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Introduction

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Ritual has been a central concern of Chinese culture for at least four thousand years. It prompted the earliest known uses of Chinese writing, as well as the making and use of virtually all the earliest examples of what we now call Chinese art. A self-defining activity of rulers and families alike, it was also a dominant issue for all the important schools of Chinese thought. While providing Chinese with a standard for distinguishing themselves from non-Chinese, and even all humans from animals, it also was viewed by no later than the third century BC as a principle of the cosmos. More terrestrially, the practice and influence of ritual stretched beyond the sphere of religious worship and even traditional rites of passage, into the quotidian world. There it gave a shape to common gestures, added nuances to manners, and provided a framework for the oral and written expression of language. In fact, its impact on the organized activities of the Chinese state and court was probably far greater than in the polities and bureaucracies of other states.

This ritual of the Chinese court and state, however, has received little scholarly attention over the past century. The canonical books on ritual as well as the dynastic ritual codes and treatises have struck many Western sinologists as boring pieces of exotica irrelevant to a modern understanding of Chinese imperial history. Since many Chinese scholars shared this view, these texts receded out of sight onto the dusty shelves usually reserved for cracked chinoiserie. Although in recent years the ritual of certain dynasties, religious and philosophical traditions, and even villages has been studied, this collection of essays marks a noteworthy change in the study of Chinese ritual.¹

¹ Treatments of ritual in different dynasties include Howard J. Wechsler, *Offerings of Jade and Silk, Ritual and Symbol in the Legitimation of the T'ang Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Gan Huaizhen 甘懷真, *Tangdai jiamiao lizhi yanjiu* 唐代家廟禮制研究 (Taipei: Shangwu 商務, 1991); Kai-wing Chow, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China, Ethics, Classics, and Lineage Discourse* (Stanford University Press, 1994); Yamane Mitsuyoshi 山根三芳, *Sōdai reiseitsu kenkyū* 宋代禮節研究 (Hiroshima: Keisuisha 溪水社, 1996); and, Kojima Tsuyoshi 小島毅, *Chūgoku kinsei ni okeru rei no gensetsu* 中国近世における礼の言説 (Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku shuppankai 東京大学出版会, 1996). The classic account of state ritual observances at the Altar of Heaven is Ishibashi Ushio 石橋丑雄, *Tendan* 天壇

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Firstly, most of the essays focus as much on the performance of ritual as on the texts themselves. Secondly, the essays discuss state ritual – the ritual compiled and performed by officials and emperors for the dynasty and its ruling family – as well as court ritual – the ritual not codified in the codes of state ritual but actually performed at the court for and by the emperor, members of his family, and even his officials privately. Thirdly, they discuss the ritual of most of the major dynasties, providing the first modern account in any language of Chinese state and court ritual over the entire spread of Chinese history. Moreover, they consistently refuse to squeeze this prolonged experience into categories alien to Chinese traditions of ritual. Displaying an impressive professional familiarity with the full range of China's historical texts on ritual, they present clear and certain evidence that Western sinologists are learning, arguably more than before, to value traditional Chinese accounts for their nuanced analyses and careful choice of terms.

In seeking to provide such an informed reading of a wide variety of Chinese accounts of state and court ritual, the essays in this collection have independently come upon a common set of themes. In particular, three concerns, or relationships, seem to have repeatedly gained their authors' attention: the role of ritual in politics, the relation of ritual to language, and elite and popular concepts of emperorhood. First, let us consider the relation of ritual to Chinese politics. So deep are the roots of this theme that its predominance in this volume should come as no surprise. Every major Chinese dynasty since at least the Zhou dynasty (11th century–3rd century BC) considered certain rituals as emblematic of its legitimacy and essential to its survival. Some dynasties went so far as to have their rituals compiled into special codes. These vast compendia, like *The Kaiyuan Ritual Code* (*Da Tang Kaiyuan li*, of AD 732) and *The Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty* (*Ming huidian*, of 1509 and 1587), drew heavily upon the three classical accounts of ritual – the *Book of Ritual* (*Li ji*), the *Ritual of Zhou* (*Zhou li*), and the *Ceremonials and Rituals* (*Yi li*) – to form a highly self-conscious tradition of state ritual. As these state ritual codes were by middle imperial times 'almost without exception sanctioned by the traditional Confucian outlook on the cosmos and society',² they obliged usually

