



## Historical Lessons and Value Analysis of the Pre-Qin Confucian "Li" (Ritual) Ethical and Moral Thought

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### Abstract

China has long been known as the "Land of Rites" among various nations, a title largely attributed to the profound cultural influence of the ethical values and moral teachings of the Pre-Qin Confucian tradition. Confucius, a strong advocate of the Zhou rituals, made significant contributions to the study, development, and application of "Li". The high regard for Pre-Qin Confucianism in later generations reflects the deep recognition of "Li". In contemporary society, the diversification of values has become a major trend in social development. A thorough exploration of the Pre-Qin Confucian "Li" ethical and moral thought, along with the inheritance and promotion of the traditional ethical and moral values of the Chinese nation, will help people in the modern era address major issues related to political, economic, and social system building and governance. Returning to the thoughts of the ancient sages provides valuable intellectual inspiration that can contribute to political, economic, and social development.

**Keywords:** Confucianism, Li (Ritual), values, Ethical and Moral Thought

### Introduction

#### The Origin and Connotations of the Confucian Concept of "Li" (Ritual)

In the Pre-Qin period, during the Warring States era, the term "Li" had two important meanings: first, it referred to the formalities of rituals and ceremonies; second, it denoted the codes and systems of governance. Xiao Gongquan (2012) <sup>[5]</sup> argues that the Confucian emphasis on the codes and systems of governance is a broad understanding of "Li", encompassing all societal norms and regulations. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, people revered nature and engaged in divination and rituals to make decisions based on the will of spirits and gods, which reflects the widespread practice of worship and offerings to deities. Over time, this developed into a well-established system, with high-ranking officials specifically tasked with overseeing these rituals, forming a complete and organized set of practices.

The Duke of Zhou, during the Zhou dynasty, strongly advocated for "virtue" (德) and "Li", emphasizing that rulers must strictly adhere to moral standards and promoting moral education. By the time of the Western Zhou's collapse, the ritual system had been well established, especially in the state of Lu, where Confucius was born. Influenced deeply

by the Zhou rituals and sacrificial systems, Confucius developed a comprehensive understanding of the Duke of Zhou's ideas of "virtue" and "Li". Confucius stated: "I teach the rites of the Xia, but Qi is not sufficient for evidence; I study the rites of the Yin, and there remains a trace in Song; I study the rites of the Zhou, and now I follow them" (The Doctrine of the Mean, The Analects). According to the *Analects*, Confucius "asked questions in the great ancestral temple" to help people understand the cultural and ritual significance of sacrificial activities.

In *The Family Sayings of Confucius on the Zhou*, Confucius is recorded as having visited the ancient capital of the Zhou, Luoyi, multiple times to investigate the ruins of sacrificial sites and the rituals performed there. He also studied the sacrificial music and dance from the Zhou under the guidance of the Zhou official, Chang Hong (Guo, 2012) <sup>[5]</sup>. Confucius further studied the art of music under the music officials of Lu and traveled to Song to observe the rites and rituals associated with the Yin dynasty.

Confucius' teachings on "Li" were systematized in his academy of ritual and music, where he imparted the traditional cultural values of "Li". In his practice of inheriting the Duke of Zhou's ideas of "respect for Heaven"

(敬天) and "virtue corresponding with Heaven" (以德配天), Confucius gained a profound understanding of both the material and spiritual aspects of "Li". In the *Analects*, Confucius repeatedly emphasized the importance of "virtue" (德), particularly in his statements such as "ruling with virtue" (为政以德) and "a gentleman cherishes virtue" (君子怀德) (Li & Qi, 2016) [7]. Confucius also frequently mentioned "Li" in the *Analects*, using it as a moral constraint on his own behavior, a form of self-restraint or "self-discipline" (Xu, 2013) [8]. This shift from focusing on the external rituals and ceremonial decorations to emphasizing the spiritual and material essence of "Li" reflects Confucius' deeper commitment to the ideal of "benevolent virtue" (仁德) (Li & Qi, 2016) [7]. In his vision for governance, Confucius advocated for both "Li" and "virtue" as the primary tools for maintaining social order, asserting that "do not look, listen, speak, or act in ways that are not in accordance with Li" (*Analects*, Yan Yuan).

