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Abstract: Existing ritual studies typically analyze a given ritual as already established within social life and internally coherent, thus examining its symbolic meanings and social effects. Such approaches implicitly treat ritual efficacy as an analytical assumption rather than an empirical object that social actors themselves, in addition to ritual participants, can evaluate. Drawing on a grassroots-led revival of traditional Chinese rituals in contemporary China, in a context where multiple ritual forms coexist, the article shifts attention to how ritual agents actively reflect on the social significance of different ritual forms. Based on interviews and participant observation, I find that ritual revivalists do not legitimate their revival through claims of national authenticity based on traditionality or the superiority of “traditional morality.” Instead, they frame ritual value in terms of its capacity to cultivate participants. They criticize existing ritual forms not because they fail to declare social relations but because they fail to shape participants morally. Specifically, revivalists assert that the traditional rituals they revive exhibit internal symbolic coherence, articulate moral content of social roles and relations, and generate participants’ sentiments, which are more likely to achieve participants’ moral transformation in contemporary settings. By analyzing how social actors diagnose the limitations of existing ritual forms and articulate alternative criteria of ritual efficacy, the article argues that ritual efficacy is not an intrinsic property of ritual but is itself contested, which shapes how ritual is explained, redesigned, and performed. I also explain why efficacy rather than traditionality constitutes the primary basis of legitimation for this revival, situating it within contemporary Chinese social situations and the legacy of Confucian ritual thought. I also explore why revivalists attribute greater efficacy to traditional rituals under modern conditions that are thought to undermine ritual authority.

Introduction

In recent years, the revival of traditional culture has been increasingly popular in China. One prominent expression of this trend is the revival of traditional rituals. While a general resurgence of ritual in traditional forms can be observed, one particular revival of ritual is distinguished by its pursuit of authenticity. It is part of the *Hanfu* (Han clothing) Movement, a bottom-up cultural revival in contemporary China, which claims to restore the authentic foundations of Chinese culture (*zhengben qingyuan*).

Such a revival easily recalls Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) influential notion of “invented tradition,” since tradition is often associated with authenticity and thus serves as a source of legitimacy. However, a closer examination of ritual revivalists’ statements shows that traditionality itself is rarely used as the primary justification for the ritual revival. In contrast, revivalists openly acknowledge that they reinterpret and reconstruct traditional rituals based on ancient records. Moreover, nationalist discourse often mobilizes tradition to present the continuity and distinctiveness of the nation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Smith 1991). However, nationalist claims, though appearing in the proposal of the revival of other cultural forms such as clothing within the movement, are barely articulated when revivalists frame the necessity of the ritual revival. The inheritance of national traditional culture is merely regarded as an additional advantage rather than the reason for revivalists to reject other existing ritual forms.

The revival of traditional Chinese ritual unfolds in a context where multiple ritual forms coexist. The functionalist approach in ritual studies may argue that “new” rituals are introduced for unmet social functions, such as fostering social cohesion and sociability (Durkheim 2008 [1912]; Taylor 2007). Nevertheless, rituals in contemporary China have not disappeared; the revived rituals in many cases are in competition with other forms of ritual, such as weddings and state-sponsored commemorations, which continue to mark life transitions and publicly establish social roles and relationships. Ritual studies also argue that ritual manifests deep collective representations of society and is intertwined with corresponding belief systems (Durkheim 2008 [1912]; Alexander 2004). From this perspective, the revived rituals may be interpreted as an attempt to restore “traditional morality,” particularly when we consider these revived rituals are in fact based on classical Confucian ritual. However, while revivalists occasionally mentioned the value of Confucian ethics in contemporary society featured by anomie, they also acknowledge that they actively reinterpret the classical meaning of ritual and norms of social roles. Different revivalists also have diverse understandings of the moral meaning of specific rituals.

Then, how can we understand the revival of traditional Chinese rituals in a context where plural ritual forms coexist and still remain at least seemingly socially functional? Based on interviews with revivalists in the *Hanfu* Movement and ethnographic observation, this article shifts the focus from what rituals do to how ritual actors diagnose the limitations of existing ritual forms and frame the value of the revival of “authentic” traditional ritual.

I find that ritual revivalists regard traditional ritual as internally coherent, with the capacity to provide moral guidance for social relations and roles it seeks to order, and with the potential of invoking and expressing strong sentiment. For revivalists, these constitute the conditions under which ritual can ultimately cultivate and morally transform ritual participants in contemporary Chinese society. In contrast, existing ritual forms are perceived as fragmented and unsettled, without the internal integration between symbolic structure, moral articulation, and emotion resonance. Therefore, the revival of Han ritual should not be understood merely as nationalist nostalgia, compensation for unmet social functions, or a replacement of belief systems. Rather, Confucian ritual is regarded as a more internally coherent and established ritual model. I further analyze three related questions in the conclusion: why revivalists draw on ritual efficacy rather than traditionality as the primary basis of legitimation; why cultivation rather than others is used as the central criterion of ritual efficacy; and why a ritual form rooted in traditional society is nevertheless considered as efficacious under modern conditions.

