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WHY CHINESE PEOPLE DO NOT HUG?  
A SHORT TREATISE ABOUT CHINESE RITUALS

Introduction

Many foreigners who know Chinese people are surprised by the fact that the Chinese express their feelings in a completely different way than the Westerners. For example, Chinese people do not hug when they meet, even if they are close family members who haven't seen each other for a long time. Obviously kissing is even more problematic. Why is that? Is it because Chinese people do not have any feelings? Of course not. The reason originates in a few thousand years of history of the feudal society and its traditional ethical code, which still influences or even shapes the behavior of the contemporary Chinese. As a result Chinese people choose the conservative way to express their feelings.

What is Chinese *li*?

On May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014 a certain website reprinted "New York Times" article entitled *Why Chinese people do not like hugging*. In the article it is written: „since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, all kinds of changes have spread rapidly all over the land of China. Suddenly, the Chinese had the stock market, private cars and even international fashion, but one thing did not seem to change: People still did not like hugging. In terms of a physical contact the Chinese remained very conservative”<sup>1</sup>. Yes, in the matter of physical contact Chinese people are really conservative. It is rooted in the Chinese morals and traditional hierarchy that has existed for thousands of years. In other words, the old Chinese feudal ethics is making trouble till nowadays.

Confucian *li* are also called “the rites”, “the rituals” or “the etiquette”. “People living, producing, communicating or taking part in whole variety of different activities always follow social rules and ethics. These rules need to be expressed and formed into the ritual. All the norms were developing and gradually diffusing dur-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://cn.nytimes.com/china/20140519/c19hugs/>.

ing thousands of years. In the end, they became widely recognized and implemented into the social customs to be finally called “the Li”. With the development of Chinese society the new variety of rituals/li were formed, improved and changed. As a result, a systematic set of rules was created. Those rules deeply influenced all social classes and formed a complex cultural model”<sup>2</sup>. Today if people say “rites” and „rituals” it often has a positive meaning of rules that make the society live and develop in harmony. However, sometimes “the rituals” can also mean shackles used to bound and harm the ordinary people.

### The origin and the development of *li*

In China, the origin of the etiquette can be traced to the times of primitive society. The famous ancient study of the rituals – *Book of Rites* says: “夫礼之初，始诸饮食，其燔黍捭豚，污尊而抔饮，蕡桴而土鼓，犹若可以致其敬于鬼神。”<sup>3</sup> It means that the very first rites referred to the behavior around the table. In ancient times, people put rice and pork roast on a stone. They used to dig a hollow in the ground to put primitive wine in it. The wine was drunk with hands. They also used to take some rigid blades of grass as the drumsticks and play with them on a drum made of soil to worship the gods. In other words, in primitive society the rites were closely linked to the religious festivals. The religious ceremony was the beginning of the Chinese ancient rituals. In fact, it was all coming from the natural human fear and respect for ghosts.

However, during the long process of development from a primitive society to the feudal society, the etiquette was still remaining fragmented, chaotic and incomplete. It was improved by feudal social system – the holistic rites system was established.

The feudal society is characterized by a very strict hierarchy. The rulers in that times needed a tool to maintain the stability of the regime and to safeguard the interests of the ruling class. So, the rites has become the first choice of the feudal rulers. The *li* became the etiquette. A ritual fear of gods became a fear of the ruling power.

The Chinese great ancient thinkers played a significant role in the process of disseminating the rites system. Confucius once said: “夫礼，先王以承天之道，以治人之情，故失之者死，得之者生” which means that *li* is derived from God. It is a tool given to the kings and emperors to govern and manage the state. If the ruler uses it, the country will survive; if he rejects it, the country will perish.

