

WANG YOUPU'S SACRED EDICT LECTURE: "EXHORTATIONS ON CEREMONY AND DEFERENCE"

Introduction

During the Qing dynasty the Kangxi emperor issued a "Sacred Edict" with moral exhortations for his subjects, the Chinese population. Local officials in every county were instructed to stage public lectures two times every month to reinforce the message of the Sacred Edict. Below is the transcript of one such public lecture given by Wang Youpu, a local salt commissioner who lived in the 1700s.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from Wang Youpu's Sacred Edict Lecture: "Exhortations on Ceremony and Deference"

Were I now to speak of the details of rituals and ceremonies, you soldiers and common people probably would have difficulty learning them because they are so numerous. But you all possess the basic elements of ceremonial behavior. For example, you know that there should be filial piety towards parents, honor and respect for superiors, harmony between husband and wife, affection among brothers, honesty among friends, and mutual responsibility among those of the same lineage. This proves that internally you already possess the basic elements of ceremony and deference. Why then make a fuss about the externals? If you could really, in dealing with others, be extremely cooperative, in conducting yourselves be extremely obliging, in the family express the affection appropriate between parents and children, elder and younger brothers, in your villages maintain accord between the old and the young, the great and the small, then those habits of struggling over minor differences and getting into noisy disputes would be reformed and the tendency toward indulgent and degenerate conduct would be restrained. ...

Let all of you — scholars, farmers, artisans, merchants, and soldiers — take care in practicing ceremonial deference. If one place becomes good, then many places will become so, and finally the entire realm will be in excellent harmony. Won't we then have a world in perfect concord?

In an ancient book it says, "The humble gain; the self-satisfied lose." These two phrases are exceptionally apt. How do the humble gain? Humility consists of modesty and mildness.

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Men of the present day can't perceive their own faults at all. Therefore they perpetually quarrel, not realizing that strife is the road to the destruction of their families and their personal ruin. In every affair, great or small, retreat a step and you will certainly gain the advantage. For example, suppose a man curses me, and I let pass a couple of phrases. If he is a good man he will naturally feel sorry. If he is a bad man, on seeing that his curses have no effect, he will give up. Wouldn't this prevent a lot of trouble? Do you think that by his cursing me he will rise to greater glory, or that I by bearing with him will fall into disgrace? If I defer to him in this way, people will just praise how good I am and will all want to join me, perhaps confiding to me the secrets of their hearts or entrusting to me their money. If he is so overbearing, people will all hate and avoid him. If he runs into trouble, who will pay attention to him? Haven't I then gained the advantage? ...

If you are able to get along with others, those who are rude will imitate you and learn to get along. If you are able to manage business fairly, those who are dishonest will learn to be fair by following you. When one person takes the lead, all the rest will follow. When one family follows, then the whole village will do the same. From near to far, everywhere people will be good. At first it will take effort, but constant practice will make it easy. Men will become honest and popular customs pure and considerate. Only this would constitute full adoption of the meaning of Emperor Shizong's repeated instructions to you.

Questions:

1. What type of behavior is the speaker promoting in this lecture?
2. Does the speaker believe it is easy for people to learn to be civil to one another?
3. What assumption does he make about human nature in the examples he gives? Do you agree or disagree with these assumptions?
4. After the People's Republic of China was formed by the Communist Party in 1949, public assemblies at the local level were frequent. When you study this period, compare and contrast these sessions with the one here. Is the context the same? The purpose?

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His Majesty's meaning is as follows:

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In the empire there are what are called popular customs (*fengsu*). What are *feng* and *su*? A Han dynasty scholar said that the hearts of all the common people in the world contain feelings of benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, and sincerity. But people in the North are generally hardy, those in the South generally delicate. Where people's temperaments are fast-paced, business is executed promptly; where they are slow, work is performed more leisurely. People of one place do not understand the dialect of those in the other. All this proceeds from the fact that the climate (*fengqi*) is different in every place and men feel a certain influence from it. This is the reason for the word *feng*.

Further, what people here like, people there hate. On occasions when one is active the other is at rest. There is no fixed mode; everybody acts according to the common practices (*su*) of his locality. This is the reason for the word *su*.

Popular customs vary greatly: in some places people are kindly, in others, reserved; in some places they are extravagant and pompous, in others frugal and simple. Because the customs of every place differed, the ancient sages created ceremonial practices in order to standardize conduct. The sage [Confucius] said that to secure the ease of superiors and bring order to the people, nothing is better than ceremony (*li*). This sentence teaches us that ceremony is extremely important. Were Heaven and earth to depart from the forms of ceremony, they would no longer be Heaven and earth. Were the myriad creatures to depart from ceremonial forms, they would no longer exist. The forms of ceremony are vast and its uses are manifold. Were reason and virtue, benevolence and justice to depart from ceremony, they could no longer be true reason and virtue, benevolence and justice. Were the honorable and the mean, the noble and base, to depart from ceremony, one could no longer distinguish between them. Were the rituals for manhood, marriage, mourning, and ancestor worship to depart from ceremony, one could not conduct those rituals. In fact, if Emperor Shizong, in offering sacrifices to Heaven or to the temple of his ancestors, or in giving private feasts, were to depart from ceremony, those things could not be performed. In a word, ceremony is the root of all customs.

