

Article

The Neo-Confucian Concept of Ritual Propriety, Learning by Familiarization, and Genuine Knowledge

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Introduction

This paper aims to elucidate the philosophical meaning of the Neo-Confucian concept of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), which modern scholars have relatively less spotlighted upon their somewhat vague understanding of ritual propriety as a kind of threadbare trait of the Neo-Confucian idea of practice.¹ We, the authors of this paper, wish to give a philosophical insight into this concept by investigating the theoretical framework of ritual propriety and the deeply related learning strategy called “learning by familiarization” (*xishu* 習熟) and “genuine knowledge” (*zhenzhi* 真知) in Neo-Confucian thought.

In the Neo-Confucian view, ritual propriety was created by the tension between the moral ideal and ontological predicaments of human beings. In principle, for Neo-Confucians, human affairs (*renshi* 人事) should be conducted

in accordance with the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理), and thus it is expected to bring about morally desirable results. However, Neo-Confucians were sharply aware of the obstacles to accomplishing such results. They admitted the human reality that it would be extremely difficult for human beings to unify with Heaven (*tian* 天), or principle (*li* 理), because of their material disposition (*qibing* 氣稟) and human desires (*renyu* 人欲). The conflicts between “(moral) oughtness” and “being” as a living entity that has various desires gave rise to the advent of ritual propriety, according to the Neo-Confucian account. Ritual propriety for Neo-Confucians was a key factor in conciliating such conflicts. It served as both socially and morally appropriate criteria of human behaviors in one’s daily life, thereby ideally leading to harmony or unification between human affairs and the Heavenly principle. Hence, Neo-Confucians put great importance on learning and practicing ritual propriety, strongly suggesting accustoming oneself to accordingly conducting ritual propriety since one’s childhood. For this purpose, they employed a learning strategy called “learning by familiarization.”

In the Neo-Confucian theory, human beings could realize their ontological principle—i.e., the endowed Heavenly principle in one’s heart-and-mind—by seeking to adjust one’s behavior and mindset to the Heavenly principle, which is manifested in the form of ritual propriety. This goal requires human beings to habituate themselves to conduct ritual propriety appropriately. “Learning by familiarization” emerged as the principal notion in this regard. Neo-Confucians believed that by cultivating a habit of conducting ritual propriety, human beings could attain a good basis for their ultimate goal—the unification with the Heavenly principle. However, such learning based on physical repetition, or habit formation, was not enough to reach their final goal. Therefore, Neo-Confucians went a step further: they called for obtaining genuine knowledge of ritual propriety through their notable device of “apprehension of principles” (*qiongli* 窮理). That is why ritual propriety was regarded as one of the major subjects of the apprehension of principles in the Neo-Confucian theory of learning.

To our arguments, we will first analyze the Neo-Confucian definition of ritual propriety and then appraise their learning strategy of learning by familiarization to explain how the two aspects of ritual propriety—principle and practice—are intertwined in the Neo-Confucian framework. Finally, we will examine how the Neo-Confucian perception of ritual propriety is further connected to their learning theory of the apprehension of principles.

1. Jang Dong u (2013, 210), in his research on the Neo-Confucian commentaries on the *Master Zhu’s Family Rituals* (*Zhuzi jiali* 朱子家禮), shows that approximately 500 serious scholarly monographs relevant to this manuscript had been produced during the Joseon dynasty. It is also well-known that the discourse on “ritual propriety” had become one of the critical issues among Joseon Neo-Confucian scholars. Since the eminent scholar Gueon Geun 權近 (1352-1409), who is deemed one of the forerunners of study of ritual propriety in Joseon, many Neo-Confucian scholars had taken part in creating active discussions about ritual propriety. For example, as we are quite aware, the so-called “Mourning Rite Controversy” (*li song*; K. *ye song*, 禮訟), which became intricately entangled with a political power game, stimulated the intense philosophical debates.

However, despite the given huge attention to the issue of ritual propriety by scholars in Joseon, modern scholars in Korea seem to be less eager to illuminate this issue. Especially in the field of philosophy, we can find only a few works to attempt to examine the philosophical foundation of ritual propriety, including Yun Sasun (1993), Geum Jangtae (1997), Do Minjae (1999), and Han Jaehoon (2015). Otherwise, most research focuses on individual scholars’ theories on ritual propriety rather than inquiring about philosophical principles of ritual propriety *per se*. For example, Yu Gueonjong (2009) mainly deals with Yi Hwang’s theory 李滉 (1502-1571); No Insuk’s recent work (2020) looks through a few major scholars’ thoughts regarding the *Master Zhu’s Family Rituals* in Joseon and explains the historical transitions of the four ceremonial occasions of the time.