Literature Review

Traditionalism and Invented ritual

While scholars find ritual that appears to be traditional may be recently invented, traditionalism is a crucial dimension of ritual, manifested by for instance the use of ancient costumes (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Bell 2009). Traditionalism provides strong legitimation, and ritual without connection to tradition can be suspected as inauthentic. The power of traditionalism is rooted in the authority of tradition itself, an imagined ideal existing in an earlier time. Therefore, although rituals are in fact recently invented and even traditional ritual experiences changes across times, they try to make its origins and inventors invisible (Bell 2009).

However, scholars also find that in contemporary ritual settings, there is a tendency that newly invented ritual is increasing and that its constructive “invented” feature is explicitly

acknowledged. Bell (2009) summarizes the characteristics of these invented rites as therapeutic, a medium of self expression with an inward orientation, in contrast to traditional ritual where the self is defined by the community. She explains this phenomenon by the decline of the authority of tradition and fragmentation of social consensus. While invented ritual has no root in tradition which can be used to claim as its authority, it legitimates itself by ritual efficacy. Emotion attachment and collective effervescence become the goal of the designed ritual (Bell 2009; Frost 2023). However, these studies implicitly create a dichotomy between ritual with traditional appearance that legitimates itself by its traditionality and explicitly invented ritual that justifies itself by its efficacy, which overlooks the case of traditional ritual that its designers self-consciously invent.

Ritual efficacy and ritual failures

Existing sociological studies of ritual typically analyze a given ritual as if it were already deeply integrated within social life and embedded in social structure. Deeply influenced by the founding father of sociology Emile Durkheim (2008 [1912]), ritual is understood on the one hand as the symbolic expression of deep collective representation of society and on the one hand as serving certain social functions (Alexander 2004). Under this understanding, the analytical focus is to interpret the symbolic components of ritual as a cultural system, explain its relationship with the broad social structure, and examine social effects of ritual. Such analysis is built on an implicit assumption that ritual is always symbolically coherent and functional (Handelman 2005).

Scholars of ritual studies reflect on ritual efficacy more seriously. Scholars argue that ritual efficacy is a vague concept. Quack and Töhelmann (2010: 17) differentiate between effect and efficacy, arguing that the former refers to the actual result of a cause while ritual efficacy is based on the relation of certain effects to the “intentions, expectations and/or perceived functions of the ritual.” Realizing the potential discrepancies of perspectives between research observers and practitioners, which can influence which aspects of ritual selected to evaluate ritual efficacy, Quack and Töhelmann (2010: 17) further elaborate that one must answer “in ritual, what or who affects what or whom and according to whom” when investigating ritual efficacy. This understanding of ritual efficacy indicates that ritual efficacy is not an inherent property of ritual but socially constructed.

Scholars also find that rather than always being functional and efficacious, ritual can fail. This challenges the classical understanding of ritual as a social fact that all aspects of ritual render it meaningful and make it work and direct us to the performative dynamics within ritual (Schieffelin 2007; Stewart and Strathern 2014; Bell 1992). Scholars generally categorize two types of ritual failure: one is the failure to produce expected outcomes, and the other is mistakes and incorrect performance made during ritual processes (Schieffelin 2007). For the first one, the study of ritual failure shares a similar analytical problem with that of ritual efficacy—the point of view, that is, whether it is participant or observe deciding the ritual failure (Grimes 1990; Schieffelin 2007).

While these studies open up a multi-perspectival approach to ritual, they only focus on one ritual and only take at most two views into research consideration—from indigenous ritual participants and from researchers. However, in the modern setting, plural rituals with different sources of authority can coexist (Bell 2009). This includes the possible existence of a third perspective—the one from ritual actors evaluating other ritual forms that may be in competition with theirs (Frost 2023). This article is the examination of how ritual actors understand the value

of their rituals in comparison with other existing rituals. The inclusion of the “third perspective” shows that which perspective used to understand ritual efficacy is no longer a conceptual question. Rather, ritual efficacy becomes a contestable empirical object, and social actors’ debates around it may have further practical consequences.

Case and Method

This article draws on the case of the *Hanfu* Movement in contemporary China. It originated on the internet in the early 2000s and continues to thrive today. Both scholars and revivalists characterize it as a grassroots movement (Wang 2022; Yang 2020; Zhou 2024). It aims to start from *Hanfu* to rejuvenate Chinese/Han civilization comprehensively. *Hanfu*, according to revivalists, is the traditional clothing of the Han ethnicity, which now accounts for 92% of Chinese population. The emphasis on the Han is related to the complicated historical relationship between Chineseness and the Han ethnicity, which is beyond the explanation scope of this article. A brief understanding is that “the Han” here is not limited to the modern Han ethnicity but refers to the core of ancient Chinese civilization.

