

A Summary of Textual Research on the *Liji* 禮記 (*Rites Records*)

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The Status of the *Liji* as a Classical Text

The *Liji* is one of three texts that for centuries comprised the most important sources for classical ritual. The other two of these so-called *san li* 三禮 (Three Rites texts) are the *Yili* 儀禮 (Ceremonial) and *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rites of Zhou). After the collapse of the Eastern Han 東漢 (24 CE-220), the authority of the *Liji* increased gradually. While an important step in the *Liji*'s ascendance came when Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200 CE) completed his commentary on the text in the late Eastern Han, it was not until the Tang dynasty that the *Liji* became officially designated as a *jing* 經 (classic).¹ Later, in the Song period, it was recognized as the first and most important of the Three Rites texts, occupying a key position amongst the Four Books (Sishu 四書) and Five Classics (Wujing 五經). To wit, two of the Four Books, the “Da xue” 大學 (Great Learning) and “Zhong yong” 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean), were actually chapters from the *Liji*.

As first-time readers of the Three Rites texts quickly discover, the *Liji*, *Yili*, and *Zhouli* analyze ritual from significantly different perspectives.² The *Zhouli* outlines an idealized political system, describing the duties of more than three hundred bureaucratic offices. The *Yili* details specific procedures to follow during different ceremonies, including capping, marriage, mourning, sacrificial offerings, archery competitions, banquets, official visits, and court audiences. The seventeen chapters of the *Yili* all lay out specific sets of protocol, with significant overlap in content across chapters. Its prescriptions, completely devoid of any grand statements about the significance of ritual, are highly technical, covering everything from seating arrangements at banquets to appropriate gestures made upon greeting a visitor. Such matters rightly belonged within the domain of protocol officers, as the following statement from a *Liji* chapter with perhaps grander pretensions pointed out:

Rolling out the mats, setting out the vessels for wine and meat, arranging the bowls and cups, and following the etiquette for rising up and sitting back down: these are the minor details of the rites, so officers are in charge of them.
鋪筵席，陳尊俎，列籩豆，以升降為禮者，禮之末節也，故有司掌之。³

By contrast, the *Liji* not only recorded the details of common rituals but also provided extended discussions of both the purpose of different ceremonies and the larger significance of the rites. In particular, the *Liji* extolled ritual as an efficacious system of etiquette and ceremonial that promised to instantiate a perfect rank hierarchy throughout all

¹ For example, the *Tang liu dian* 唐六典 (comp. ca. 739 CE) designated the *Liji* and the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 as “great classics” (*da jing* 大經). See Li Linfu (et. al.), *Tang liu dian, juan 2*, “Shangshu li bu” 尚書吏部, 45.

² For a more detailed discussion of the Three Rites texts, including an overview and comparison of their content, see Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics*, 168-201.

³ CITATION OF THE “YUE JI” CHAPTER FROM THE LIJI (語出《禮記正義》卷四十八，《樂記》第十九，1516頁，上海古籍出版社，2008年)

levels of society. According to this theory, special attention had to be paid to the rituals performed amongst members of the ruling class, who stood at the apex of the political and social hierarchy. As the *Xiaojing* 孝經 put it, “from still repose the ruler governs the people” (*an shang zhi min* 安上治民).⁴ Commentators have long recognized this promise of the *Liji* as a blueprint for creating a harmonious social order. As the Qing 清 (1644-1912) scholar Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763-1820) once wrote:

In my opinion, the *Zhouli* and *Yili* are texts written for just one generation. The *Liji* is a book for the ages. One must first understand the *Liji* before later studying the *Zhouli* and *Yili*. A statement from the *Liji* reads: “The rites take proper timing to be the most important.” With this single phrase, it is possible to cover all of the regulations that have governed ritual for all generations.

以余論之，《周官》、《儀禮》，一代之書也。《禮記》，萬世之書也。必先明乎《禮記》，而後可學《周官》、《儀禮》。《記》之言曰‘禮以時為大’，此一言也，以蔽千萬世制禮之法可矣。⁵

Recently, archaeologists have recovered bamboo manuscripts from Zhanguo 戰國 (475-221 BCE) period tombs that have counterparts in the received *Liji*. These include two manuscripts corresponding to the *Liji* chapter “Zi yi” 淄衣 (Black Robes), with one from the Chu 楚 tomb at Guodian 郭店 and the other from the manuscripts held at the Shanghai Museum. The Shanghai Museum manuscripts also include a text that the editors titled *Min zhi fu mu* 民之父母 (Parents of the People), which parallels closely the received *Liji* chapter “Kongzi xian ju” 孔子閒居 (Kongzi in Leisurely Repose). In addition, the Shanghai texts entitled *Xing zhi ming chu* 性自命出, *Liu de* 六德, and *Nei li* 內禮⁶ each contain content that is closely related, respectively, to portions of the *Liji* chapters “Yue ji” 樂記 (Records on Music), “Sang fu si zhi” 喪服四制, and “Nei ze” 內則 (Regulations for the Home). The recovery of these bamboo manuscripts has prompted a veritable flood of scholarship reconsidering a host of problems, including how the *Liji* was compiled, when it became a text in forty-nine chapters, and what sort of role it played in the transmission of classical thought. We consider all of these questions in greater detail below.

The Compilation of the *Liji*

Recent scholarship on learning and textual production in early China has emphasized that the “Five Classics” (*wu jing*) that eventually enjoyed significant authority in late imperial times emerged from the complicated manuscript culture of the pre-imperial and early imperial eras. During this period, the Five Classics, while no doubt important, were not

⁴ *Xiaojing*, “Guang yao dao” 廣要道 12/3/17. Citation from the ICS Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series (CHANT), published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong and The Commercial Press (Hong Kong).

⁵ Jiao Xun, *Diao gu ji*, *juan* 16.