(Tokyo: Yamamoto shoten 山本書店, 1957). Two useful bibliographies on Chinese ritual and related social and religious activities are Saiki Tetsurō 齋木哲郎, *Reigaku kankei bunken mokuroku* 礼学関係文献目録 (Tokyo: Tōhō shoten 東方書店, 1985), and *Min Shin shūkyōshi kenkyū bunken mokuroku* 明清宗教史研究文献目録 a special issue (no. 4) of the journal *Shihō* 史峯 (Tsukuba: Tōyōshi kenkyūshitsu 東洋史研究室, 1989). And, a useful survey of Chinese thought about ritual is Cai Xiangsi 蔡尚思, *Zhongguo lijiao sixiang shi* 中國禮教思想史 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1991).

² David McMullen, 'Bureaucrats and Cosmology: The Ritual Code of T'ang China', in David Cannadine and Simon Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1987): 186.

the emperor, members of his clan, and his officials to perform for the state over 100 rituals that were concerned as much with this world as with the supernatural. For instance, an emperor, in addition to offering sacrifices to Heaven and his ancestors, was required to perform a state ritual at all his public audiences with officials and foreign emissaries, at all rites of passage from coming of age and accession to mourning and funerals, at rehearsals for warfare, and after bad harvests. He may have failed to perform them, lacked the funds to perform them as desired, and even appointed proxies to perform them in his place. But, such neglect made him vulnerable to censure from his officials and seldom succeeded in the removal of these rituals from the state's ritual code.

Furthermore, these rituals and their codes became the principal concern of a particularly vocal group of officials in virtually every dynasty. While these officials might not have qualified as priests, they were certainly experts on the key classical texts and their dynasty's ritual code, which they often treated as 'liturgies'. Thus, the this-worldliness and political concerns of the state did not undo its intimate reliance on ritual. Bureaucracy in pre-modern China was the custodian, not the enemy, of at least certain kinds of ritual.

It is not surprising then that many scholars have judged these ritual codes to constitute a strikingly self-enclosed system of prescribed behaviour. Their self-conscious use of archaic vocabulary, their frequent focus on the same rituals, and the volumes of scholarly commentaries they begot, all point to a remarkable continuity that enabled experts of a dynasty's ritual code to claim expertise over virtually all the recorded state rituals of earlier dynasties. Thus, Qing dynasty ritual experts could, without exaggeration, have claimed mastery over a tradition some two thousand years old. To cite an instance brought to light by David McMullen: the designated stages for the funeral of an eighth-century AD emperor were virtually identical to those for a funeral prescribed in two classical ritual codes as well as in the key neo-Confucian text on domestic ritual, *The Family Rituals of Master Zhu* (*Zhuzi jiali*), used in many educated families from arguably the twelfth to the early twentieth century.³

Even if the remarkable textual continuity of state rituals was not constantly reflected in their actual performance, they were still intended, like rituals in general, to impart to particular actions, relationships, and institutions a certain sanctity, or at least to make them less vulnerable to attack. If then the ongoing context of most of these state rituals was political, their drafting and performances were usually undertaken to foster social bonding and secure hierarchical relations between parties of different ages, statuses, ranks, or genders. The burial items in the Zhou dynasty tombs studied by Jessica Rawson were all put there to support the

³ David McMullen, 'The death rites of Tang Daizong' (in this volume).

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continuation of unequal statuses and relations, of bonds, even into the afterlife. Fifth-century Buddhist rituals at the Liang dynasty's court, as explained by Andreas Janousch, were performed to gain the emperor the secular and religious loyalties of all his subjects. The ninth-century ceremony of gratitude analysed by Oliver Moore sought to transform the imperial civil examinations into a selection process for establishing patron-client ties between the examiners and the candidates they passed. The ritual component of sixteenth-century community pacts drawn up by elite members of local lineages sought, according to Joseph McDermott, to instil closer ties amongst lineage members, and the eighteenth-century compilation of Manchu rituals by the Qianlong emperor, discussed by Nicola Di Cosmo, stressed the ethnic solidarity of all Manchus. All this quest for order – burial, Buddhist, factional, kin, and ethnic – was explicitly shaped by political concerns, a link perhaps most evident in the late eighth-century imperial funeral described by David McMullen. Here, an imperial funeral, with all the political and spiritual threats it posed to a dynasty, is transformed into an imperial accession rite. Once again ritual became a natural ally for an officialdom constantly concerned about the maintenance of order.