Within the movement, in addition to *Hanfu* itself, the revival of traditional rituals is a significant component. On the one hand, traditional Chinese ritual is seen as having symbolic national meaning. “China has the greatness of etiquette, so it is called Xia; there is the beauty of clothing, so it is called Hua”—this quotation from *Chunqiu Zuozhuan Zhengyi*, a Chinese classical text, is often cited by revivalists to claim their reason for the traditional ritual revival. On the other hand, revivalists admit that its revival is also practical: particularly in the early phase of the movement when *Hanfu* was rarely known by the public and regarded as even eccentric, conducting rituals provides a relatively legitimate occasion to wear *Hanfu* and also serves an activity for revivalists as a group to engage with together, particularly, a meaningful one.

The revived traditional rituals within the movement are diverse, with additional ritual types remaining to be discovered and re-designed. At present, the revived practices primarily center on sacrificial rites (*jisi*) and life-cycle rites. The former mainly involves commemorating national ancestors and heroes and sometimes even modern martyrs; the latter most commonly includes weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies.

These rituals are collectively referred to as Han ritual within the movement. These rituals are in fact Confucian rituals. Only Confucianism emphasizes ritual as well as its social function in Chinese tradition, and revivalists refer to Confucian classical texts, such as *Yili*, to revive the rituals. However, as Confucianism has lost its status as the state ideology, “Confucian” ritual sounds only constrained to a small population interested in Confucianism. In contrast, the *Hanfu* Movement is a national movement, aiming to cultivate the national public. Thus, the revived rituals are labeled as Han ritual, at the same time, in alignment with the movement’s main goal of reviving “*Hanfu*.”

Data used in this article was collected through interviews with *Hanfu* revivalists and participant observation. From 2023 to 2025, I have interviewed 41 revivalists, including 23 movement leaders and 18 practitioners—the boundary between the two was sometimes blurred. Movement leaders are concerned with the movement’s aims, directions, and strategies and most head local *Hanfu* associations, organizing and designing all kinds of *Hanfu*-related activities. Many of them turned the revival of Hanfu and Han rituals into their career and owned ritual studios and companies. *Hanfu* practitioners actively participate in *Hanfu* activities out of a desire to revitalize *Hanfu*, though without well-defined reflections on the movement. I interviewed

nearly all practitioners and leaders in person across 14 provinces. Interviews with practitioners usually lasted approximately three hours, and those with leaders ranged from three to six hours, with several exceeding six hours.

I conducted participant observation of diverse *Hanfu* activities, including rituals, representations of rituals, festival celebrations, and forums. I traveled to multiple cities to attend events organized by different *Hanfu* associations. Many associations are active only during *Hanfu* event periods, therefore attending their events was more efficient. Moreover, considerable variation existed in movement ideals and practices across *Hanfu* associations, and observing events organized by different associations offered opportunities for comparison. I attended several ritual events designed by movement leaders I interviewed, providing me the opportunity to observe what they said during the interviews in reality.

Most rituals follow similar procedures drawn from ancient records and are highly symbolic. To better understand their underlying rationales, in 2024, I attended a four-day Han ritual training organized by a well-established *Hanfu* association. During the training, the instructors explained the meaning of each ritual as well as its procedures and provided the ritual scripts designed by themselves based on ancient records.

Cultivation as the Legitimacy for Revived Han Rituals

In this section, I will show how ritual revivalists in the *Hanfu* Movement understand the value of the revival of traditional Chinese rituals in contemporary China. In Chinese society, there is no lack of rituals—neither national nor life-cycle ceremonies. National ceremonies held by the state include various types. They include those in a “modern” style, such as the national flag-raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square and the National Day military parade, and rituals appearing traditional, such as the official sacrificial ceremony honoring the Yellow Emperor—the legendary ancestor of the Chinese nation. As for life-cycle ceremonies, although revivalists advocate reintroducing several rituals at key moments of the life course (especially the coming-of-age ceremony), which have faded nowadays, certain rituals, such as weddings, remain socially entrenched.

Revivalists’ legitimation of their revival of Han rituals often expands in comparison with existing rituals. They hold different attitudes toward different kinds of existing rituals and provide varied understandings of the value of Han rituals in different comparisons. For instance, they strongly criticize the official sacrificial ceremony honoring the Yellow Emperor and claim that their way of conducting sacrificial rituals honoring the Yellow Emperor is more authentic because it is more in alignment with the idea of traditional rituals. However, when evaluating the state commemorative ceremony for modern martyrs, revivalists do not oppose to this type of ritual, and authenticity no longer constitutes the reason for Han ritual’s superiority in revivalists’ understanding.

In the following subsections, I demonstrate three ways of ritual revivalists understanding the value of their revived Han rituals and analyze how they all point to the social function of rituals expected by Confucianism—cultivation.

Internal Coherence of Ritual

Revivalists hold an explicitly negative stance toward a certain type of ritual, which they think is not internally coherent. A frequently mentioned example during my interviews with revivalists is the critique of the Western-style wedding currently popular in contemporary China.