Till the time of Zhou Dynasty (1049–255 BC) the system of rites has been completed. Back then a new official positions were established for the first time. Great *Zongbo* and little *Zongbo* were appointed to manage the rituals, they were an

<sup>2</sup> 《中国古代礼俗》引言 P2, 2007商务印书馆。

<sup>3</sup> 《中国古代礼俗》P4, 2007商务印书馆。

equivalent of today's deputy minister. The *Zongbos* had many different officials at their disposal – like *Sishi*, *Yuren* or *Jiren* who were in charge of worship activities, *Zhongren* and *Mudafu* who took care of the funeral ceremony, *Yueshi*, *Zhongshi*, *Shengshi* and others in charge of music and dance or *Jinche*, *Chepu* and others in charge of the carriages and the official banners. Therefore, in Zhou Dynasty a large number of ceremonial institutions were formed. The rites were divided into 3300 types, 300 of which were said to be The Great Rites, and 3000 kinds were classified as The Little Rites. The Rites were also arranged in five basic categories: *Jili*, *Xiongli*, *Junli*, *Binli* and *Jiali*.

*Jili* is a worship ceremony, including worshipping heaven and earth, ancestral temple, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the God of silkworms, the ancient emperors, Forests and Mountains, Rivers and Streams etc. What is interesting, the ceremony of worshipping Heaven and Earth as well as the ancestral temple, were conducted by the emperor himself.

*Xiongli* includes funeral and mourning the dead, the ceremony of offering people gifts in case of famine, the ceremony of expressing sympathy and offering gifts to the ally which is suffering from a natural disasters, the ceremony of compensating a war damage occurred in the country of the ally and a ceremony of giving a ritual support (for example gifts for the neighboring country).

*Junli* refers to a system of rituals concerning military activities.

*Binli* is a system of ceremonies between the Zhou Dynasty king and his vassals. It includes the regular visits of a vassal princes and paying respect to the Zhou Dynasty king and also the ritual of sending the vassal's representative to a king, as well as the ceremonies necessary while meeting of two or more vassals etc.

*Jiali* is the etiquette which is in force during the feasts. It includes the rituals around the table, the marriage ceremony, the ceremony of the initiation when a child becomes a grownup, the archery rituals, congratulations rituals etc. This kind of rites had the strongest impact on the ordinary people's lives and still remains influential in today's China.

Establishing such a perfect and strict system of rituals has only one reason – to maintain the social stability, to safeguard the authority and the dominance of the ruling class, to maintain their vested interests. This system requires that people obey the monarch. It marks a clear difference between father and son, young and old, poor and rich, noble and peasant. Each has his place in the society, his own laws and duties.

This system was strongly supported by Confucius and his students. Confucius once said: “贵贱有等，长幼有差，贫富轻重皆有称也。” Which basically means that people are not equal because of the difference of age, material status and social class.

During Zhou Dynasty period a lot of books about rites have been written. To the Western Han Dynasty (202 BC – 9 AD) three significant volumes were completed – *Zhouli* 《周礼》, *Yili* 《仪礼》 and *Liji* 《礼记》. The feudal emperors made

these three books a bible of those times. People were supposed to pay homage to these works for generations. Since then, for over two thousand years of feudal China the rulers continuously used this doctrine to strengthen their power. It was constantly taught at schools and required to be in constant practice of ordinary people. The impact of the feudal rites system on everyone's life was so deep that it became a standard of judging right and wrong. It actually became the unwritten law.

## Everyday rites in Chinese feudal society

### Toasts and Drinking

In ancient China drinking alcohol was a must on every feast, but drinking each time needed certain rituals and regulations.

Firstly, the seating. According to the ritual the most important guest should sit on the northwest, the second most important guest should sit on the southwest. This is because the ancient Chinese believed that „the dignified *qi* of heaven and earth originates in the southwest and ends its run on northwest”<sup>4</sup>. The host should sit in the southeast and accompany guests.

Secondly, the toast. At the banquet, the host began the ceremony of making toasts, but first he had to wash his hands and his glass in front of the other guests to show them that he was clean and neat. Then the owner had to make a toast and pay respect to the most important guest. In return the guest makes a toast to the owner. Later the owner makes a toast to the second most important guest and, like before, the guest makes a toast to the owner in return. In the end of the ceremony host makes a toast to the rest of guests.

