



The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism (Oxford Ritual Studies)

Michael David Kaulana Ing

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In *The Dysfunction of Ritual in Early Confucianism* Michael Ing describes how early Confucians coped with situations where their rituals failed to achieve their intended aims. In contrast to most contemporary interpreters of Confucianism, Ing demonstrates that early Confucian texts can be read as arguments for ambiguity in ritual failure. If, as discussed in one text, Confucius builds a tomb for his parents unlike the tombs of antiquity, and rains fall causing the tomb to collapse, it is not immediately clear whether this failure was the result of random misfortune or the result of Confucius straying from the ritual script by building a tomb incongruent with those of antiquity.

The *Liji (Record of Ritual)*--one of the most significant, yet least studied, texts of Confucianism--poses many of these situations and suggests that the line between preventable and unpreventable failures of ritual is not always clear. Ritual performance, in this view, is a performance of risk. It entails rendering oneself vulnerable to the agency of others; and resigning oneself to the need to vary from the successful rituals of past, thereby moving into untested and uncertain territory. Ing's book is the first monograph in English about the *Liji*--a text that purports to be the writings of Confucius's immediate disciples, and included in the earliest canon of Confucian texts called "The Five Classics," several centuries before the Analects. It challenges some common assumptions of contemporary interpreters of Confucian ethics--in particular the idea that a cultivated ritual agent is able to recognize which failures are within his sphere of control to prevent and thereby render his happiness invulnerable to ritual failure.

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