The following remark of Shunheng, a male leader of a local *Hanfu* association and owner of a ritual company in his forties, represents a typical aspect that revivalists think problematic:

In contemporary China, popular civil weddings lack sacredness and do not possess the characteristics of ritual. What remains is merely custom without ritual. Since the modern period, many Chinese have adopted Western-style weddings, yet they do not share the religious faith from which these forms originate. Such wedding formats are closely tied to religion. Yet you do not believe in that religion. There is no God, no pastor serving as witness. Instead, an emcee assumes a role resembling that of a pastor, asking: “Are you willing to remain together, in poverty and in sickness?” But who is he? Whom does he represent? A well-groomed emcee—what authority does he have to bear witness? A pastor represents God; he speaks in the name of divine authority. Only then can such words carry meaning. No matter how moving the words may sound, they are ineffective and meaningless because inwardly there is no God, no faith. Without belief, the ritual cannot enter the heart; it has no real impact. Life will proceed as before. It does not truly shape people. Only when one speaks from within one’s own cultural roots, when the ritual resonates deeply within the heart, can it truly make sense and become meaningful and effective.

Han ritual revivalists do not reject Western-style or Christian weddings per se, regarding it as inherently flawed. Nor do they criticize Chinese couples for adopting Western forms merely due to nationalist reason. What is problematic from revivalists’ perspective is that the participants in the ritual lack the corresponding belief, which undermines the sacredness of the ritual. Therefore, for Shunheng, the advantage or the condition for the efficacy of Han ritual is that it “speaks from within one’s own cultural roots.” Revivalists assume although traditional Chinese culture is in decline in contemporary Chinese society, deep belief, for instance, ancestor worship, still exists among the population. Shi Qian, a female leader of a local Han association and owner of a Han ritual studio in her forties, differentiates the two belief systems embodied in Western and traditional Chinese rituals:

In the West, couples wear wedding gowns and marry in church because they have religious faith. They swear before Heaven in the name of their own belief. In a Chinese wedding, before whom does one make a vow? One vows before one’s lineage, before one’s family.

In addition to the absence of corresponding belief in ritual with religious components among the Chinese public, revivalists criticize rituals that displace the very relational order they are meant to structure. In the instance of the Western-style wedding held by Chinese, Fan Chengzhong, a male local *Hanfu* association leader in his forties, explained when he chose to design a traditional Han wedding for his own marriage:

The problem with Western-style weddings is that they tend to feel somewhat frivolous. During many weddings we attended, the bride and groom are treated almost as if they are being teased. The emcee says, “Kiss!” and you kiss.

“Hug!” and you hug. It is all directed by the host—it has little to do with us. We simply stand there. The emcee becomes the protagonist! The wedding is arranged entirely around him. Who is actually getting married? That is why I feel somewhat resistant to Western-style weddings. I did not want to adopt that format, so I began to look into what our traditional wedding would be like. In a wedding, we, the couple, are the central figures, not the host.

For Fan Chengzhong, the relation between the couple should be central during the wedding; this is the meaning of the wedding. However, when the wedding becomes more like a mere performance, the center shifts to performative stage itself.

Another widely discussed negative example among the revivalists is the sacrificial ritual held by people who, in their view, do not understand the essence of Han ritual. In an article written by one of the most famous movement leaders, Xishan Qinkuang, in early 2000s, he criticized the contemporary sacrificial ritual although with some traditional elements:

Almost overnight, the term “sacrifice” surged in popularity, and “official commemorative ceremonies (*gongji*)” became fashionable spectacles. What was once cast aside like worn-out shoes has suddenly become gleaming golden boots, now worn lightly by officials striding across the red carpets of various public commemorations. Ritual officers in suits and ceremonial sashes stand with their backs to the ancestors. After the cannons sound, they begin to recite formulaic sacrificial texts, indistinguishable from one another. Sacrifice has become a stage performance; ancestors have become props, their beards tugged year after year as descendants play fashionable cultural games.

Dongdao Zhuren, a male movement leader and owner of a Han ritual studio in his forties, echoed this point and explained it in further detail:

When it comes to sacrifice, I admire the ancients; I do not admire contemporary practices. What is the problem today? At times, people place excessive emphasis on honoring the officiants while forgetting those who are being honored. For example, in many events, especially those organized by government institutions, the primary concern is not the sacrificial act itself, but the ranking of officials seated in the front rows. In traditional practice, things were much simpler: those attending would simply observe; three offering officials (*xianguan*) would be selected—this year you, next year someone else—and the rite would proceed. Today, however, one must select representatives from the education sector, from lineage descendants, from well-known scholars, from government leadership, and so on. In this sense, the ritual’s central focus begins to shift. In fact, classical ritual theory grappled with questions far subtler than those we face today. For example, we say, “Sacrifice to the spirits as if they are present.” But should one first salute the spirits or first invite them to descend? I am not asking you. I just want to show that the ancients debated such matters carefully. By contrast, modern practitioners scarcely concern themselves with these questions; instead, they worry about how to arrange the seating order of officials.