⁶ With the exception of *Nei li*, the editors of the Shanghai Museum manuscripts assigned all of these titles; they are not found on the actual bamboo manuscripts. For a discussion of titles on and titling of excavated manuscripts, see Richter, *The Embodied Text*, 12-13.

necessarily more exalted than all other texts and certainly did not exist in fixed, standardized editions.⁷ In Zhanguo, Qin, and Han times, centuries before the invention of paper and woodblock printing, there were no standard versions of classical texts. Many different versions circulated amongst educated specialists and would-be office holders (often called *shi* 士), who would master particular texts (be they oral or written) in order to secure support from wealthy patrons and obtain official posts. The *Liji* and its constituent chapters were no less a product of this manuscript culture. Students of the *Liji* thus face the standard host of knotty questions that plague all scholars wishing to trace the compilation of any classical text, including: Do the titles of classical texts given in early historical, philosophical, and literary works indicate texts that looked anything like the versions we read today? What was the relationship between oral and written transmission of texts? What was the difference, if any, between a text and a commentary? How are we to understand the process of textual transmission when many early sources emphasize both disruptions in lineages of learning and the diversity of techniques (*shu* 術) offered by a host of experts?

Students of the *Liji* face additional problems, since pre-imperial and Han sources frequently mention texts or writings called *li* (rites), *ji* 記 (records) or *li ji* (rites records) that had nothing to do with the received version of the *Liji*. Our sources note that transmission of all such writings on ritual had suffered greatly over the centuries of the pre-imperial and early imperial periods. We thus regularly read laments about the jumbled state of ritual learning and ritual texts in the early Western Han. As Sima Qian 司馬遷 (?145-?87 BCE) wrote in the chapter “Rulin liezhuan” 儒林列傳 (Accounts of the Forest of Classicists) from his *Shiji* (comp. ca. 87 BCE):

Amongst learned men there are many who speak of the rites, but Gao Tang from Lu is the one who most gets at their root. The rites certainly come from the time of Kongzi but their traditions were never complete. When the Qin burned the writings, the disbursement and loss of documents became much more severe. Today, there is only the *Shili* 士禮 (Rites for Men of Service) and Gao Tang is able to explain it. 諸學者多言禮，而魯高堂生最本。禮固自孔子時而其經不具，及至秦焚書，書散亡益多，於今獨有士禮，高堂生能言之。⁸

Scholarly consensus holds that the *Shili* was a version of the *Yili* (sometimes also called the *Lijing* 禮經). For most of the Han, the *Yili* was the single rites classic and the only one to enjoy consistent state support via an Academician (*boshi* 博士) post at the imperial court.⁹ Nonetheless, as Sima Qian emphasized, ritual learning was not confined to the *Yili*. We are hard pressed, however, to draw specific connections between this larger world of ritual learning and practice and the *Liji*. Since the “cultural manifold” of early China highly valued

⁷ Two of the most important studies advancing arguments along these lines include Fukui Shigemasa, *Kandai Jukyō no shiteki kenkyū*, and Nylan, “Classics Without Canonization.” For detailed studies of how different manuscript versions of texts might have circulated and combined, see Shaughnessy, *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts* and Richter, *The Embodied Text*.

⁸ *Shiji* 121.3126.

⁹ See Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics*, 175. Note that during the reign of Wendi 文帝 (r. 202-157 BCE), at least, it was possible to obtain an official post as a protocol officer at court without knowledge of the *Yili*. See *Shiji* 121.3126.

myriad sorts of ritual practices, we must assume the existence of a large number of different ritual specialists, many of whom could have kept their own “rites records.”¹⁰ Distinguishing between these different ritual texts in our sources can be impossible.

In this regard, two stories that became prominent during Han times and have bedeviled scholars for centuries are especially illustrative. The first would associate a collection of records on ritual as well as several other texts with Kongzi and the Kong family. In his *Shiji* chapter “Kongzi shi jia” 孔子世家 (Hereditary House of Kongzi), Sima Qian gives but a laconic description of “rites records” (*li ji*), along with “writings and accounts” (*shu zhuan* 書傳) of ancient dynasties, that Kongzi supposedly composed in his elder years.¹¹ A much more fantastic tale linking the *Liji* to Kongzi is found in sources composed after the *Shiji*. The “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 (Treatise on Arts and Letters) from the *Hanshu* gives the following version:

Towards the end of Wudi’s reign, King Gong of Lu tore down Kongzi’s residence, desiring to expand his own palace. In the process, he found a version of the *Shangshu* in ancient script as well as the *Liji*, the *Analects*, and *Xiaojing*. All of these numbered in the tens of *pian*. All of them were written in ancient characters. 武帝末，魯共王壞孔子宅，欲以廣其宮，而得古文《尚書》及《禮記》、《論語》、《孝經》凡數十篇，皆古字也。¹²

A healthy dose of skepticism is in order here, despite the fact that many scholars have been willing to lend this rather fanciful story some credibility. Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927), for example, argued that this “rites record” from the wall of Kongzi’s residence was the *Li gu jing* 禮古經 (Ancient Classic of the Rites) in fifty-six *juan* recorded in the ritual section from the “Yiwen zhi” of the *Hanshu*.¹³

It is hard to put much stock in Wang’s argument, however, not least because the “Yiwen zhi” description of the *Li gu jing* says nothing about it coming from Kongzi’s house. More importantly, other versions of the tale give different titles for the ritual texts retrieved from the storied rubble of the Kongzi residence. For example, the *Hanshu* chapter “Chu yuan wang zhuan” 楚元王傳 (Account of King Yuan of Chu) states:

When King Gong of Lu destroyed the residence of Kongzi, desiring to construct a palace, he obtained some ancient writings from within the wall, including a remnant set of rites texts in 39 *pian* and a *Documents (Shu)* in 16 *pian*. 及魯恭王壞孔子宅，欲以為宮，而得古文於壞壁之中，逸禮有三十九，書十六篇。¹⁴

What was the relationship between the “remnant rites” texts described in this version of the story and the *Liji* text mentioned in the “Yiwen zhi” passage quoted above? Was this

¹⁰ On the “cultural manifold,” see Lloyd and Sivin, *The Way and the Word*.

¹¹ *Shiji* 47.1936.

¹² *Hanshu* 30.1706.

¹³ Wang Guowei, “Han shi guwen ben zhu jing zhuan kao” 漢時古文本諸經傳考, in *Guan tang ji lin* 觀唐集臨 *juan* 7 (vol. 2), 324.