Where, the anthropologists must wonder, are the liminal states, the moments of ecstasy, the experience of *communitas*, the sense of liberation, and the quest for salvation that they claim to have found in the ritual of so many other cultures? Is this world of ritual texts so committed to order, stability, and harmony that its rituals are truly devoid of disorder and uncertainty? How could these dry texts, the predictable outcome of a process aimed at routinizing ritual, have ever excited the passions and thoughts of full-blooded men in the past?

Many of the essays in this volume provide then a surprising response to this sceptical assessment of Chinese state ritual. It is not that they contend, like one of the social scientists attending the conference which gave birth to this volume, that ritual in many of its functions and features is similar to orgies. Rather, by probing beneath the placid surface of ritual codes and prescriptions, they provide another, more combustible analysis of the relationship between Chinese ritual and power, religion and politics. Most obviously, they show the gaps between ritual texts and ritual performances, and so disclose serious political divisions these state rituals were often expected to disguise or ignore. Thus, Nicola Di Cosmo shows the attempt to use ritual to standardize the ethnic and religious diversity of the Manchu court a century after its conquest of China, and David McMullen writes on the compilation of a strictly Confucian funeral for an emperor personally more interested in Buddhism. These and other state rituals were made or used to bridge huge cultural gaps, and gloss over or ignore the religious differences, that continued to divide this vast empire and its court long after a performance of state ritual ended. Yet, the rituals proposed and enacted

by emperors were not necessarily concordant with the existing social or political order – that surely is an important finding of Andreas Janousch’s demonstration of how a certain Buddhist ritual presented a hierarchy radically at odds with the secular or state order of south China in his time and thus became itself a political act. Also, Joseph McDermott’s essay on the ritual section of sixteenth-century community pacts (*xiangyue*) showed, not surprisingly, that the performance of a single ritual can communicate and mean different things to different social groups. Moreover, many other essays, especially Mark Lewis’ on the *feng* and *shan* rituals of Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, give clear evidence that ritual texts and performances, their recorded traditions, and their evolving interpretations rarely co-existed in the homogeneous harmony desired by court officials. Soon (or long) after their original performances, state rituals could become contentious acts in courts and dynasties riven with disagreement.

This opposition worked in at least three ways. Often it took place within the traditions of state ritual, where it can be discerned by noticing the actual political context behind the choice of a ritual, and the timing and location of its performance. These disagreements frequently arose from the incompleteness, contradictions, and obscurities of venerable classical texts. As Robert Chard’s essay makes abundantly clear, this textual confusion made it necessary for the emperor and his officials to choose among rituals or among different prescriptions of the same ritual. These differences allowed each version of a ritual or each policy on a ritual issue to attract its own group of advocates. Witness a debate on imperial shrines in the Former Han which lay behind some of the practices Michael Loewe described in this volume for imperial ancestral worship and burials in the Later Han. As recounted by Loewe in a separate article, by the middle of the first century BC the Han state felt itself obliged to make, on average, one ancestral offering every twenty minutes every day of the year at one of the 176 ancestral shrines under its care. With such conspicuous filiality threatening the state’s finances, officials engaged in an ongoing debate about the number of generations the Han state would normally care for the burial shrines of its emperors and their family members. A final decision, with broad implications for other state policies and the imperial family’s concept of itself, was made only in the Later Han, as the state in the Former Han repeatedly reversed its policy to meet the demands of officials, all able to find justification for their views in classical texts and practices.⁴

Thus, once a self-conscious tradition of ritual arose – and that was the case from earliest imperial times at the latest – ritual decisions in China often became highly contested, most unharmonious affairs. A ritual code might have usually been compiled by Confucian scholars to nurture

⁴ Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology, and Monarchy in Han China* (Cambridge University Press, 1994): 285–97.

