

2.4 Rituals, transmission, and roles

Confucius is right on the cusp of the boundary between **the Spring and Autumn period** and **the Warring States period**, between when the Zhou was thriving and when the Zhou was beginning to break down. Amid the signs of impending disorder and civil strife, Confucius tended to see the Zhou as held together by the ritual conventions of social order, 禮 **lǐ** (ritual).



禮 **lǐ** is usually translated **ritual**, or **ceremony**, or sometimes **decorum**. The character 禮 is part of the Chinese word for **manners**, 禮貌 **lǐ mào**. The importance of 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) for Confucius has been understood by many scholars as linked to the feudal character of the declining Zhou. For Confucius, it seemed that 天 **tiān** (nature) had not provided the social world with the sage-king who would bring the social world into harmony. Under such conditions, Confucius aimed to preserve the root of **legitimate norms** by preserving as much of the **traditional order** as possible. The 禮 **lǐ** (rituals) form the core of what needs to be preserved and transmitted through history.

“I transmit, I do not create”

Confucius famously said that he was a transmitter, not a creator (Analects 7:1).

述 而 不 作
shù ér bù zuò
relate but not make

We can think of him as saying something like, “I transmit, I do not create. I'm not engaged in constructing a way for you to behave, I'm studying the way it was done in the past and transmitting it to you.”

It is important to note that these ceremonies and rituals are ones that must be **studied**. Confucius recovers, records, writes about, researches and teaches his students the 禮 **lǐ** (ritual).

Confucius, when he speaks concretely about 禮 **lǐ** (ritual), mostly talks about fairly religious, very structured ceremonies, like the **wedding** ceremony, the **funeral** ceremony, **naming** ceremonies. These are the ceremonies that are usually done in a temple. There are roles to be played: at one point, you do this, and then this person does that, and then you say this, and then he says that. So the role is to be studied, memorized, practiced and performed.



學而時習之，不亦說乎？

You study and repeatedly practice it, isn't that pleasant?
(Analects 1:1)

For Confucius, this learning, practicing, performing and transmitting, is what constitutes normative guidance, the social practice is the path you are to follow. And that path is the path through the ritual performances linked to each named role in your natural and social identity. All these roles are linked to a concert-like coordinated and harmonious social performance—an elegant ceremony is his conception of social order.

禮 **lǐ** (ritual) as an extension of the path metaphor



As you will recall, the classical Chinese thinkers understood normative guidance (ethics) using a **path** metaphor (道 **dào**). The Confucian emphasis on the importance of **ritual** (禮 **lǐ**) is an apt use of the metaphor. Physical paths are created by past human behaviour (because paths are created when many people **repeatedly walk over terrain using the same route**), and Confucius views normative guidance as coming from **repeated human paths of ritual and ceremonial**

performance. Ceremonies are records of the way that people have behaved in the past. They're transmitted from generation to generation through memory, recorded histories, repeated practice and performance.