In Zhou Dynasty period, the toasting etiquette has been completely systemized. Each part of the ceremony had even a proper name like *xian*, *cu* or *chou*. Moreover, the dishware for every part of toasting ceremony had to be changed. For example, there was a special dishware for *jue*-toast and a different one *zun*-toast.

What is more, the vessels for monarch and his officials, men and women could not be mixed. The master and the servants were not allowed to sit at the same table.

### Eating

In the pre-Qin era (before 221 BC), people mainly eat with their hands, they neither use chopsticks, spoons nor other tools. That is why everyone was obliged to wash their hands before dinner, otherwise it was very impolite. During the dinner, guests

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<sup>4</sup> 《仪礼集释》卷四。

were taking boiled rice from the common vessel with bare hands and then were putting it into their own bowl. Even if they had taken too much, it was forbidden to put it back to the common vessel because there was always a risk of putting dirt to a common meal. Fish and meat, could not be put back into the original common vessel either.

While eating, tongue and mouth could not make any sound. Making a sound was a way to express that the food was not tasty. It was also very rude to drink seasoning sauce straight into mouth, since it was actually blaming the host for preparing a dish without flavor.

In addition, according to the ancient Chinese rituals, in different seasons people were supposed to eat different food. For instance according to *Lǐshì Chūqín*<sup>5</sup>: “In spring eat wheat and lamb; in summer eat beans and chicken; in autumn eat hemp and dog meat; in winter eat millet and pork”.

Other classic text from Ming Dynasty *Wanli yebuobian* says: “In the beginning of Spring eat *chunbing* (spring pancake), for the end of Spring Festival eat *yuánxiǎo* (sticky rice and sesame dumplings), for Dragon Boat Festival eat *zongzi* (rice dumplings wrapped in a bamboo leaf), for Chongyang Festival eat cakes made of sticky rice, in the end of the year eat pasta.”

Due to the strong support of the rulers, eating habits were incorporated to the ancient ritual system. Anybody who ate food unsuitable for the season, would have been immediately ridiculed by others.

### Dress code

In ancient China clothes were indicating person's social status. That is why the dressing etiquette has been valued by the rulers. From Xia and Shang Dynasty period (XXI–III Century BC) Chinese people had certain rules concerning hats and clothes. To the Zhou Dynasty they have formed a complete dress code.

For his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, an ancient aristocrat was supposed to throw an initiation party also known as the crowning ceremony. “Crown” actually meant the hat. An adult aristocratic men must wear a hat in public places, otherwise he was considered to be impolite and uneducated.

The emperors, dukes and the officials were always supposed to wear the hats, but their hats differ from the ordinary people's hats. Their hats were called crowns. This kind of hat was a kind of a horizontal board on a top of the head. There were strings with pearls made of jade in front and rear of the board. The number of strings was indicating the status. The emperor front and rear could have

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<sup>5</sup> An encyclopedic Chinese classic text compiled around 239 BCE under the patronage of Qin Dynasty.

twelve strings, the duke could have nine strings, a high rank official could have seven strings, a lower official could only have five strings.

In the Han Dynasty period, only the emperor was allowed to wear this kind of crown. Ordinary people could wear a headscarf used to wrap the hair. By the Tang and the Song Dynasty period there was a bit of confusion in the “hat rituals”. However, in Qing Dynasty the top and the tassel on the back of a man’s hat could tell everything about his rank. *Qinghuijian* 《清会典》 says that an official of the first rank has a ruby on his hat, an official of the second rank wears a coral, an official of the third rank uses sapphire, an official of the fourth rank should wear a pearl made of lapis lazuli, an official of the fifth rank has crystal pearl, an official of the sixth rank has a pearl made of clam (*sic!*), an official of the seventh rank used a plain gold pearl, an official eighth and ninth rank wore a curved golden pearl. The tassel, which was actually made of peacock feather, also indicated the rank of the official. There were feathers with one, two or three eyes. The one with three eyes was the most precious, so it was worn by the highest rank officials.