For revivalists, the central relation that traditional sacrificial ritual aims to order is the one between those who are being honored and participants, usually between ancestors and descendants. Yet, in the contemporary “revived” sacrificial ritual, government leaders become the center. Actually, this shift is understandable—as a ceremony held by the state, it represents the state draws on national tradition for its legitimacy. Revivalists do not oppose to the role of the state in creating the national community (Hutchinson 1987) because they do not oppose to other forms of state rituals such as the national flag-raising ceremony at Tiananmen Square and the National Day military parade. What they are concerned with is the internal coherence of ritual itself. The subject being honored is treated as only a symbol rather than a real subject in a spiritual form that participants imagine interacting with. When the sacrificial ritual claims to commemorate the national ancestor but it is in practiced not respected as the ritual requires, the relation that is supposed to be addressed and order by the ritual shifts, which thus undermines ritual sacredness.

Providing Moral Guidance

Ritual revivalists believe that compared with existing rituals, especially the coming-of-age ceremony and wedding, Han ritual is more “meaningful.” Shi Qian explicitly demonstrated this point when she talked about her studio holding coming-of-age ceremony:

Shi: In China today, schools usually organize a collective coming-of-age ceremony when students turn eighteen. But the format of these ceremonies, personally I find is rather strange. There is something like an “adulthood gate,” and you wear a suit or a formal dress, and your parents walk you through it. Does that mean you have become an adult? I feel that the meaning is quite different from that of traditional coming-of-age ritual, which we call the *jili* or *guanli*.

I: In what sense do you think they are different? Aren’t they all meant to signify [turning to adulthood] ...?

Shi: Responsibility. I think that many of our rituals—whether the ancients conducted sacrificial rites, or other forms of ritual practice—the key point was that, through the ritual itself, one was made to experience a moral demand.

She later explained how the moral demand of responsibility is manifested in the traditional coming-of-age ceremony:

Actually, within the “three investitures” (*san jia*) there are several highly significant stages. For example, during the first investiture, a girl’s hair is pinned up, signifying that she has reached adulthood—that she is now recognized as a grown woman. Yet in the middle of the rite there are also acts such as the conferral of wine and rice. Why is wine bestowed? Is it simply to indicate that, having come of age, one is now permitted to drink alcohol? No. Rather, it signifies that one has acquired the right to perform ancestral sacrifices—that one may enter the ancestral temple to honor the ancestors. Then, in the second stage, one is granted a courtesy name (*zi*). Only at that moment does one formally acquire one’s own *zi*. Each stage entails a distinct form of obligation. When

you are given food, is it merely about eating? When you are given wine, is it merely about drinking? That is not the point. Just as in a wedding ceremony, every segment carries its own meaning.

The interview with Shi Qian indicates that she did not deny the transformative function of ritual. As the coming-of-age ceremony she criticized, walking through the “adulthood gate” has symbolic meaning, signifying and socially claiming the transformation of one’s identity. However, what she took issue with is that such transformation is merely formal. By explaining the symbolic meaning of each procedure within the ceremony, Shi Qian aimed to highlight that Han ritual provides moral guidance to the new social roles of individuals.

However, the emphasis on the capacity of Han ritual to provide moral guidance on social roles does not mean the revival of Han ritual is out of a wish to rejuvenate traditional Confucian morality or a belief that such morality is superior. Rather, my interviews show that revivalists’ interpretations of the meaning of their revived rituals vary. Taking coming-of-age ceremony as an example, we can observe that different revivalists imbued different meanings to adulthood. For instance, as stated above, Shi Qian argued that adulthood means a realization of the correspondence between rights and responsibilities, particularly as a responsible family member. Zifeiyu, a male owner of a Han ritual studio in his forties, remarked that he always told a story at coming-of-age ceremonies about a group of teenage students who join during the Japanese invasion into China in 1937–1938, joined the guerrilla resistance, many of them dying in battle. He presented their participation in the war as their true “coming-of-age” and aimed to teach contemporary youth who, though not required to face war, must assume age-appropriate moral and social responsibilities in their own era. In contrast, Longqi, a male leader of a local *Hanfu* association in his forties, stated that the coming-of-age ceremonies he designed were intended to instill self-reliance, filial gratitude, and reverence.

Furthermore, revivalists are open to modification and reinterpretation beyond the ancient Confucian morality and imply that there is no restrictive consistent meaning of a ritual or a social role. For instance, when Shi Qian interpreted the stage of the conferral of wine and rice as the symbolic representation of the adult right to perform ancestral sacrifices during the coming-of-age ceremony, I asked:

I: But you mentioned that this is related to the traditional lineage system. Yet nowadays, ancestor worship is quite rare—at least in my region in the north. So I wonder how you see this: if you tell someone today that they now have the right to perform ancestral sacrifices, they might feel that it does not really mean much to them...