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harmony. But, in specific contexts – such as succession, marriage, funeral, ancestor worship, or even sacrifices to Heaven – it might prove to be an issue or even cause of great contention. As such, it could reveal fault lines otherwise undiscernible in state and court politics.

Consider the later case of a specific imperial funeral, as studied in this volume by David McMullen for the eighth-century Tang emperor Daizong. If in this and many other instances we simply ask who is proposing the ritual procedure to whom, a disagreement will become evident between the inner and outer courts and even within the inner court itself. Officials usually (but not always) stress the need for the emperor to use the official dynastic ritual code they have compiled or preserved; they thereby hope to set the agenda for both the performance of ritual and the activities of the emperor himself. In general, they do their best to make a ritual austere and eliminate all personal dimensions to his ritual. Their aim is to minimize the dynastic impact of any personal crisis on the performance of any ritual, including a rite of passage; one would not be too far wrong in claiming that they want the ritual to be as uneventful as possible. Their methods are varied and time-tested: they rely on venerable textual prescriptions, on the views of senior and experienced officials, on the placement of the deceased emperor's corpse in the palace most associated with their affairs and views of emperorship, on restrictions on the direct involvement of people outside the court, and on limiting the discernible impact of non-Confucian belief systems on the performance of the funeral. So concerned are the drafters of his funeral ritual about dynastic stability that they turn a funeral into an accession rite (note also that they order the new emperor not to follow the coffin to the grave, lest he leave the palace empty and vulnerable to a *coup d'état*). Therefore, the absence of liminality in this funeral text, so obvious to anyone conversant with first-hand accounts of actual Chinese funeral rituals for commoners during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was intended, lest fissures in state and court affairs erupt onto stage centre.

For the new emperor, however, the funeral poses different, far more personal problems, in particular his wish to express his own grief at the death of his father. The dynasty's officials will have already specified in the script for this funeral ritual the appropriate moment for him to express grief. Seeking to channel that grief along narrow lines, they want to keep him from turning the transfer of dynastic power into a personal, emotional experience. Predictably, their ritual fails to meet his needs. His solution then is to add to their ritual, to prolong it, and to perform parts of it in sections of the palace off-limits to officials. His aim, not at all in the script they have written for him, is to make his father's funeral a personal or family ritual rather than an official state ritual. He may not change the text, but he can alter the performance (even if it passes unrecorded).

To the uninitiated, this spat can appear to be little more than a tepid 'tempest in a teapot'. But it usually highlights the need to distinguish, in

most of the essays in this volume, between court rituals and state rituals, as the emperor and his inner court often preferred alternative ritual traditions to that represented by the state ritual programme of the officials. Furthermore, the matter of protocol at his father's funeral often required the first important set of decisions by the new Tang emperor and his court and thus provides a clue about who was in charge of the government – he, his ministers, a eunuch, the empress, or his mother. Such an occasion naturally drew the attention of all parties at the court. Finally, for reasons to be discussed below, questions about ritual regularly aroused debates which became landmark events in the history of Chinese politics, much as legal case decisions and legislative acts have often been in the modern West. One thinks of the *feng* sacrifices at Mt Tai by Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty, of the ordination and ritual assemblies of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, and of the Great Ritual Controversy of the 1520s and 1530s, and the central concern of Chinese politics with ritual is self-evident.

Another source for controversy over ritual came from the introduction of non-Confucian rituals to the court. These rituals, sometimes newly created, remind the historian that beneath the rhetorical appeals to antiquity, court rituals, more so than state rituals, underwent frequent creation or change in both text and performance. Once again, these changes might pit the inner court against the outer court, as the emperor pursued his own interest in non-Confucian ritual to the dismay of his officials. These rituals, rarely included in the officials' state ritual codes, derived from Buddhism, Daoism, shamanism, and the popular religious cults of a given period. Whereas state ritual would focus on either self-conscious recreations of earlier, classical rituals or on the fostering of a sense of loyalty to the emperor and dynasty, non-Confucian rituals might espouse sets of political and human relations which need not have been hierarchical. While they too might be closely concerned with the dynasty's fate, what usually distinguished them from state ritual was their regular stress on deeply personal and family problems or on their calling upon forces beyond the court and the dynasty to give help for these troubles.⁵ Admittedly, state ritual might tolerate or encourage the emperor's worship of mountains and rivers, certain planets, and certain popular gods like Guandi. Yet, these alternative rituals could even be presented to transform the secular order. As in the 517 ordination ritual for Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, filial piety and ministerial loyalty were to be changed into piety towards the emperor, a form of piety possible for all human beings. Such threats to the primacy of the emperor–minister relationship did not necessarily mean the end of the observance of state ritual, but they introduced, to Confucian officials, the undesirable element of uncertainty and, in some cases, liminality. Not