During Shang and Zhou Dynasties Chinese people, both men and women, were all wearing shirts and skirts. Aristocracy, in addition, was wearing a kind of hatchet shaped apron made of leather or silk embroidery to show their dignity. To the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC) shirts and skirts were no longer divided, but combined together into a dress, from the neck to the ankles. In the Qin Dynasty period (221–207 BC), when the weather was cold people wore leather coats and furs. However it was also under a strict control of rites. Emperor was wearing white fox fur coat, the aristocrats were wearing yellow fox fur coats, the high rank officials were wearing tiger, wolf or lamb leather fur coats, the ordinary people were allowed to wear only sheepskin and furs made of dogs.

When the host was receiving visitors, he was supposed to wear an extra cloth on the leather gown, otherwise it was rude.

The poor people could only wear one layer of clothing, so they used to wear the thick coats with cotton inside. After Qin and Han Dynasty, dress code became more and more complete. Style, colors, patterns could not be confused.

From Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279 AD) period the dragon pattern and the yellow color was dedicated to the royal robes of the emperor.

In Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD) the red robes were reserved for the first to fourth rank officials, fifth to seventh rank officials were supposed to wear blue robes, eighth and ninth rank officials wore green robes.

In the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 AD) the literates and the military officials wore silk embroidery in a shape of square in the front of the coat. According to their rank the literates could have twelve different bird patterns on their chest, while military officials could choose among twelve different animals.

## Gifts

From ancient times the Chinese loved to give presents. In comparison to other rituals, gifts have the biggest influence on the contemporary Chinese people. After a few thousand years of development this particular custom has not changed a lot. So far, China still cultivates most of ancient gift-giving habits. We can divide gift rituals as follows.

Friendship is one of the most common and simple human emotion. Everyone needs a friend. The Chinese people really appreciate the friendship, they often say: “for a friend, let the two knives stick into your ribs” 《为朋友两肋插刀》 which means “everything for a friend”. Therefore, exchanging gifts between friends is a very common thing. For example, nowadays when students graduate, they exchange gifts lavishly, as a souvenir. Such gifts are mostly diaries, pens, books or CDs. Friends tend to exchange simple and inexpensive gifts, which reflect a pure friendship and does not have any pragmatic reason. Such gifts are small, but they are the most rare ones. Even after many years, looking at those presents brings us back to the past.

Weddings and funerals are the most important occasions in Chinese people's life. Marriage is a top priority matter. When a Chinese attends the wedding, he always brings money. A few decades ago, Chinese people gave the newlyweds some daily necessities like household appliances as gifts. Today they mostly give money, however the amount of money gets bigger and bigger. The current average red envelope for the wedding contains around 500–1000 CNY (about 250–500 PLN). In general, it is a quite big sum of money in China. Specially, when somebody has to attend several weddings in a short time, it can become a real problem.

Apart from weddings, Chinese also give money to newborn babies, to people who move to the new houses, to children who go to college, when somebody dies, or even to somebody who gets a promotion. Chinese have many relatives, co-workers and friends so giving-money ritual is a quite troublesome thing.

I once heard that during National Day holidays (1<sup>st</sup> of October), someone took part in eight weddings. He had no time to rest within one week and, what is even worse, he was obliged to spend his whole salary on red-envelopes for newlyweds.

What is a man without his family? So, when a relative or a close friend is sick, the Chinese are obliged to go to the hospital or his home to visit. In this case gifts are compulsory too. We often give some diet supplements, fruits, flowers, etc. Of course money are welcome as always.