Confucius, as the primary founder of Confucianism during the Spring and Autumn period, further deepened the connotations of "Li", elevating the rituals of the Zhou and inheriting the Duke of Zhou's ideas, which contributed to the development and continuation of Confucianism during this time.

However, during the time of Mencius, the concept of "Li" evolved significantly. Mencius used human nature and ethical principles as the only standard for the development of "Li" and its origins. During this period, Chinese society experienced the rise of new elites, who, due to their talents, wealth, or political strategies, entered the ruling class, while traditional aristocrats, who had once upheld "Li" as the core of political order, began to move away from it (Feng, 2001) [3]. Mencius believed that the four virtues of benevolence (仁), righteousness (义), propriety (礼), and wisdom (智) arose from human emotions such as compassion, shame, respect, and a sense of right and wrong. He argued that the material conditions of life—adequate food and clothing—were essential for the formation of proper ethical and ritual practices in society. He famously stated: "A people with stable property have stable hearts; a people without stable property have unstable hearts. Without stable hearts, they will act in harmful ways". Mencius believed that ensuring material security for the people was essential for their moral behavior and for the proper practice of "Li". His ideas emphasized the need for rulers to provide for the people's basic needs, which would allow them to focus on cultivating moral virtues and rituals.

By the time of Xunzi, the concept of "Li" had evolved even further. Xunzi introduced the idea of "broad Li" (广义之礼), which departed from the Zhou ritual system in two significant ways: first, "Li" applied equally to both aristocrats and commoners, without the restriction of bloodline or social status; second, "broad Li" was no longer tied to political or clan identity, but instead focused on political legitimacy. Thus, regardless of changes in central or local governance, the legitimacy of "Li" remained intact, ensuring social stability (Feng, 2001) [3]. Xunzi's philosophy, grounded in his belief in the inherent badness of human nature (*Xing E* 性恶), argued that "Li" was necessary to regulate and restrain human desires. Xunzi believed that

human nature was inherently inclined toward selfishness, greed, and disorder, and that "Li" served to maintain harmony and order by regulating these desires (Xiao, 1946) [9]. He stated: "Heaven and Earth are the beginning of life, while 'Li' and 'righteousness' are the beginning of governance. A noble person is one who embodies 'Li' and 'righteousness' in their actions". Thus, Xunzi emphasized the role of "Li" in both the spiritual and material well-being of society, asserting that it was essential for social governance and the cultivation of virtue.

In summary, the concept of "Li" evolved from the formal rituals of the Shang and Zhou dynasties to a broader, more inclusive set of ethical guidelines and social norms in Confucian thought. Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi each contributed to the development of "Li", adapting it to their respective socio-political contexts and emphasizing its importance for maintaining moral order and governance in society.

### The Value of "Li" in contemporary Confucian thought

In today's era of rapid economic and social development, the enduring moral values of Confucianism continue to provide fundamental ethical guidance for citizens and society (Li, 2024) [6]. In particular, the modern Confucian thought based on the core values of Confucius' ideas of "benevolence" (仁) and "Li" (礼) has a profound influence on the spiritual and cultural development of the Chinese nation (Chang & Liu, 2019) [1].

