

Form without Social Foundation: Ritual Revival in Contemporary China
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Existing ritual studies assume an organic relationship between ritual and society, with the former both being structured by and structuring the latter. Based on this assumption, ritual studies further examine the mechanisms through which ritual produces social effects and cultivates moral subjects under functioning social conditions (Durkheim 2008; Collins 2004; Bell 2009; Mahmood 2005). While scholars recognize social conditions that once enabled traditional rituals to properly function have changed, they pay attention to the decline of these rituals and the emergence of new ones (Bell 2009; Frost 2023). They thus overlook the possibility of conscious revival alongside what appears to be ritual's inevitable decline. What happens when the social conditions disappear while traditional ritual is consciously revived and reconstructed in modern settings? While studies of invented tradition argue that many so-called traditional objects and practices are in fact recently designed for modern purposes (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), they attribute too much agency to designers, overlooking the constraints produced by the entanglement between traditional cultures and their social backgrounds and thus the challenges of revival in a structurally displaced modern world.

Drawing on a bottom-up cultural revival in contemporary China, which includes the revival of traditional ritual, I ask when the social foundations that traditional moral practices were based on have disappeared, how revivalists who consciously revive traditional ritual understand the value of their efforts. Specifically, why are they dissatisfied with existing ritual forms? What advantages do they see in traditional ritual forms? How do they respond to contemporary settings that may be incompatible with traditional ritual and disable its function—what strategies do they employ, and how do they see their limitations? Based on revivalists' understandings and practices, I further ask what the limitations and potentialities of this revival reveal about the relationship between ritual practice, social conditions, and ritual efficacy in the modern world.

This ritual revival is part of the *Hanfu* Movement. Initiated online in the early 2000s, the movement aims to revive *Hanfu*—the traditional clothing of the Han ethnic majority—and rejuvenate Han civilization holistically. The revived traditional rituals mainly include sacrificial and life-cycle rites. The former mainly involves commemorating national ancestors, heroes, and even modern martyrs; the latter commonly includes weddings and coming-of-age ceremonies. These rituals are in fact largely Confucian rituals but are referred to as Han ritual within the movement, in alignment with the movement's main theme of reviving "*Hanfu*."

The study is based on interviews and participant observation. From 2023 to 2025, I interviewed 15 *Hanfu* consumers and 41 revivalists. Many of the revivalists headed local *Hanfu* associations and owned ritual studios. I conducted participant observation of diverse *Hanfu* activities organized by different *Hanfu* associations, including rituals, festival celebrations, and forums.

I find that instead of justifying the ritual revival through authenticity or nationalism, revivalists focus on ritual efficacy—particularly ritual's capacity to cultivate and morally transform participants. This criterion of ritual efficacy may derive from classical Confucian ritual thought. The mechanism through which revivalists expect such cultivation to occur is bodily experience and emotion during ritual performance. Their emphasis on bodies and emotions is consistent with both classical Confucian theories and general ritual studies in Western scholarship (Ammerman 2020; Mahmood 2005; Collins 2004).

In comparison with existing ritual forms, revivalists believe traditional ritual possesses characteristics that can intensify participants' bodily feelings, evoke emotions, and thus facilitate moral transformation. First, traditional ritual is able to provide substantial moral guidance regarding the social roles and relations that ritual intends to establish or transform. Although revivalists themselves offer diverse reinterpretations of moral content, they believe structures of traditional ritual procedures enable moral teachings to be embedded in the ritual. Second, revivalists emphasize the performative and aesthetic dimensions of the rituals they revive, such as changing into *Hanfu*—the clothing barely worn in daily life. In addition to ritual itself, revivalists also believe stemming from Chinese indigenous culture, traditional ritual can still generate public resonance to some extent.

However, traditional Confucian ritual was historically embedded in a broader social and institutional context that enabled its cultivating function. With China's radical modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this social foundation has been largely displaced. Yet not all changes pose the same challenge to ritual revival. Some concern the moral content and social norms that ritual is supposed to convey, and revivalists believe these can be adapted. Classical Confucian ritual thought also allows modification of ritual scripts according to appropriateness (*yi*) to avoid ritual failure (Ing 2012). Revivalists need to only recognize the social roles and relations that ritual aims to establish and provide their own interpretations of the moral norms.

In contrast, other changes concern more fundamental conditions that ritual efficacy depends on and are far more difficult to overcome. Two are particularly significant: the collapse of the ancient cosmology, replaced by a Western-based separation between sacred and secular realms, and the loss of Confucianism's status as state ideology, which renders participation in the traditional ritual revived by grassroots revivalists a matter of free choice. These changes hinder traditional ritual from exerting its efficacy.

Revivalists are aware of these structural constraints and express a sense of powerlessness when imagining ritual cultivating individuals and further ordering the society. They shift their attention to the ritual stage—the only sphere they can control. To foster participants' moral transformation, revivalists adopt strategies to intensify emotion and bodily experience, including introducing pre-ritual lessons teaching ritual meanings and the creation of a ritualized atmosphere. The efforts can be read as a compromise of reviving ritual in a modern postcolonial context but suggest a potential of achieving ritual efficacy at a micro level when its broader social foundation is absent.

When most studies take the relationship between ritual and its embedded social conditions for granted, they investigate the decline or transformation of traditional ritual under changing conditions. I instead center ritual revival as a form of conscious reconstruction under modern structural constraints. Furthermore, by examining a case in which ritual form and its social foundation have been separated through China's modern rupture with its Confucian heritage, I reveal the conditional structures of ritual efficacy, which is obscured when form and foundation are fused. By showing the distinction between reconstructable and irrecoverable conditions as well as revivalists' concentration on the ritual stage to maximize ritual efficacy, I present a complex relationship between social conditions, ritual practice, and ritual efficacy under modernity.

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