Shi: It may not feel like much.

I: Right, because they do not actually perform ancestral rites anyway.

Shi: Even if people no longer conduct ancestral sacrifices, it is still a form of recognition by the family, isn’t it? What counts as an adult today? Do we simply say that turning eighteen makes someone an adult?

I: So it may not necessarily refer to the specific obligation to perform ancestral rites, but perhaps to other responsibilities related to the family?

Shi: Yes, responsibility toward the family. In any case, you are telling them: you are now an adult and you must take responsibility. For example, if we were

organizing the ceremony together with a school today, we could even add something extra. I could give you a gift—a copy of the Criminal Law.

Shi Qian's words show that the significance of adult responsibility embedded in traditional coming-of-age ceremony that refers to the right for performing ancestral rites can be easily extended to modern understanding of adulthood from the legal lens—assuming legal responsibility.

Other forms of rituals are criticized as lacking moral guidance, which indicates that revivalists are concerned with moral meaning conveyed through ritual. For them, traditional ritual matters not merely due to its traditional appearance. However, meanwhile, ritual revivalists acknowledge that the moral meanings represented in traditional ritual are open to reinterpretation, and they reinterpret these meanings in diverse ways. Then, how can we understand the significance of the revival of Han ritual? What aspects of traditional ritual do revivalists precisely identify with? I argue that they recognize the relational order that Confucian ritual aims to structure. As for the specific content of how to order these relations, they believe it should be adjusted to adapt to contemporary conditions. For example, they affirm that key life moments, such as coming of age and marriage, need to be marked, and the relationships such as that between husband and wife require ordering. As Shunheng asserts, “[ritual] concerns the most fundamental human relations (*renlun*). Any ethnicity—so long as they are human—share certain common human qualities. Ritual responds precisely to this shared human nature.” In this sense, what remains constant in traditional ritual is the relational structure that Confucian morality aimed to order. At the same time, ritual, in which steps are highly symbolic, leaves room for revivalists to modify the content of that relational order.

Invoking Sentiments in Practice

Ritual revivalists typically stress that they provide pre-ritual training sessions, which includes not only the presentation of how to perform during the ritual but also explanation of why to perform this ritual. This is one of the crucial points that they believe differentiates themselves from other ritual companies. During the pre-ritual sessions, they usually teach the significance of the ritual as well as the symbolic meanings of each step in the ritual. It is because even though revivalists believe the steps in traditional Han ritual are more meaningful than other forms of rituals as I presented earlier, they acknowledge that these meanings may not be understood by participants simply through following the ritual steps. As Zifeiyu remarked,

This is precisely why, when we conduct coming-of-age ceremonies, we include a pre-ritual training session. If we only rehearse the ritual procedures, the deeper meanings we seek to convey cannot necessarily be felt through the rehearsal itself. They must be explained explicitly. The ritual program alone cannot fully express these meanings. But once they are articulated and understood, the participant may grasp their significance more fully. Take the *jiaozi* rite, for example. In this segment, the parents offer the young person a cup of wine and deliver admonitions (*lingxun*), expressing their hopes, expectations, and guidance for the child's future life. If we do not explain beforehand why this instruction is included in the ceremony, the participant may interpret it as little different from the everyday parental instruction they receive at home. In that case, the coming-

of-age ceremony would lose its deeper meaning, or fail to achieve any substantive effect.

However, substantive social effects of ritual are impossible for revivalists to observe and lie beyond their control. During my interviews, they emphasize the necessity of pre-ritual sessions usually by the subsequent description of participants' emotional reactions during the ritual. Tears shed during the ritual, including coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and sacrificial rituals honoring national heroes, are often regarded by revivalists as a sign of the ritual's efficacy. Revivalists' influence is largely confined to the ritual stage itself; once the ritual concludes, how participants live their lives is no longer within their purview. Therefore, invoking appropriate emotion and letting participants perform the ritual with this sentiment become the main means for revivalists to potentially shape participants and largely the social order.

In addition to discursive moral teaching, revivalists emphasize the form of Han ritual itself is able to both cultivate and express strong sentiment. For instance, Tangtang, a female leader of a local *Hanfu* association in her forties, mentioned this point when describing a commemorative ritual for martyrs organized by the association:

We went to the Martyrs' Cemetery to conduct commemorations. In advance, we had communicated with the cemetery authorities and explained that we intended to perform the rites in a traditional manner. The cemetery administration approved; in fact, the Party committee and propaganda officials there were supportive. However, once we arrived on site, it became clear that the public had a need. Why? Because they did not know what to do. They only knew to lay a bouquet of flowers and bow. But laying flowers and bowing felt too perfunctory. It could not fully carry their emotions. Why is such a sacrificial ritual (*jili*) form necessary? Because we have solemn emotions that need to be expressed, and such emotions require a certain ritual form in order to be expressed. A sufficiently elaborate and extended ritual form allows us to express our feelings fully.