Firstly, "Li" plays a significant role in nurturing and developing the core values of contemporary socialist Chinese culture and socialist ideology. The core values of socialist culture in modern China are a result of creatively inheriting and transforming the excellent traditional cultural heritage in the context of the new economic era. These values not only provide theoretical leadership for socialist thought but also contribute to the practical construction of a socialist value system. The formation of this core value system has profound historical and practical significance for the enhancement of the nation's political cultural soft power and the development of a moral society (Feng, 2013) [4]. Confucian "Li" serves both as a normative system for governance and as a guiding principle for individual conduct. In socialist society, Confucian values centered on "Li" play a major role in guiding and regulating the thoughts and political actions of the people. Concepts such as "civilization", "harmony", "integrity", and "friendliness" in the socialist core values are essentially an extension and inheritance of the core Confucian ideas of ritual propriety and morality. These values absorb and inherit the essence of Confucian thought and culture, while further promoting the construction of a socialist rule of law. The emphasis on the rule of law in socialist Confucian values aligns closely with the regulatory functions of "Li". The rule of law not only helps maintain social order and stability but also reflects and propagates the spiritual essence embedded in "Li", thus further standardizing social and individual behavior. Moreover, socialist Confucian values have enriched the spiritual connotations of "Li", allowing it to evolve and innovate in the new era. Currently, Confucian idealistic social values are mainly rooted in the good education of ethics and morality through "Li" and its role in forming and perfecting societal order. In contrast, the socialist Confucian

core values are systematically developed based on an understanding of productivity, political civilization, and spiritual civilization. This development requires the realization of a harmonious society through practice, further highlighting the practical significance of socialist Confucian values (Ding, 2008) [2]. In this process, "Li" not only serves as a behavioral norm but also profoundly influences state governance and social construction. By emphasizing the role of "Li" in regulating individual morals and promoting overall social order, Confucian "Li" plays an irreplaceable role in contributing to national prosperity and social harmony.

At the same time, Confucian "Li" has also played an important role in the construction of traditional Chinese culture, becoming a crucial spiritual force for building and enhancing cultural soft power and national confidence. As both a social behavioral norm and a spiritual principle, the "Li" in traditional Chinese culture has not only provided the foundation for the continuity of Chinese civilization but also serves as a guiding value for modern societal development. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of Chinese thought and traditional culture on numerous occasions, expressing a deep recognition and respect for the value systems of Chinese tradition. This recognition is not only about preserving excellent traditional culture but also about its positive role in the new era. The profound richness of Chinese culture, with its deep value system and philosophical essence, is a key resource for enhancing the nation's cultural soft power. Excellent traditional Chinese thought and cultural spirit serve as the backbone for building cultural soft power, playing an irreplaceable role in the development of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. Particularly under the guidance of modern Marxism, the "harmony" spirit advocated by Confucian ritual and music traditions can effectively help address and resolve the contradictions and issues that arise in the socialist market economy and the development of society. In the context of the rapid development of the socialist market economy, society may face complex challenges and conflicts in political morality, value awareness, interpersonal relationships, family order, and overall social order. Confucian "Li", through its emphasis on ethical norms and moral constraints, provides an important theoretical foundation and practical guidance for social governance. Specifically, "Li" can help coordinate relationships between people, promote mutual respect and harmony, improve the relationship between humans and nature, and facilitate the construction of ecological civilization. It also helps achieve internal harmony in individuals, fostering psychological health and moral cultivation. These functions support the stable and healthy development of the harmonious society envisioned in socialism with Chinese characteristics (Zhang, 2006) [10]. Furthermore, Confucian "Li" has injected a deep cultural foundation into the construction of modern Chinese cultural confidence. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "The excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation is our deepest cultural soft power". The core of this cultural confidence lies in recognizing the unique value of Chinese culture and its innovative transformation and developmental use in the modernization process. By promoting the spiritual

essence of Confucian "Li", strengthening social ethics and cultural identity, we can better showcase the unique charm of Chinese culture while enhancing China's voice in global cultural exchanges. In conclusion, Confucian "Li" as a crucial component of traditional Chinese culture plays an indispensable role in social order, national governance, cultural confidence, and individual moral cultivation. In the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics, incorporating the Confucian spirit of "Li" into various aspects of social development not only inherits the excellent traditions of Chinese culture but also provides sustained spiritual motivation and value support for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