¹⁴ *Hanshu* 70.1969.

“remnant rites” actually just a portion of the *Yili*? Or perhaps something else entirely? Even Han writers appear to have been unsure, hence their evident confusion between the *Yili* and *Liji* throughout the period. Even as late as the late Eastern Han, for example, when inscribed stone versions of classical texts were carved during the Xiping 熹平 era (172-178) of Lingdi 靈帝 (r. 168-189 CE), officials carved the *Yili* but assigned the title *Liji* to the finished inscription.¹⁵

A second story concerns the collection of texts by King Xian of Hejian 河間獻王, who Han writers eventually championed as the virtuous classicist king *par excellence*. This image of the king is especially strong in the *Hanshu* chapter “Jing shi san wang zhuan” 景十三王傳 (Accounts of the Thirteen Kings of Jingdi). According to this account, a *Liji* text was one of a group of texts obtained by the king from throughout the empire:

The texts that King Xian collected were all old writings in ancient script from before the Qin. These writings were compilations of the *Zhouli*, *Shangshu*, *Li* (Rites), *Liji*, *Mengzi*, and *Laozi*. They were all classics, accounts, explanations, and records that the disciples of the seventy students [of Kongzi] set forth.

獻王所得書皆古文先秦舊書，《周官》、《尚書》、《禮》、《禮記》、《孟子》、《老子》之屬，皆經傳說記，七十子之徒所論。¹⁶

In his *Hanshu* commentary, the Tang commentator Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581-645) wrote that the *Li* text was the *Lijing* (i.e., the *Yili*), but said only that the “The *Liji* were explanations comprised of records on different rituals by all of the classicists” (禮記者，諸儒記禮之說也).¹⁷ This rather cautious explanation contrasts with Wang Guowei’s claim that the *Liji* mentioned in the “Jing shi san wang” chapter of the *Hanshu* was the *Ji* (Records) text in 131 *pian* listed in the ritual section of the *Hanshu* “Yiwen zhi.” The “Jingji zhi” 經籍志 (Treatise on Classical Texts) from the *Suishu* (comp. 636 CE), meanwhile, provided a slightly different description for this “Yiwen zhi” *Ji* text. According to its narrative, after King Xian donated to the imperial court a *Ji* of 131 *pian*, “there was nobody to transmit it” (時亦無傳之者). The description continues:

When Liu Xiang examined and compared classical texts, he produced a manuscript of 130 *pian*. Liu then set it in order and wrote a preface to it. He also obtained texts such as the *Mingtang Yin Yang ji* (Records of the Bright Hall and Yin-Yang) in thirty-three *pian*; *Kongzi san chao ji* (Records of the Three Court Audiences of Kongzi) in seven *pian*; *Wang shi shi ji* (Historical Records of the Wang clan) in twenty-one *pian*; and a *Yue ji* (Record of Music) in twenty-three *pian*. Combined together these added up to 214 *pian*.

¹⁵ A *Luoyang ji* 洛陽記 cited in a commentary to the *Hou Hanshu* biography of Cai Yong states that the Xiping stone classics carved by Cai included the *Liji*. Cai’s biography, however, says only that he carved the “six classics” (*liu jing*), which probably would not have included the *Liji* in forty-nine *pian* as we know it today. See *Hou Hanshu* 80.1990.

¹⁶ *Hanshu* 53.2410.

¹⁷ *Hanshu* 53.2410.

至劉向考校經籍，檢得一百三十篇，向因第而敘之。而又得《明堂陰陽記》三十三篇，《孔子三朝記》七篇，《王氏史記》二十一篇，《樂記》二十三篇，凡五種，合二百十四篇。¹⁸

The “Jingji zhi” description is a good reminder that Liu Xiang was a key figure in the compilation of the *Liji*, along with so many other texts. Under the orders of Chengdi (r. 33-7 BCE), Liu Xiang and a team of editors had obtained texts from around the empire, edited them, and compiled a bibliography of the texts housed in the imperial library.¹⁹ As the “Jingji zhi” makes clear, Liu Xiang combined a wide range of material together to make a *Ji* text.²⁰ The critical role of Liu Xiang is important to keep in mind when considering stories about texts retrieved from Kongzi’s residence or obtained by the King of Hejian. Despite the efforts of Wang Guowei and earlier commentators, we cannot know for sure the relationship, if any, between these stories, the work completed by Liu Xiang, and the version of the *Liji* that we read today.²¹

We thus must refrain from offering definitive accounts of the *Liji*’s compilation; the sources simply do not support confidence in this regard, even if we have some tantalizing clues. For example, as readers of the *Yili* quickly discover, eleven of the seventeen chapters of that text conclude with a section labeled *ji* (records). These records usually expand upon some of the topics discussed earlier in the chapter, providing further explanation or elaboration on the meaning of the text, textual lacunae, and the significance of different ritual institutions and practices. Some of these records are just a few phrases long, while the lengthier among them could comprise an entire independent chapter. We do not fully understand the relationship between these records at the end of the *Yili* chapters and the “main” text at the beginning. It is tempting to speculate that the records were written directly on to blank portions of the bamboo strips that contained the “main” text, though we could just as easily argue that the records were written on separate strips before later being combined with the main text. In any case, the records sections of the *Yili* could be seen as a good example of what William Boltz has called the “composite nature” of early Chinese texts.²² Bamboo manuscripts likely circulated in textual units that were much shorter than the full texts that we currently have in our possession. Producing a manuscript was more a process of combining together these textual units (hence the common Han-era praise for those skilled at “combining writings” *zhu wen* 屬文) than composing an entirely original essay.

¹⁸ *Suishu* 32.925. The passage is also translated in Riegel, “*Li chi* 禮記,” 293-4.

¹⁹ *Hanshu* 10.310.

²⁰ We might note, however, that in his *Bie lu* 別錄 (Separate Records), Liu Xiang noted an “ancient script *Ji*” (古文記) in 204 *pian*, not in 214 *pian* as the “Jingji zhi” described. For one modern attempt at understanding precisely how Liu Xiang manipulated manuscripts in order to complete his work, see Marc Kalinowski, “La production des manuscrits.”