Chinese people put a lot of thoughts into birthdays. There is a strong tradition of respect for older people, so we celebrate their birthdays more than elsewhere. When an old man is having his birthday, the Chinese wish him longevity and therefore offer him proper gifts. For example some fancy and healthy food or diet supplements. Many people give also clothing and money. Friend's birthday may be one

of a very few occasions where money are not the most suitable gift. In this case it is better to give clothes, watches, belts, bags or mobile phones.

Holiday gifts unite the family. Festivals are also an opportunity to express feelings toward friends. For example, for the Chinese New Year we give some firecrackers or New Year Paintings. For the Lantern Festival we offer some *yuanxiao*, for the Dragon Boat Festival we give the rice dumpling and for Mid-Autumn Festival we often offer the moon cakes and fruits. The Chinese got used to express their feelings in this way.

The utilitarian gifts are a disgusting habit. Even though they are a result of the traditional gift-giving ritual, they have become a malignant tumor of the Chinese society.

Originally this custom was an expression of goodwill and affection. The utilitarian gifts express a very complex evil phenomenon in China. Such gifts are all over the country. For example, when we want to get a promotion or when we want to see a doctor, or when a child goes to school, or even when we want to pass a driver's license test, the gift must be offered. In fact they are bribes and officially illegal.

What is the most frightening is that in contemporary China everyone is a victim of the utilitarian gifts, but yet everyone is an active participant. This is a serious social problem.

### Respect for elderly

Respecting elderly is a virtue. In ancient times, this virtue was incorporated into the ritual system and became a tool for the ruling class to maintain the feudal order. As a system of rites, this custom has been developing until the Zhou Dynasty period. In the country ruled by Zhou Dynasty „a fifty-year-old should be taken care of by the township, a sixty-year-old should be taken care of by the province, a seventy-year-old should be taken care of by the country”<sup>6</sup>. Zhou Dynasty has also set up homes for the elderly. The state in those times was responsible for fulfilling the seniors' needs. The elderly citizens could enjoy their late years.

Whenever there were holidays, Zhou Dynasty king was visiting a nursing house for the elderly to express his support or even to ask them about the strategy for the state. For the sick seniors the regular nursing visits were arranged according to the rule: “For more than ninety-year-olds one visit a day; for more than eighty-year-olds one visit for two days; for more than seventy-year-olds one visit for three days”<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately in Warring States period (475–221 BC) this pension system has been destroyed. During the Ming Dynasty, the houses for the elderly has been set up once again. In such places the poor, orphaned and sick seniors could have been hos-

<sup>6</sup> 《礼记。王制》。

<sup>7</sup> 《管子。入国》。

pitalized. In addition, everyone above the age of eighty was pardoned and could avoid the criminal punishment. Ninety-year-olds or older did not have to pay any taxes.

In China, the ritual of respecting the elderly has been continued till nowadays. Today China has already entered the aging society stage. In 2012, China promulgated the “Elderly Protection Law” that says that a child must often come home to visit the parents, otherwise it is committing a crime.

### Bowing Ceremony

In ancient China, the ceremony of bowing has been the longest practised ritual. It is the most basic ritual. It originated from the primitive society and it was popular among the slaves in feudal society. During over two thousand years of the history of feudal society, bowing was identifying the difference between rulers and their servants. This ritual was a way to subdue the ordinary people.

In Qing Dynasty the ritual developed into so called “three kneels, nine hits ceremony”<sup>8</sup>. To show the respect, a person had to kneel, put the hands on the ground and hit three times with the forehead on the ground, then rise. It was repeated three times, so in total there was kneeling three times and hitting with the forehead on the ground nine times.

This ceremony helped a lot the feudal rulers to form their arrogance and complacent. It actually led to a direct international conflict in the late nineteenth century. In 1893, the British king sent a diplomat, lord Macartney, to China to discuss diplomatic and trade issues. Because the Chinese insisted on performing the “three kneels, nine hits ceremony” a long dispute has been started. The Chinese believed that China is the imperial state and all the other countries are small tributaries that must accept the superiority of China one day. The British were obviously supposed to perform the ceremony in front of the Chinese emperor. Of course, the British themselves felt insulted by this unequal treating. Since the two sides did not want to compromise for months, they finally broke off the negotiations. This argument in future led to the famous “Opium War” and eventually to the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. In 1911, after the last emperor was dismissed the bowing ceremony was abolished.