Revivalists do not deny the significance of commemorating martyrs in a "more modern" form—represented by laying flowers and bowing. However, they regard Han ritual as a better way for participants to express their sentiment. The procedural design of Han ritual provides more room for emotional expression. For instance, the sacrificial Han ritual is longer, with several repetitive steps, and with a stage of reading the sacrificial address.

Furthermore, the invocation of appropriate sentiments for the ritual is supported by the performative dimension within the ritual. As part of the *Hanfu* Movement, revivalists of Han ritual emphasize that one of the differences between their rituals and other types of ritual is the wear of *Hanfu*. This is not because ritual is merely the occasion of wearing *Hanfu* as the byproduct of the *Hanfu* Movement. Instead, revivalists emphasize the important role of *Hanfu* in providing an experience that differentiates the ritual moment from the mundane life as even though with over twenty-year revival of *Hanfu*, it has still not been widely worn in people's everyday life. Therefore, changing into *Hanfu* before the ritual marks the entrance into sacredness (Durkheim 2008 [1912]).

In addition to *Hanfu* itself, other aspects of performing ritual are also crucial to create a ritualized and sacred experience. For instance, Shunheng is the movement leader I have interviewed who particularly emphasizes the power of performance and aesthetics:

Shunheng: It is not particularly difficult to complete the procedural sequence of a ritual correctly. But to give the ritual vitality, to endow it with resonance, with affective force, to make it enter the heart, that is truly difficult.

I: Would you be willing to elaborate? Perhaps give a concrete example?

Shunheng: She once served as a bridesmaid at a Han-style wedding held for a friend. That ceremony had none of this power. It was simply an ordinary, vulgar person presiding over a Han wedding. It lacked any sense of communion between Heaven and Earth; it lacked the function of a ritual mediator, a messenger between Heaven and humanity, a conduit between humans and the divine. The officiant had no control over the details of the rite. As a result, the beauty and sacredness of the ritual were not manifested at all; its moral significance was completely submerged, leaving only an empty shell. To perform ritual well is extremely difficult. Without innate talent, it cannot be done. Without the capacity to communicate with the divine, it cannot be done. Without artistic sensibility, aesthetic cultivation, and design awareness, it cannot be done. Entry is easy. You may not even have read the *Yili*, yet by observing others you can imitate the form. However, to do it well is exceedingly difficult.

Therefore, when I later asked him the importance for his *Hanfu* association to lead the public to perform sacrificial ritual, particularly when “in primary school, students were sometimes organized to visit martyrs’ memorial monuments to lay flowers and so on,” he responded that:

That simply does not work. It does not deeply move people inwardly. You cannot assume that simply placing someone in a particular setting will automatically generate a sense of resonance. Nor does merely learning ritual gestures—raising one’s hands, bowing in proper form—guarantee such resonance. Ultimately, the question is: who is the ritual mediator? Is there a true great shaman between Heaven and Earth present? That is the key. Ordinary people do not possess this ability. Without that capacity, the affective field cannot be generated; the ritual atmosphere cannot take shape.

According to Shunheng, the procedural sequence of Han ritual itself and merely wearing *Hanfu* do not guarantee to move participants. He emphasized his charismatic role in creating a certain ritual atmosphere to invoke their emotion.

Sentiment is the core of the Confucian understanding of ritual. According to Confucianism, while human beings naturally have sentiments that are not inherently good or bad, ritual aims to manage and direct these sentiments to achieve an ordered world. Ritual has the functions of both impression and expression. On the one hand, through performing ritual, humans are expected to be shaped and cultivated by ritual. On the other hand, ritual allows cultivated people to express their refined disposition. While Confucian texts are more concerned with excessive sentiment rather than sentiment deficiency (Ing 2012), the latter is the more common problem that ritual revivalists observe. By emphasizing the internal symbolic coherence of ritual and the moral significance that Han ritual is embodied with, revivalists share a similar social goal with Confucianism and expect ritual to deliver a moral teaching and achieve an

ordered society. However, revivalists believe the moral significance is not cognitively learned; rather, they emphasize the invocation of strong sentiment during the ritual. Only when participants have the strong feelings, from the perspectives of revivalists, is there possibility for them to understand the moral meaning of the ritual and then be actually cultivated and transformed.

Discussion and Conclusion

The article shows that the revival of traditional Han ritual in contemporary China cannot be sufficiently explained by invented tradition, nationalist appeal, or simple functional compensation for social order. By empirically examining how ritualists frame the value of traditional Han ritual in comparison with other ritual forms in the context where multiple rituals coexist, I find that revivalists believe Han ritual is able to achieve internal coherence, provide moral guidance, and invoke sentiment. These three aspects all point to Han ritual's capacity to cultivate ritual participants.