²¹ Lu Deming 陸德明 (556-627) wrote in the “Preface” 序錄 to his *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 (Explanatory Writings of Classical Texts) that according to Zheng Xuan’s *Liu yi lun* 六藝論 (Discourse on the Six Arts) there were the texts from Kongzi’s residence on the one hand and the *Li*, *Ji*, and *Zhouli* from King Xian. Lu Deming thus seems to discount a connection between the Kongzi residence story and the *Liji*.

²² Boltz, “The Composite Nature of Early Chinese Texts.”

The present-day version of the *Liji* in forty-nine *pian* is unquestionably a product of this sort of compositional process. As for the specific people who completed the *Liji* and the process by which it became a text, however, we have but the dimmest of ideas, even after millennia of discussion. One of the most confusing issues has been the role of Dai De 戴德 and Dai Sheng 戴聖, an uncle-nephew team of ritual specialists in the late Western Han. Dai De is credited with compiling a “rites records” text that is still extant and bears his name: *Da Dai li ji* 大戴禮記 (The Rites Records of the Elder Dai). In his *Liu yi lun*, Zheng Xuan, who was the first to combine together the “Three Rites” texts, wrote that Dai De transmitted a *Ji* in eighty-five *pian*. In Zheng Xuan’s day, the text was known as the *Da Dai li*. Dai Sheng, meanwhile, transmitted a *Li* in forty-nine *pian*. This text, according to Zheng Xuan, was the *Liji*. Later texts followed Zheng Xuan’s story. The *Suishi* “Jingji zhi” went further, saying that Dai De compiled his text from portions of the late Western Han exegete Liu Xiang’s 劉向 (77-8 BCE) *Ji* in 204 *pian*, while Dai Sheng deleted portions of Dai De’s text to create the *Xiao Dai ji* 小戴記 (Records of the Younger Dai; in other words, the *Liji*). The “Jingji zhi” goes on to say that the younger Dai’s *Liji* was originally in forty-six *pian*, and that it only reached forty-nine *pian* after the famous Eastern Han scholar Ma Rong 馬融 (79-166 CE) added three additional texts in three *pian*: *Yue ling* 月令 (Monthly Ordinances), *Mingtang wei* 明堂位 (Ranks Within the Bright Hall) and *Yue ji* 樂記 (Music Records). Scholars have weighed in on these stories over the centuries, but Qing and contemporary scholars effectively refuted them by noting that a) Dai Sheng lived before Liu Xiang’s time, so he could not possibly have used Liu Xiang’s text to compose the *Da Dai ji*; b) the texts compiled by the elder and younger Dai contain such a mix of content that we must assume many different people had a hand in their composition²³; and c) Zheng Xuan made no mention of Ma Rong’s supposed role in adding the three *pian* to make the final *Liji* in forty-nine *pian*, despite the fact that Zheng was a student of Ma Rong. Above all, we must keep in mind that the “Jingji zhi” was written centuries after the compilation of the *Liji*. Its description of the *Liji*’s compilation was no doubt an attempt to “reconcile” works mentioned in earlier sources in order “to show how these works preceded and led in rational fashion” to the version of the *Liji* in forty-nine *pian* available at the time.²⁴ We thus cannot place too much stock in the “Jingji zhi” account.

A more accurate picture of the compilation of the *Liji* would place it in the institutional context of the study and transmission of ritual learning during the Western Han and Eastern Han. According to what is recorded in the histories, that path of transmission was more or less as follows: Gaotang Sheng of Lu transmitted his learning to the famous ritual expert Hou Cang 后倉 (fl. 70 BCE). Hou Cang taught Dai De, Dai Sheng, and Qing Pu 慶普. The learning of these three ritual specialists all received official state sponsorship. Dai De, meanwhile, taught Xu Liang 徐良, who eventually served as an Academician. Dai Sheng, for his part, taught Qiao Ren 橋仁 (fl. 2-5 CE) and Yang Rong 楊榮, while Ma Rong

²³ This includes content that Qing scholars argued was divided between “ancient script” (*gu wen*) and “modern script” (*jin wen*) traditions of learning. The divisions between ancient and modern script learning, however, were not defined as clearly in the Western Han as Qing scholars made them out to be. On this issue, see Nylan, “The *chin wen* / *ku wen* controversy in Han times.”

²⁴ Riegel, “*Li chi* 禮記,” 294.

馬融, Lu Zhi 盧植 (d. 192), and Zheng Xuan also transmitted the ritual knowledge of the Dais. The “ritual comportment” (*li rong* 禮容) associated with the ritual learning of Qing Pu was transmitted by Cao Chong 曹充 and Cao Bao 曹褒; Cao Bao is also said to have transmitted a *Liji* in forty-nine *pian*.²⁵ By the time of these Caos in the Eastern Han, there must have been many types of materials transmitted as interpretations of ritual classics. When the two Dais were installed in the imperial academy in the Western Han, the texts that they had edited and selected entered the mainstream of ritual learning at court, but the chapters and the internal organization of the texts were by no means set. All the way to the time of Ma Rong and Lu Zhi in the late Eastern Han, these texts were still being edited, with new script and old script versions circulating. When Zheng Xuan composed his commentary, he combined all of the traditions of ritual learning to create a fixed edition (*ding ben*).

The Nature and Content of the *Liji*

As we have already emphasized above, the *Liji* is a composite text made up of material from a wide range of ritual learning traditions. The text cannot be understood as an individual work by a single author exhibiting a clear, systematic, and coherent point of view. Most ritual texts were probably initially compiled in order to assist in ritual instruction; the selections that made up the texts did not necessarily need to be consistent with each other. We might imagine, for example, that when the elder and younger Dai created their texts they drew upon bits here and there from different sources and then combined together portions that were generally similar in content. The chapters of the *Liji* suggest this sort of pattern, particularly the “Qu li” 曲禮 and “Tan gong” 檀弓. Both of these chapters are comprised of many short and scattered statements. Less obvious examples include the chapter “San nian wen” 三年問 (Questions about the Three Year Mourning Period), which is comprised of one section of the “Li lun” 禮論 (On ritual) chapter of the *Xunzi* 荀子 (comp. late 3rd century CE) and part of the “Yang huo” 陽貨 chapter of the *Analects*. This diversity of sources and lack of unified message, however, does not diminish the value of the *Liji* as a source.