But when you practice ceremonial behavior, there should be no awkward stiffness; all should be natural and easy. The essence of ceremony is contained in the word "deference." The sage said that as long as ceremony and deference were used, there would be no difficulty in ruling the empire. If these two words, ceremony and deference, are sufficient to regulate the vast concerns of an empire, shouldn't it be even easier to regulate an individual or a family through them? The sage also said a ruler who wants the common people not to fight must first set an example for them of ceremonial behavior and deference. Thus it may be seen that this word, deference, is also the root of the practice of ceremony.

Were I now to speak of the details of rituals and ceremonies, you soldiers and common people probably would have difficulty learning them because they are so numerous. But you all possess the basic elements of ceremonial behavior. For example, you know that there should be

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filial piety towards parents, honor and respect for superiors, harmony between husband and wife, affection among brothers, honesty among friends, and mutual responsibility among those of the same lineage. This proves that internally you already possess the basic elements of ceremony and deference. Why then make a fuss about the externals? If you could really, in dealing with others, be extremely cooperative, in conducting yourselves be extremely obliging, in the family express the affection appropriate between parents and children, elder and younger brothers, in your villages maintain accord between the old and the young, the great and the small, then those habits of struggling over minor differences and getting into noisy disputes would be reformed and the tendency toward indulgent and degenerate conduct would be restrained.

If I had no desire which might induce you to compete or me to steal; if I never allowed momentary anger to get me into a fight; if I never held you in contempt because you are poor and I am rich; if you didn't try to hurt me because you are strong and I am weak; if everybody became kind, without any sign of pettiness; then this would be true ceremony and deference, and in the fullest sense there would be honor and justice.

Though everyone knows how to talk of ceremony and deference, they do not all practice it. Why don't they practice it? Because at present they only know how to use the rules of ceremony to reprove others, not how to use them to correct themselves. For example, if we are quarreling, you'll say I'm impolite and I'll say you are. One will say, "Why don't you yield to me?" And the other will reply, "You haven't yet yielded to me. Why should I yield to you?" At length the animosities become so complex that they cannot be disentangled. What gain is there in that? You should think a little and say, "Although he is without proper manners, where are my manners? Although he hasn't yielded to me, in the beginning why didn't I yield to him?" If both parties would admit part of the blame, wouldn't numerous disputes be avoided? It is just that people love to quarrel and will not give in to others. For instance, a scholar who has a rough idea of how to compose a few verses of various kinds of poetry regards himself as the literary prodigy of the day and disdains to cast an eye on others. But if he realized that the subjects of study are inexhaustible and that the empire possesses an abundance of learned men, he would say, "The books I have read are only a fraction of what men have written and my compositions don't amount to even a spot of brightness among the whole lot." Automatically he would be modest and defer to others. He who really acts with modesty and deference is a virtuous and worthy scholar.

Farmers are also in the habit of quarreling about their fields. I say that you have encroached on the dike a little; you say that I have ploughed a furrow too many. Perhaps some animal, an ox or a sheep, has trodden down the grain, and this gives rise to a quarrel. Or perhaps one person dams up the water till it overflows his own fields, not letting it pass by and irrigate those of his neighbor, and this leads to a struggle. Craftsmen are also quick to get into violent quarrels. You want to keep me down and I want to keep you down; I try to turn your

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employer against you and you try to turn mine away from me. We each care for our own prosperity only, with no regard to whether the other lives or dies.

Merchants and shop owners are even worse. When you see me earning money, you become jealous; when I see you making a profit, my eyes turn red with envy. When a particular kind of trade is profitable, you want to engage in it, and so do I. When trading conditions are good in a certain place, you will conceal it from everyone else and secretly hurry there yourself. Knowing that a certain kind of goods is losing value, a merchant will trick people into taking them off his hands and afterwards go and insist on getting the payment. There are others who, beginning trade with empty hands, borrow money at high rates but are a long time in repaying their bills. This is what is called "You seek high [interest] while I seek delay [in repayment]." Others get into disputes about the scales used or the quality of coins. There are so many sources of disputes that it would be an endless task to mention all of them. To sum it up, people will not yield to each other on anything; if only they would yield, they would all become honest and generous men.

As to you soldiers living in camp, you can't avoid having rough and crude personalities. At work and at rest you use your swords and staffs and engage in combat. Everybody says that soldiers, because of their very nature, do not understand ceremony. Therefore, from now on you must try to understand the principle of yielding and ceremony. In your village try your best to show deference to others and to temper the roughness of your personalities.