Existing rituals that revivalists criticize, such as wedding, coming-of-age ceremony, and the sacrificial ritual held by the state, can be understood as still serving social functions, that is, establishing and declaring social relations. However, revivalists evaluate these rituals by a different criterion—whether participants understand and internalize the moral meaning embedded in these roles and relations.

In contrast to the academic assumption that ritual is inherently efficacious, revivalists do not adopt an essentialist view of understanding Han ritual and competing rituals. Believing moral cultivation to be the central goal of ritual, they recognize that the achievement of this goal requires both that ritual itself be morally meaningful and that participants' sentiment be properly invoked. The script of Han ritual provides a basic structure through which revivalists can imbue moral significance and generate a more ritualized experience. Therefore, according to revivalists, compared with other ritual forms, Han ritual is just a ritual model with greater potential for cultivating people. They also acknowledge that simply performing Han ritual by following its procedures cannot automatically realize cultivation. In a context characterized by general sentiment deficiency, invoking appropriate emotion requires additional work beyond the ritual script.

Furthermore, many revivalists expressed a sense of powerlessness during interviews: their influence is largely confined to the ritual stage itself rather than extending to people's actual life after ritual. They even cannot guarantee to influence other participants and ensure all of them are inwardly engaged during the ritual but can only control themselves to behave properly. Although the cultivation of human beings and achievement of an ordered society are the ultimate goals in classical Confucianism and these revivalists' aspiration, in practice, revivalists pursue a more modest and immediate goal. As Confucianism has lost its status as the state ideology, instead of expecting Confucian ritual revival to transform society at the macro level, they focus on preserving the integrity of ritual itself, thereby creating at least the possibility of moral resonance and cultivation of participants at the micro level.

Traditionality itself has long been considered as the source of ritual legitimacy (Bell 2009). However, in the case of Han ritual revival in the twenty-first-century China, revivalists do not justify their efforts through traditionality but through its potential to cultivate participants. One exploratory explanation is that Confucian tradition can no longer provide sufficient authority. On the one hand, Confucianism no longer occupies a central position in Chinese society, including areas of ideology, culture, and political structure, but merely exists as one

component of traditional culture. On the other hand, traditional culture in China has often been stigmatized as feudal, and ritual practice interpreted as superstitious (Xu 2024). Therefore, revivalists turn to ritual itself, particularly its efficacy, to seek legitimacy for traditional ritual.

Moreover, traditionalism and invariance are often closely associated in claiming the authority of ritual, and the invented or constructed nature of ritual is usually obscured (Bell 2009). Ritual revivalists in my case, however, do not deny the constructedness of the rituals they revived and emphasize the necessity of modifying Han ritual to adapt to contemporary circumstances. This stance actually aligns with classical Confucian ritual thought, which allows the modification of ritual script according to appropriateness (*yi*) in order for contextualization to avoid ritual failure (Ing 2012). Yet precisely because revived Han ritual is acknowledged as constructed and variable, it cannot easily derive authority from traditionality alone.

A further question is why cultivation becomes the primary criterion of ritual efficacy rather than, for instance, the declaration of social relationship, or more broadly, the achievement of an ordered society. While this question requires deeper examination, I offer several tentative explanations here. First, cultivation is central in classical Confucian ritual thought (Ing 2012). However, revivalists do not strategically deploy this criterion in order to exclude other ritual forms. Instead, they treat cultivation as a universal norm of what ritual ought to accomplish. Second, as I stated earlier, the decline of the status of Confucianism and the grassroots position of revivalists shift their expectations of ritual function from macro-level social transformation to individual morality cultivation. Finally, according to ritual revivalists, the core social problem they identify lies not in institutional disorder but in moral meaning emptiness and emotional deficiency. Therefore, cultivation and moral formation of subject become the goal to pursue.

Considering the arguments of secularization and disenchantment made by Western scholars (Taylor 2007; Weber 2009), the revival of traditional ritual in my case presents an interesting puzzle: if modernity leads to the fall and failure of ritual, then how can a ritual form rooted in traditional society, instead of newly new invented or explicitly secular forms (Frost 2023), be regarded as efficacious? In the Chinese context, based on revivalists' understanding, the failure of other ritual forms is not the inevitable outcome of secularization. While revivalists' discourse on China's modern transition warrants further examination and their diagnosis of ritual failure appears diverse, it still can be read from their interviews that they attribute these failures to the westernization process, incomplete cultural integration in Chinese society, and the erosion of traditional Chinese culture. In addition, the Confucian ritual tradition provides a distinctive condition of its revival even in a context marked by declining belief in supernatural power: "when performing sacrifice, conduct it as though the spirits were present (*jishen ru shenzai*)."

Many revivalists infer that Han ritual does not require sustained belief in transcendent power outside the ritual setting and also distinguish between ancestral spirits as historically real people and an abstract supernatural God. Therefore, ritual efficacy of traditional ritual is considered as independent of metaphysical faith; traditional Chinese ritual is regarded as still "workable" under modern conditions and helping overcome the problem brought by modernity in Chinese society.

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