This point deserves emphasis, since the reputation of the *Liji* suffered over the centuries as more and more scholars dismissed it as a “forgery” (*wei zuo* 偽作) that offered little reliable information about ancient ritual. This understanding of the text began to emerge during the Song period, when educated thinkers and officials began to evince a skeptical attitude towards the idea that classical texts were composed in high antiquity during the reigns of the sage kings. During this time, fewer scholars were willing to lend credence to claims in chapters of the *Liji* that the work was a genuinely ancient text. For example, the Song scholar Lü Dalin 呂大臨 (fl. 11th century) argued that the “Ru xing” 儒行 chapter of the *Liji* was not the work of Kongzi, while Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) argued that the *Liji* was merely an explanation of the *Yili* by Qin and Han classicists and thus could not be trusted. During the Ming and Qing, this skeptical attitude became even more pronounced, with Sun Xidan 孫希旦 (1736-1784) writing that most of the text was composed by people during the Han, a view that many modern scholars continue to share.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

The *Liji* is hardly unique in this regard, however, since almost all of the received texts from the pre-Qin era were edited and copied during the Qin and Han. Throughout this period, there must have been large additions and deletions of content, new combinations of chapters, as well as signification elision between “main texts” and “commentaries” (a genre distinction that was by no means set during the Han period). To this picture we must add the significant rate of textual loss over the centuries as well as the dramatic rupture that occurred with the advent of woodblock printing, when editors and publishers had to decide which manuscript versions to carve and print. Such complexities render meaningless all claims that the *Liji* was a “forgery.” With the possible exception of individual chapters whose composition has been more or less explained, such as “Wang zhi” 王制 (Royal Institutions) and “Xiang yin jiu yi” 鄉飲酒義 (The Meaning of Village Drinking Rites), for most of the 49 chapters of the *Liji* the only way to determine what Qin and Han scholars added and deleted is to deepen our research on early texts and to check our conclusions by study of excavated texts. All such work must be performed with the utmost care and caution. Conclusions, if any, can only be preliminary, particularly given the continual excavation of new texts.

The *Liji* primarily records the system of regulations and titles used at the Zhou royal court as well as the basic rituals performed by people of different rank. These rituals include ceremonies of capping, marriage, sacrifices and offerings, banqueting, visits, court audiences, and self-presentations before the ruler. The titles and order of the chapters do not comprise a coherent table of contents for a book. Rather, the titles can be based on the content of the entire chapter, just the opening passages or characters, or a portion within the chapter. Over the centuries, scholars have proposed different categories for the *Liji* chapters in order to discern patterns in content. In his *Liji zheng yi* 禮記正義 (Correct Meaning of the Record of Rites) the great Tang-era commentator Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648) arranged categories from Zheng Xuan’s *San li mu lu* 三禮目錄 (Catalogue of the Three Rites Texts; extant only in fragments) in order to convey the general meaning of each chapter. Drawing on Liu Xiang’s analysis in the *Bie lu*, the *San li mu lu* offered nine categories: comprehensive discourses (*tong lun* 通論), mourning rites (*sang fu* 喪服), auspicious events (*ji shi* 吉事), institutions (*zhi du* 制度), offerings and sacrifices (*ji si* 祭祀), the Bright Hall and Yin-Yang 明堂陰陽, regulations for descendants (*shixi fa* 世子法), regulations for heirs (*zi fa* 子法), and music records (*yue ji* 樂記). These divisions were based on different criteria, including content, origins, and form.

A different sort of attempt, using more consistent criteria, is seen in Liang Qichao’s 梁啟超 (1873-1929) *Yao ji jie ti ji qi du fa* 要籍解題及其讀法 (*Explaining the Titles of Ancient Texts and a Method for Reading Them*). In this work, composed in 1925, Liang listed all of the chapter titles together and then divided them into ten different categories:

- 1) Detailed records of specific ceremonies. Examples include “Tou hu” 投壺 (The Arrow in the Pot Drinking Game) and “Ben sang” 奔喪 (Traveling Home for Mourning).
- 2) Records of government decrees or laws. Examples include “Yue ling” 月令 (Monthly Ordinances).
- 3) Explanations of classical ritual texts, resembling commentaries to the seventeen chapters of the *Yili*. Examples include “Guan yi” 冠義 (The Meaning of

- Capping), “Hun yi” 昏義 (The Meaning of Marriage) and “The Meaning of Village Drinking Ceremonies” 鄉飲酒義 (Xiang yin jiu yi).
- 4) Records of statements by Kongzi. These include the texts “Biao ji” 表記, “Zi yi,” “Zhongni yan ju,” and “Kongzi xian ju.”
 - 5) Records of Kongzi’s disciples and other people from that time. Examples include “Tan gong.”
 - 6) Sundry descriptions of institutions. Examples include “Wang zhi,” “Yu cao” 玉藻 (Jade Ribbons), and “Ming tang wei” 明堂位 (The Positions In the Bright Hall).
 - 7) Studies of rites for different institutions (*zhidu lijie*). Examples include “Li qi” 禮器 (Ritual Objects), “Jiao te xing,” and “Ji fa” 祭法 (Models for the Offerings).
 - 8) Comprehensive explanations of the meaning of ritual or of techniques for learning. Examples include “Li yun” 禮運 (The Ritual Cycles), “Yue ji,” “Xue ji” 學記 (Records of Learning), “Da xue,” and “Zhong Yong.”
 - 9) Sundry records of collections of sayings. Examples include the “Qu li” and “Ru xing.”
 - 10) Records of a specific event. Examples include “Wen wang shi zi” 文王世子 (The Crown Prince of King Wen).²⁶

Liang’s schema is more systematic than the one employed by Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, but it nonetheless tends to get bogged down in trivial detail. A simpler and clearer model for reference has been devised by the 20th century scholar Gao Zhonghua 高仲華 (or Gao Ming 高明). In his *Lixue xin tan* 禮學新探 (1963), Gao divided the 49 chapters of the *Liji* into just three categories: comprehensive surveys (*tong lun* 通論), comprehensive overview of ritual (*tong li* 通禮), and studies of specific rituals (*zhuan li* 專禮).