Let all of you — scholars, farmers, artisans, merchants, and soldiers — take care in practicing ceremonial deference. If one place becomes good, then many places will become so, and finally the entire realm will be in excellent harmony. Won't we then have a world in perfect concord?

In an ancient book it says, "The humble gain; the self-satisfied lose." These two phrases are exceptionally apt. How do the humble gain? Humility consists of modesty and mildness. Men of the present day can't perceive their own faults at all. Therefore they perpetually quarrel, not realizing that strife is the road to the destruction of their families and their personal ruin. In every affair, great or small retreat a step and you will certainly gain the advantage. For example, suppose a man curses me, and I let pass a couple of phrases. If he is a good man he will naturally feel sorry. If he is a bad man, on seeing that his curses have no effect, he will give up. Wouldn't this prevent a lot of trouble? Do you think that by his cursing me he will rise to greater glory, or that I by bearing with him will fall into disgrace? If I defer to him in this way, people will just praise how good I am and will all want to join me, perhaps confiding to me the secrets of their hearts or entrusting to me their money. If he is so overbearing, people will all hate and avoid him. If he runs into trouble, who will pay attention to him? Haven't I then gained the advantage?

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Among the ancients there was a man named Lou Shide. He once asked his brother, "Suppose that someone spit in your face. How would you react to him?" When his brother said he would just wipe it off, Lou Shide said, "If you wipe it off, the man will hold you in even greater contempt. Just accept it with a smile and wait until it dries of its own accord." Just think, meek Lou Shide afterwards rose to become prime minister. Isn't this evidence that "the humble gain"?

How do the self-satisfied lose? Self-satisfaction occurs when a person is impressed with his own importance. It does not refer only to property owners and officials who rely on their money and influence to deceive and humiliate others and thus invite disaster. It also refers to young men who call their elders "old fogies" and even if they are poor or feeble do not address them in a respectful manner; it also refers to young men who tell local officials and gentry, "We will not cringe before you," and arrogantly try to gain the upper hand. This emotion of self-satisfaction will inevitably lead a man to exceed what is appropriate to his station. He will undertake daring acts, bringing on calamity. This shows how "the self-satisfied lose."

The principles taught by these two sentences may be compared to an earthen vessel. When the vessel is empty (= modest) it can still gain. If it is full (= self-satisfied), you cannot put more things into it, and if you force them you may overturn the vessel or break it into pieces. From this can be seen how the humble gain and the self-satisfied lose. These principles may also be compared to a man who has some chronic disorders. Knowing that his body is weak, he will be careful in all matters, not daring to eat much food or indulge in wine or women. Consequently he may enjoy a long life. The man who doesn't have the slightest health problem, by contrast, will depend on his strength and vigor. He will eat and then go right to sleep, take off his clothes in drafty places, and show not even the least moderation in regard to wine and women. Then one day he gets an incurable illness. Aren't these accurate examples of how the humble (= cautious) gain and the self-satisfied lose?

Formerly there was a Mr. Wang Yanfang who was exceptionally ready to defer to others. Once a cattle thief, when captured, said, "I will willingly receive my punishment, but please don't inform Wang Yanfang." When Wang heard of this, he sent someone to give the thief a piece of cloth and persuade him to become good. From this incident the thief became so reformed that when he saw someone drop his sword in the road he stood guarding it till the owner came back to get it. In antiquity there also was a Mr. Guan Youan who was equally deferential. When an ox belonging to another family came and ate the young shoots of his field, he was not at all angry, but took the ox, tied him to a tree, and brought him grass to eat. Because he was so accommodating and humble, all the people of his village reformed. In a time of rebellion, the bandits didn't bother him, and those who had fled from danger came to him for protection. Just think of it: when one man knows how to yield, a whole district can be reformed, and even bandits can be influenced. Aren't ceremonial behavior and deference then real treasures?

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Furthermore, if you compete over things, you don't get any more for it; if you yield, neither do you have any less. The ancients said it very well: "A person who always makes way for others on the road won't waste one hundred steps in his whole life. He who always gives in on questions of boundaries won't lose even a single section over the course of his life." Hence it can be seen that yielding and ceremony bring gain and never humiliation. Then why not yield? Emperor Shizong hopes that you all will listen to the instructions of the former Emperor Shengzu and examine yourselves by them.

If you are able to get along with others, those who are rude will imitate you and learn to get along. If you are able to manage business fairly, those who are dishonest will learn to be fair by following you. When one person takes the lead, all the rest will follow. When one family follows, then the whole village will do the same. From near to far, everywhere people will be good. At first it will take effort, but constant practice will make it easy. Men will become honest and popular customs pure and considerate. Only this would constitute full adoption of the meaning of Emperor Shizong's repeated instructions to you.