⁵ Franciscus Verellen, 'Liturgy and Sovereignty: The Role of Taoist Ritual in the Foundation of the Shu Kingdom (907–25)', *Asia Major*: n.s. II, i (1989): 76–7.

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surprisingly, these non-Confucian, non-state rituals, so favoured by the inner court, rarely won the approval of the Confucian official élite. Usually, they were not recorded in the standard histories (at least in detail), if only because they were performed in the emperor's private quarters, in the absence of officials.

Perhaps the most surprising threat to Confucian dominance of state and court ritual came from its oldest rival, shamanism. Practised at a Chinese court long before the appearance of 'Confucian' ritual, shamanism had a persistent, if checkered, career at imperial courts right up to this century. Mark Lewis notes its influence on the *feng* and *shan* rituals, before they became noticeably 'Confucianized' into symbols of proper government. Some Tang emperors enjoyed the company of shamans and trusted their advice, but as a rule the later Han Chinese imperial dynasties tended to display far less interest in shamanistic rituals than did the non-Han dynasties or, for that matter, the earlier Chinese dynasties. The Khitan government of the Liao dynasty, for instance, allowed shamans to 'force the entire court to bow at the sound of their voices', and the Jurchen rulers of the Jin dynasty allowed shamanesses to join in the official rites to Confucius. But, as Nicola Di Cosmo shows, the Qianlong emperor went even further in the mid-eighteenth century. He had Manchu shamanic ritual compiled, just like Confucian state ritual, into a code, and then proceeded to have both types of ritual practised separately at his court. This mixed commitment accorded well with a common Manchu effort to make their empire multi-national and multi-cultural. Yet, this code's reliance on shamans posed little serious threat to Confucian officials, since it was directed toward Manchus rather than Han Chinese.

A third way conflict about rituals arose in imperial politics was, as noticed by Oliver Moore, through the use of a certain ritual for court officials in and around the court. He shows how in the late eighth and ninth century a ritual was practised to transform successful examination candidates into disciples of their examiners. Such a ritual formed longlasting patron-client relations among these officials at the expense of their commitment to the imperial throne. Most surprisingly these Confucian officials used Buddhist ordination rituals to bond new disciples into clientage circles. As examiners, they would confer on each graduand a Buddhist monk's robe and begging bowl to signify his examination success and entrance into a relationship of privileged clientage to a high official. Thus, a court ritual, seen on paper to be totally devoid of conflicts and disorder, was in fact not only party to great controversies but also a vital part of the actual politics conducted at the court. If not for the reasons intended by the Confucian experts, ritual was at the centre of Chinese imperial politics.

A second general theme of this volume grows out of this pervasive relation of ritual to politics: the complex relation between ritual and language. Right

up to this century Confucius and his followers have been known as ‘men of books’. As mastery of these books made them, in a phrase of Jack Goody’s so evocative of Chinese life, ‘the gate-keepers of ideas’,⁶ they repeatedly appealed to these texts for descriptions of a moral social and political order. In particular, their world view was greatly influenced by a belief in the need for ‘the rectification of names’, whereby a person matched his behaviour to the role (and its written Chinese character) prescribed in classical texts. Furthermore, these educated men identified themselves with the mastery of the language of these texts and their transmission, and elevated calligraphy to a high art. In all these and other efforts the written language played a crucial role in the establishment and reproduction of an élite Confucian culture. Written language was essential, as David McMullen and Robert Chard show, for the accurate explication, codification, and transmission of early rituals, tasks necessary for any dynasty with the slightest pretence to legitimacy. It even ended up inside the ancient sacrificial bronzes studied by Jessica Rawson, if only to identify the intended recipient of the sacrifices.