***Liji* Commentaries and Editions**

Starting from the late Western Han, we begin to see a variety of *Liji*-related texts that we might broadly term “commentaries.” Qiao Ren 橋仁, for example, one of Dai Sheng’s students, composed a *Liji* in “chapter and verse” (*zhang ju* 章句) comprised of forty-nine *pian*. In the Eastern Han, Ma Rong composed his “commentary” (*zhu*) to the *Liji*, while his pupil Lu Zhi write an “explanatory notes” (*jie gu* 解詁) to the text. Lu explained his efforts as follows:

I completed a study of the similarities and differences of all of the traditions and attached it to the chapters of Dai Sheng’s work, getting rid of overly verbose and repetitive phrases.

考諸家同異，附戴聖篇章，去其繁重。²⁷

Zheng Xuan composed a “commentary” (*zhu*) to the *Liji*, based on the edition of the *Liji* compiled by Ma Rong. Zheng Xuan’s exceedingly clear explanations allowed his *Liji* with

²⁶ Liang Qichao, *Liang Qichao guoxue jiang lu er zhong*, 88-89.

²⁷ Lu Deming and Wu Chengshi, *Jing dian shi wen xu lu shu zheng*, 91.

commentary to quickly became the most esteemed version of the text. During the Tang, the *Liji* took the *Yili*'s position within the Five Classics, with commentaries by Lu Deming and Kong Yingda comprising the most authoritative annotated editions. These two texts retained this status all the way to the emergence of the *Shi san jing zhu shu* 十三經註疏 (Commentaries and Subcommentaries to the Thirteen Classics) in late imperial times.

Setting aside the complicated circulation of manuscript versions of the *Liji* and portions of the *Liji* described above, we have additional evidence for a range of written and inscribed stone versions of the text, mostly composed after the Eastern Han. Inscribed stone versions of the *Liji* were included in a series of “stone classics” cut throughout the imperial period:

1. Tang-era Kaicheng 開成 stone classics (833-837; currently housed at the Beilin Museum in Xi'an)
2. The so-called Meng-Shu 孟蜀 stone classics (944; also called the Guangzheng stone classics, with only a few rubbings extant)
3. Jiayou 嘉祐 stone classics from the Northern Song (only a few pieces remain, with some rubbings collected in Luo Zhenyu's 羅振玉 (1866-1940) *Jishiyan congshu* 吉石庵叢書)
4. Southern Song stone classics (these inscriptions included only the *Liji* chapters “Great Learning,” “Doctrine of the Mean,” “Xue ji,” “Ru xing,” and “Jing jie” 經解; the originals are now housed in the Hangzhou Beilin museum)
5. The Qing-era stone classics ordered cut by emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (the originals now kept at the Imperial Academy (*Guozijian* 國子監) in Beijing)

Written versions of the *Liji* dating to after the Eastern Han period include the following:

1. A Six Dynasties version of the chapters “Da zhuan” 大傳 and “Shao yi” 少儀, of which only 42 lines of text remain. These texts are included in *Dunhuang mi ji liu zheng xin bian* 敦煌秘籍留真新编 (1947), originally compiled by Kanda Kiichirō 神田喜一郎 and edited by Lu Zhihong 陸志鴻.
2. A Tang version of the chapter “Tan gong,” included in Luo Zhenyu, *Ming sha shi guji cong can* 鳴沙石室古籍叢殘 (1917). Luo compared this version of the “Tan gong” to printed editions, revealing many differences.
3. Fragments of Tang versions of the chapters “Ru xing” and “Da xue” (36 lines of text) as well as “Yue ling” (19 lines of text). Both are included in Wang Zhongmin 王重民, *Dunhuang guji shulu* 敦煌古籍敘錄 (1958).
4. A Tang-era copy preserved in Japan of *juan* 5 from the *Liji zheng yi* and *juan* 59 from “Sang fu xiao ji shu yi” 喪服小記子本疏義.

As with all other texts, the advent of woodblock printing completely transformed the transmission of the *Liji*. In a recent essay, Qiao Xiuyan 喬秀岩 outlined two main streams (*xi tong*) for printed versions of the *Liji*.²⁸ Our discussion here is a summary of Qiao's work. The first stream comes from a Song imperial print based on the Kaicheng stone classic

²⁸ Qiao Xiuyan, “*Li ji ban ben za shi*.”

carved during the Tang. As we noted above, the original stones are still extant, housed in the Beilin Museum in Xi'an. The text has been significantly altered, however, and transmitted rubbings exhibit quite a few differences with the Beilin Museum stones. The relationships between rubbings and the stone text are thus incredibly complicated. The edition of the *Liji* printed by Zhonghua Press is a reprint of the woodblock edition printed by the Biren tang 齋忍堂, a fine carving that has been widely used. It was not, however, based on a Tang or Song-period rubbing, so at best it can only serve as a reference text. The Song imperial edition is no longer extant. A Southern Song edition from 1177 printed by a government office in Fuzhou 撫州, Jiangxi province was based on the Northern Song imperial edition and is closest to the Tang stone classic. This text can be seen as the most complete rare edition (*shan ben*) within the Tang stone classic-Song imperial print stream of transmission. An edition of the *Liji zhenyi* in eight columns by a Shaoxing 紹興, Zhejiang province publisher (in Chinese, referred to as the “Yue kan ba hang” 越刊八行 edition) was first printed in 1192. The text, with a postface by Huang Tang 黃唐, became the basis for later printed versions of the text that included both commentaries and subcommentaries. The text and commentary included in this Shaoxing edition are more or less the same as the Fuzhou edition, placing it firmly within the Tang stone classic – Song imperial print stream.

