⁶

Textual sources show that these beliefs about the powers and needs of ancestors continued into the early Chou (ca. 1050–500 B.C.). Violence remained central to sacrifice; one served ancestors by killing animals, or sometimes even people.⁷ One of the great heroes of early history, the Duke of Chou, is portrayed in the *Book of Documents* as having a deep belief in the power of the ancestors of the royal line to affect the welfare of their descendants and indeed the whole country. When the king was ill, the duke dramatically offered to give up his own life to serve his ancestors in the netherworld if they would spare the king.⁸

Sacrificial odes in the classic *Book of Poetry* portray ancestral rites in early Chou aristocratic circles as emotionally charged rituals of great symbolic

³ Creel, *Birth of China*, pp. 197–216.

⁴ Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, p. 33.

⁵ Keightley, "The Religious Commitment," p. 213.

⁶ Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, pp. 9–16, 33–42.

⁷ See Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China*, pp. 17–28.

⁸ *Shang-shu*, "Chin T'eng," 13:6a–13a; Legge, *Chinese Classics* 3:351–60.

power. The ancestor was represented by a human impersonator, often a grandson, who acted as a medium so that the ancestral spirit could be present among those sacrificing to him. The impersonator was offered many glasses of wine, presented the best available food, and entertained with singing and dancing. The descendants, by joining the feast, were in communion with the ancestor present in the impersonator.⁹ These odes often express the idea of reciprocity between the living and dead. One ode begins by describing the preparation and careful placement of wine, grain, and meat to be offered to the ancestors. Because the rites are performed meticulously and without mistake, the ancestors will send blessings, especially long life and many descendants.

The spirits enjoyed their drink and food
And will grant our lord a long life.
With full obedience and timeliness
He performed everything.
Thus son's sons and grandson's grandsons
Will continue his line without interruption.¹⁰

CONFUCIUS AND THE CONCEPT OF *LI*

When later writers used the term *li*, they generally assumed that their readers understood what *li* was and what made it powerful and desirable. The *Analects* of Confucius provided much of the basis for this common ground. In the *Analects* Confucius seldom spoke of specific rituals but did repeatedly refer to the general category of *li*. Despite his great admiration for the early Chou leaders and respect for texts like the *Book of Poetry* and *Book of Documents*, Confucius did not put particular emphasis on communication with ancestors; his concerns were more with human virtue and good government. Sacrificial rituals remained important, but because proper performance of such rituals, especially by rulers, was one of the most effective means of attaining an orderly society and cultivating morality among its members. Thus for Confucius the rituals themselves brought results, rather than the ancestors.¹¹

Confucius sometimes tended toward a cosmic view of ritual, attributing great power, even "magic" in Fingarette's sense, to proper performance of *li*.¹² When the disciple Yen Hui asked about true goodness (*jen*), Confucius replied,

⁹ On early Chou royal ancestral rites, see also Bilsky, *The State Religion of Ancient China*, pp. 31–102.

¹⁰ *Shih-ching*, poem 209, 13B:16a; Waley, *Book of Songs*, p. 211.

¹¹ Schwartz, *World of Thought*, pp. 49–50, suggests that this attitude may already have been present in the early Chou before Confucius. Bilsky, *State Religion*, pp. 124–30, 162–82, attributes the decline in the importance of ancestral rites to the weakness of the royal court and the rising importance of rites to territorial deities as the religious basis of rule.

¹² Fingarette, *Confucius—the Secular as Sacred*, pp. 1–17.