Yet, the relative attractiveness of language vis-à-vis ritual to Chinese officials and thinkers varied considerably over time. Sometimes ritual was the dominant partner: witness Mark Lewis’ highly original argument that the *feng* and *shan* sacrifices performed by Emperor Wu of the Han at Mt Tai shaped the narrative of Sima Qian’s famous historical classic, the *Shi ji* (*Historical Records*). In Lewis’ view, these famous rituals provided Sima Qian with a model of an organizational unity that gave coherence to otherwise inchoate, written sources. Yet, as Nicola Di Cosmo shows, language could impose constraints on the performance of ritual, once ritual was written down. His study of the codification of Manchu ritual on the orders of the Qianlong emperor deals with ‘the rare instance of the codification of a shamanic belief system by a government and of its incorporation within the canon of state rituals’. Alarmed over reports of a decline in knowledge of the pre-conquest shamanic ritual of the Manchus, the Qianlong emperor turned to the written word to standardize and transmit this knowledge. This codification, intended to impose essentially imperial clan ritual on all other Manchu households, may have helped some Manchus define a common set of Manchu practices; but as Di Cosmo concludes, that success did not assure its acceptance and practice. In fact, as the role of shamanic ritual in the life of the Manchus declined, this conquest by language was arguably this ritual’s kiss of death. It froze a living tradition, so that Manchu shamanic ritual’s threat to the Confucian hegemony over state ritual ended up being undermined by the very traditional Confucian method of codifying ritual. Written language, or text, won out, as performance of this ritual continued to decline.

⁶ Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge University Press, 1985): 17.

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And yet, there was another, equally ancient Chinese tradition of reflection on language and ritual, which gave priority to ritual over language, especially the spoken word.⁷ According to a Chinese scholars' cliché, the world has become so decadent that men who once ruled solely through the use of their body must now resort to language and, even worse, to written laws. Confucians early on stressed how ritual could replace language and so create harmony: one can argue with a speech, but how can one reply to a ritual act except in the affirmative? They often added music to fill the time and air with appropriate sounds, minimize the need for words, and thereby expand the sense of harmony. Ritual would allow both participants and observers to learn from other humans how to act together in harmony without relying on explicit verbal instruction. Not surprisingly, it lay right alongside the need to memorize classical texts at the heart of any Confucian programme for education and socialization.

But ritual also fostered harmony by obliging people to conform and shut up. Its coercive power might have imposed unwelcomed restrictions on emperors, officials, and court personnel, limiting their scope of action far more effectively than any set of laws. But, these men soon found the silence (or restricted use of language) in a ritual performance a useful way of communicating their views and ideas, particularly when they feared that recourse to explicit oral or written language might prove too risky or disruptive. And so, they turned to the silent but evocative movements of ritual, trusting that its codified gestures would function as the grammar and syntax of an abstruse political language comprehensible to a small circle of powerful men. Witness how Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty contended with his court officials and monks in cat-and-mouse tangles that relied on ritual as much as the spoken word to be the means of discourse. Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty proved even more secretive about his rituals. Just he and one attendant climbed the summit of Mt Tai where he performed the *shan* sacrifice. The attendant died shortly afterwards in highly suspicious circumstances, and the emperor never revealed what had happened during his short stay on the mountain. Oliver Moore's ceremony of gratitude also was never codified; it survives in a later text. And, more tellingly, its bonding of patron-client relationships took place without recourse to any verbal expression, such as an oath of fealty. The examiner silently conferred on his future disciples a monk's robe and begging bowl, with all those present understanding the implications of this ritual. Only later, usually in poems, did the disciples record their memory of this ritual. Relatively little

⁷ J. G. A. Pocock, 'Ritual, Language, Power: an Essay on the Apparent Political Meanings of Ancient Chinese Philosophy', in his *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd, 1971); 42–79. This 1964 essay, unfortunately neglected by many sinologists, was unusually perceptive on the relation of ritual and language in early Chinese, especially Confucian, writings, when such matters attracted very little attention from sinologists.