A much more complicated second stream is comprised of a) the edition by Yu Renzhong 余仁仲; b) an edition with pictures and supplementary commentary (*zuan tu hu zhu* 纂圖互注) eventually used in the *Liji* edition printed in the Sibu congkan 四部叢刊 series; c) an edition in ten columns (*shi hang ben* 十行本); d) and the Min 閩, Imperial Academy (Jian 監), and Mao 毛 editions. The Yu Renzhong edition was printed in the Shaoxi 紹熙 reign period (1190-1194) of the Southern Song. It is not significantly different from the Fuzhou and eight-column editions mentioned above, but the commentary is quite a bit different, placing it closer in affinity to the ten-column edition, which came later. For example, while the Fuzhou edition places Lu Deming's “explanatory writings” (*shi wen*) at the end of the text, the Yu Renzhong edition divides up these explanations and places them below the main text and commentary. The Yu Renzhong edition also uses the explanatory writings to explain problems in the main text and commentary; in some cases, the edition even changes the text of both based on the explanatory writings. The text provided the basis for the edition in ten columns, so the Yu Renzhong edition can be considered the progenitor of this entire stream. As a result, the ten-column edition did not just add the explanatory writings to the eight-column edition. Rather, it seems to have used as a base text the Yu Renzhong edition, whose main text and commentary were supplemented by the explanatory writings, and then added the subcommentary.

The Sibu congkan edition was a reprint of an edition with pictures and commentary originally printed at the end of the Southern Song. The explanatory writings, main text, and commentary are exactly the same as the Yu Renzhong edition. This edition with pictures and commentary was thus based on either the same text used for the Yu Renzhong edition or the Yu Renzhong edition itself. During the Song, a ten-column edition in 63 *juan* was cut, but no printings are extant. During the reign of the Qing emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735-1796), the scholar Peng Yuanrui 彭元瑞 (1731-1803) cited a “Liu Shugang edition” 劉叔剛本 of the *Liji* in his work *Shijing kao wen ti yao* 石經考文提要 (Studies and Summaries of the Stone Classics). A copy of this ten-column Liu Shugang edition was printed by Qianlong's famous and favored advisor Heshen 和珅 (1746-1799). A ten-column edition carved during

the Yuan 元 dynasty (1271-1368) and revised during the Ming 明 (1368-1644) was a recarving of the original Song-era ten-column edition, but the Yuan-Ming edition was marred by many errors. The Heshen edition also had problems. For example, the characters on page 21 of *juan* 19 appear significantly different than those on the other pages. The Min, Imperial Academy, and Mao editions are completely lacking this same portion, as is the version of the ten-column edition that the Qing scholar Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849) printed. In sum, later printings of the Song ten-column edition are significantly corrupted. An edition collated by Yue Ke 岳珂 that combines many features of both the Fuzhou and Yu Renzhong series was recarved at the Wuying Hall 武英殿 of the Forbidden City. According to Yue's *Xiang tai shu dian kan zheng jiu jing san zhuan yan ge li* 相臺書塾刊正九經三傳沿革例, he based his work on a Shicai tang 世采堂 edition but consulted many different editions.

In general, before the Northern Song, all classical works included both the main text and commentaries. There were also a few editions that included just the main text, printed separately and circulating independently from commentaries. From the Southern Song on, both government-sponsored and private printing became much more widespread. For greater reader convenience, and in order to meet demands brought about by students studying for the civil service examinations, many editions in different formats appeared, including editions with: a) explanatory writings paired to the main text and commentary; b) commentary and subcommentary combined together; c) commentary, subcommentary, and explanatory writings combined together; d) and finally diagrams and supplementary commentary. Amongst this flood of publications, a Southern Song edition by the Jiangyang publishing house (Jiangyang shufang 建陽書坊) that combined explanatory writings with commentary and subcommentary offered the most convenient format. It circulated widely, providing a format that served as the basis for the *Shi san jing zhu shu* 十三經注疏 series that became so important in late imperial times.

Today, editions of the *Shi san jing zhu shu* are often based on Ruan Yuan's *Chong kan Song ben shisan jing zhu shu* 重刊宋本十三經注疏. Ruan's edition of the *Liji zhu shu* is based on a reprint of a ten-column edition from the Song, but he checked it against many other editions. Although Ruan Yuan's achievements were formidable, his edition nonetheless contained many errors and defects. This was because he had not consulted a Fuzhou edition, only indirectly consulted an eight-column edition,²⁹ and did not see a Yu Renzhong edition or an edition with pictures and supplementary commentary. By Qing times, copies of the Fuzhou edition were quite rare, but the collector and bibliophile Gu Zhikui 顧之逵, an elder cousin of the scholar Gu Qianli 顧千里 (1770-1839), managed to acquire one. In the eleventh year of the Jiaqing 嘉慶 emperor's reign (1806), Zhang Dunren 張敦仁 (1754-1834) and Gu Qianli copied and re-carved the text, which they entitled *Fuben Liji Zheng zhu kao yi* 撫本禮記鄭注考異 (The Fuzhou Edition of the *Liji* with Zheng Xuan's Commentary and Collated Variants). This edition was a much more significant achievement in textual research than that of Ruan Yuan. Because the great Qing scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁

²⁹ Ruan Yuan's sources for an eight-column edition included what he described as a "Song edition collated by Hui Dong" (惠棟校宋本) and a "Song carving" (宋板) cited in *Qi jing Mengzi kao wen* by the Tokugawa scholar Yamanoi Konron 山井鼎 (d. 1728).

(1735-1815) was intellectually hostile towards Gu Qianli, however, when Duan composed his *Liji zhu shu jiao kan ji* 禮記註疏校勘記 (The *Liji* with Commentary, Subcommentary, and Notes on Textual Study) he refused to consult the Fuzhou edition and take into account the results of Gu's research. Duan's work thus fell short of an even-handed treatment of the problems caused by the many different editions of the *Liji*. Moreover, other works by Qing scholars, such as Wang Yinzhi's 王引之 (1766-1834) *Jing yi shu wen* 經義述聞 (Transmitted Knowledge of the Meaning of the Classics), were not incorporated into Duan's work. As a result, Duan's *Liji zhu shu* did not employ an edition of the *Liji* that provided a fully reliable basis for study.