### Conclusion

As stated in the Liji (Book of Rites), "Governing a country without 'Li' is like farming without a plow" and "Thus, 'Li' is the ruler's great instrument, through which the subtle distinctions of roles are clarified, the spirits are honored, the system is examined, and the virtues of benevolence and righteousness are distinguished. It is through 'Li' that governance is maintained and the ruler's reign is secure". This discussion clearly underscores the central role of "Li" in state governance, highlighting it as an essential tool for ruling the country. "Li" is not only the cornerstone of social order but also a crucial means for rulers to achieve long-term peace and stability. "Li" represents more than just a set of behavioral norms in ancient society; it symbolizes the wisdom and cultural essence that have been accumulated over generations. Since the Pre-Qin period, Confucian ideas about "Li" have been considered an important crystallization of Chinese culture. Its core spirit encompasses moral ethics, institutional norms, and social governance, making it a pillar and distinctive feature of Chinese civilization.

In the Pre-Qin period, Confucian "Li" was not merely a practice of moral ethics but also the theoretical foundation for social stability and political functioning. In ancient Chinese society, "Li" served dual functions: on one hand, it maintained social order by regulating personal behavior and moral cultivation; on the other hand, it ensured the legitimacy and effectiveness of political governance by establishing and maintaining social institutions. Thus, "Li", as a political tool, has always been integral to state governance and social construction. Especially in the thoughts of Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, the connotation of "Li" was further expanded and deepened, evolving into both a moral standard for individual cultivation and a mechanism for regulating social relations, balancing power distribution, and promoting societal harmony. These ideas became key components of traditional Chinese culture and had a profound impact on the political culture of subsequent generations.

In the process of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, the ideas and cultural spirit of "Li" remain highly relevant. The rapid development of China's market economy has brought immense vitality and creativity to society, but it has also resulted in the emergence of conflicting values and challenges to social order. In this context, the regulatory role and spiritual value of Confucian ideas on "Li" are particularly important. Concepts promoted by "Li", such as respect, integrity, and harmony, align closely with the values of "civilization", "friendliness", and

"harmony" found in the contemporary socialist core values. Through its emphasis on institutional norms and moral constraints, "Li" provides a theoretical basis and practical guidance for modern social interactions, public affairs, and state governance. The development of socialism with Chinese characteristics requires not only technological progress and economic growth but also cultural confidence and spiritual strength, and Confucian ritual thought is a crucial source of this cultural confidence.

Confucian thought on "Li" also stresses the importance of cultural inheritance. In the process of modernization, we should not only focus on learning from foreign cultures but also safeguard the uniqueness and significant value of Chinese culture. As one of the core elements of Chinese traditional culture, "Li" is not only an important manifestation of national spirit but also serves as a bridge for dialogue between Chinese culture and the world. In the context of globalization, emphasizing the value of "Li" helps us retain our cultural identity while learning from and incorporating foreign cultures, ensuring that our modernization process maintains its independence and distinctiveness. Only by effectively inheriting and innovating the traditional cultural spirit of "Li" can we truly achieve cultural prosperity and national strength (Li & Wang, 2024) <sup>[6]</sup>.

The traditional cultural ideas of "Li" from the Pre-Qin period are the foundational roots of Chinese culture and an essential part of China's social system and intellectual framework. In the process of building a modern nation, inheriting and promoting the cultural spirit of Pre-Qin "Li" represents a respect for and adherence to the roots of our national culture. As the Liji states, "Li is the great instrument of the ruler", "Li" is both the link for cultural inheritance and an important insight for modern governance. Only by deeply exploring and flexibly applying the spiritual essence of "Li" in the process of socialist modernization can we move further along the path toward the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, allowing Chinese culture to shine even more brightly in the new era.

### Funding Project

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