### The influence of *li* on modern China

There are two sides of the same coin. Ritual system on the one hand helped the ruling class to maintain the power and at the same time ensured a stable development of the ancient Chinese society. It has also built a good social atmosphere,

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<sup>8</sup> 三跪九叩。

such as respecting the elderly, hygiene and etiquette around the table, taking part in traditional festivals. In this way, rituals have become a bright side and the essence of the traditional Chinese culture. But in the final analysis, the ritual system was firstly a tool for Chinese aristocracy to control the people. It has left the worst heritage for the entire nation that is still hidden deeply in our blood and minds. In minds of every Chinese the equality does not exist, there is only a dream to be an emperor. It is frightening to live in the society where everyone has the same selfish dream.

Although the bowing ritual was abolished together with the last emperor and the modern Chinese has adopted a western equality-reflecting handshake, the Chinese people are still kneeling inside. At the same time we are telling ourselves that one day I want him/them to be kneeling in front of me!

Chinese people always say: "Eat bitter in life and you will be higher than anyone else"<sup>9</sup>, "Today I am a grandson, but tomorrow I will become a grandfather"<sup>10</sup>.

The Chinese society is an arena for the constant battle for power between men. Power means status and wealth. The main purpose of the struggle is to climb in the hierarchy as high as possible so that one day you can successfully join to the ruling class.

In such an environment a woman's position is irrelevant. From the times of Zhou Dynasty the rituals helped to maintain patriarchy and discrimination of women. It is said that a woman should "obey father and older brothers when she is little, obey husband when she is married and obey sons when her husband is dead"<sup>11</sup>. In the *Book of Rites* we read: "男女不杂坐，不同梳栉，不同巾櫛，不亲受。嫂叔不通问，诸母不漱裳"<sup>12</sup>. This means that men and women cannot sit together, men and women cannot hang clothes on the same hanger, cannot use the same towels and combs, between men and women goods cannot be delivered personally. Woman and her husband's brother cannot greet each other, a man cannot let his father's concubine to wash his pants.

We can imagine that if the ancient men and women cannot even hang clothes together, how could they hug? Embracing is a sign of being equal. In the feudal history of China people have never been equal, so it was impossible to hug. The rituals has affected people's thoughts for two thousand years. So far, from the end of feudal society (1911 AD) only one hundred years has passed. The visible impact of Chinese ancient patriarchal thinking is difficult to eliminate in such a short term. The hierarchy in China has existed for thousands of years. Moreover, in the future it will continue to affect our lives for a long time.

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<sup>9</sup> 吃得苦中苦，方得人上人。

<sup>10</sup> 今天当孙子，明天当爷爷。

<sup>11</sup> 幼从父兄，嫁而随夫，夫死随子。《礼记》。

<sup>12</sup> 《礼记》。

## STRESZCZENIE

### DLACZEGO CHIŃCZYCY NIE LUBIĄ PRZYTUŁANIA? KRÓTKA ROZPRAWA NA TEMAT CHIŃSKICH RYTUAŁÓW

W artykule przedstawiono historię kształtowania się chińskich zwyczajów, będących obowiązującymi zasadami we współczesnym społeczeństwie chińskim. Przybliżono historię i zasady funkcjonowania systemu *li*, który stał się niepisany prawem zakorzenionym w świadomości mieszkańców Państwa Środka. Omówiono najważniejsze rytuały z czasów chińskich dynastii. Kontekst historyczny kształtowania się poszczególnych zwyczajów pozwala lepiej zrozumieć współczesnych Chińczyków. Na przykładzie sposobu wyrażania uczuć ukazano wpływ historycznych rytuałów na współczesność.