Conclusion

As we have outlined above, over the centuries scholars have completed considerable commentarial work of and critical studies on the *Liji*. Problems with the compilation of the text, the origin and transmission of its chapters, discrepancies between different editions, and definitions of different titles and terms, however, are legion and hard to resolve definitively. Not surprisingly, detailed study of classical ritual learning has been considered a rather perilous undertaking. Much the same could be said even if we were to ignore the problem of different textual editions and focus on the content of the *Liji* alone. While the renowned Tang exegete Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) stated that the *Yili* was hard to read, the *Liji* is in fact even more difficult. This is primarily because the text is extremely abstruse and the terms it employs are quite specific. Scholars in later periods have not been able to solve many of these problems.

The key to research on the *Liji* thus continues to be rooted in textual study. Such study should begin with research into the different editions of the text. With this basis in the origins and transmission of the editions, comparison of textual variants can be commenced. Excavated texts, carved stone texts, and handwritten copies (*chao ben* 鈔本) should all be consulted in order to better understand the different possibilities for a given character, passage, or even chapter. From there, studies should be made of all commentaries, incorporating recent philological studies and research on specific terms, while combining this information with what we can learn from excavated sources. We can then offer explanations that clarify words and content. Finally, based on knowledge gained from study of textual variants and commentaries, combined with our understanding of pre-Qin sources, we can provide deeper explanations for the compilation of the text, the origin of its sources, and the structure of its different chapters. Of course, in order to better understand the significance of ritual and the nature of ritual practice in the classical period, we should consult the different types of rites described in the *Yili* and compare them to similar rites described in the *Liji*. In short, much work remains to be done if we are to use the *Liji* to offer better descriptions of the early classicist understanding of ritual.

Appendix A: Annotated Bibliography of Major Studies of the *Liji*

Countless studies of the *Liji* have covered all aspects of the text, including its compilation and contribution to early classical studies and ritual learning. Such studies have been stimulated recently by the addition of newly excavated manuscripts related to the *Liji*. Nonetheless, the most important reference works for the *Liji* remain the commentaries and

critical philological studies completed over the centuries. The most important of these works including the following:

- Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127-200 CE). *Liji zhu* 禮記注 (Commentary on the *Liji*).
- Lu Deming 陸德明 (556-627). *Liji shi wen* 禮記釋文 (Explanatory Writings on the *Liji*).
- Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574-648). *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Proper Meaning of the *Liji*).
- Wei Shi 衛湜 (fl. 1205-1230). *Liji ji shuo* 禮記集說 (Collected Explanations of the *Liji*).
- Wei Liaoweng 魏了翁 (1178-1237). *Liji yao yi* 禮記要義 (Essential Meaning of the *Liji*).
- Chen Hao 陳澧 (1261-1341). *Liji ji shuo* 禮記集說 (Collected Explanations of the *Liji*).
- Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764-1849). *Liji zhu shu jiao kan ji* 禮記注疏校勘記 (Collation and Notes on the *Liji* with Commentary and Commentary).
- Yamanoi Konron 山井鼎 (d. 1728) and Wuguan 物觀. *Qi jing Mengzi kao wen bu yi* 七經孟子考文·補遺 (Textual Studies and Addenda to the Seven Classics and the Mengzi).
- Zhang Dunren 張敦仁 (1754-1834). *Fuzhou Liji Zheng zhu kao yi* 撫本禮記鄭注考異 (The Fuzhou Edition of the *Liji* with Zheng Xuan's Commentary and Collated Variants).
- Sun Xidan 孫希旦 (1736-1784). *Liji ji jie* 禮記集解 (Collected Explanations of the *Liji*).
- Zhu Bin 朱彬 (1735-1834). *Li ji xun zuan* 禮記訓纂 (Compiled Critical Explanations of the *Liji*).
- Sun Yirang 孫詒讓 (1848-1908). *Shi sang jing zhu shu jiao ji* 十三經注疏校記 (A Collation and Notes on the Thirteen Classics with Commentaries and Subcommentaries).
- Pan Zongzhou 潘宗周 (1867-1939). *Liji zhengyi jiao kan ji* 禮記正義校勘記 (Collation and Notes on the Proper Meaning of the *Liji*).

In addition to the major works listed here, Qing scholars completed numerous studies of individual chapters of the *Liji*, especially the “Great Learning” and “Doctrine of the Mean.”

In addition, scholars in the 20th and 21st centuries have completed numerous new punctuations, commentaries, and translations into modern Chinese of the *Liji*. The most important modern works on punctuation and ordering of the text include the following:

Li Xueqin 李學勤 (ed). *Shi san jing zhu shu* 十三經注疏. Beijing: Beijing daxue, 1999.

Liu Zhaoyou 劉兆祐 and Guo li bian yi guan 國立編譯館 (eds). *San li zong yi zhu shu kao* 三禮總義著述考. Taipei: Guo li bian yi guan, 2003.

Lü Youren 呂友仁. *Li ji zheng yi* 禮記正義. Shanghai: Gu ji, 2008.

The Li Xueqin edition from Beijing University press and the Liu Zhaoyou edition from Taiwan's National Institute for Compilation and Translation (Guo li bian yi guan) are both based on Ruan Yuan's *Shi san jing zhu shu*. The edition by Lü Youren and Shanghai Guji press, on the other hand, uses an eight-column edition published during the Song as a base text.

Important translations into modern Chinese with reference to commentaries include:

Wang Meng'ou 王夢鷗. *Liji jin zhu jin yi* 禮記今注今譯. Taipei: Taiwan shang wu, 1980.

Yang Tianyu 楊天宇. *Liji jin yi zhu* 禮記今譯注. Shanghai: Gu ji, 1997.

Lü Youren 呂友仁. *Liji quan yi* 禮記全譯. Guiyang: Guizhou ren min, 2009.

Qian Xuan 錢玄. *Liji* 禮記. Changsha: Yuelu, 2001.

Chen Shuguo 陳戍國. *Liji jiao zhu* 禮記校注. Changsha: Yuelu, 2004.

Wang Wenjin 王文錦. *Liji yi jie* 禮記譯解. Beijing: Zhonghua, 2001.

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