One more point that we, the authors of the paper, want to make clear is the translation issue of the term “*li*” 禮. This term has multiple layers of meaning, such as rite, ritual, decorum, ritual formalities, and (ritual) propriety, as other Chinese concepts do. It is because the definite meanings of the term had gradually developed over time. Namely, it had gone through semantic changes or extensions of the meaning throughout history (for a more detailed discussion about the historical development of the meaning of *li*, see Han 2020). Thus, it is very challenging to translate such a concept into specific English word(s), and this is going beyond our goal in this paper. However, for the sake of convenience, we will provide the general rendering of the term as “ritual propriety,” which seems to fit into our discussion in this paper comparably, and give relevant renderings based on the contexts if needed. “*Li*” 理 also has a similar translation issue, and we will translate the term into “principle,” for convenience, too.

The Interpretation of Ritual Propriety as Principle: How Did Ritual Propriety Become Principle?

The Neo-Confucian claim of “ritual propriety is identical with principles” (*li ji li* 禮即理) is likely to be one of the most radical arguments regarding ritual propriety. This seemingly surprising assertion, however, reflects the coherent structure of Neo-Confucian thought in terms of the relation between principles and human nature. According to Zhu Xi, ritual propriety is the embodiment of intangible, abstract principles.² Because principles are incorporeal and abstract by nature, it is necessary to find a way to engage in them in an accessible form. Ritual propriety, in Neo-Confucian thought, provides such a way. However, it does not seem adequate to explain the Neo-Confucian identification between ritual propriety with principles. Therefore, we need to take the argument one stage further.

In understanding the characteristics of ritual propriety, the term “classifying and refining” (*jiewen* 節文) has considerable importance. Since the Spring and Autumn period, the concept of ritual propriety had diverged into a few distinct meanings: roughly, “dividing and polishing,” “fulfilling” or “observing” (*li* 履), and “principles” or “norms” (*li* 理) (Han 2015, 184).³ These three meanings refer to transforming principles to the practicable form of regulations, practicing those regulations in one’s daily life, and securing the value of the regulations as normative, respectively (*ibid.*).⁴

Zhu Xi developed his definition of ritual propriety upon this intellectual heritage and proposed another influential statement regarding it: “What ritual propriety means is the classified and refined patterning of Heavenly principle

and the formal code of human affairs.”⁵ This statement also has room for clarity. First of all, we need to focus on the first part of the statement, the “classified and refined patterning of Heavenly principle.” In his commentary on the *Mencius*, Zhu Xi explicates the meaning of “classifying and refining” by the combination of “classifying or dividing something [originally] undivided” (*pinjie* 品節) and “refining or polishing something untouched” (*wenzhang* 文章).⁶ Therefore, the first part implies that the integral and abstract Heavenly principle is apprehended by being transformed into something specific and visible through the process of “classifying and refining.” At this point, we can raise a question: “Who did this work?” Then, Neo-Confucians would answer: “The sage did.”

Only sage’s heart-and-mind is clear and pure 【“Clear” refers to material force and “pure” to disposition】, [and thus] the Heavenly principle [in sage’s heart-and-mind] is integral without any deficit or lack. Therefore, [the sage] could establish teachings in the world by classifying [the integral principle] and taking precautions [against the excessive or deficient cases] according to whereabouts of the Way; making the excessive and the deficient be able to take a mean.⁷

Many rites are the heavenly conferred orders. The sage merely systemized [such orders] and applied them correspondingly based on Heaven. Ranging from the so-called rites of capping, wedding, funeral, and ancestral worship to ancient laws and institutions, cultural establishments and rites and music, and vehicles and clothes—the sage arbitrarily created none of them; Heaven created all the things. The sage merely carried out [his/her role], modeling upon that Heavenly principle.⁸

In the above excerpts, the sage is deemed to have a clear and pure material disposition, and thus his/her heart-and-mind could be harmonized with Heaven. Hence, the sage can realize the Heavenly principle in dealing with

2. *Zhu Xi ji*, vol. 60, “Da Ceng Ze Zhi Zu Dao”: “禮即理也。但謂之理，則疑若未有形迹之可言，制而為禮，則有品節文章之可見矣。”

3. We can discover the above three usages of the term *li* 禮 in the *Book of Rites* and other Confucian classics. For example, for the first usage, see *Mengzi*, Li Lou I: “禮之實，節文斯二者是也”; *Liji*, Fang Ji: “禮者，因人之情，而為之節文。” For the second, see *Liji*, Ji Yi: “禮者，履此者也”; *Xunzi*, Da Lue Bian: “禮者，人之所履也，失所履，必顛蹶陷溺。所失微而其為亂大者，禮也”; *Erya*, Shi Yan: “履，禮也。”【郭璞注】“禮，可以履行”; *Baibutong*, Li Yue: “禮之為言，履也，可履踐而行。” For the third, see *Liji*, Zhong Ni Yan Ju: “禮也者，理也。...君子無理不動”; *Liji*, Yue Ji: “禮也者，理之不可易者也”; and *Xunzi*, Yue Lun: “禮也者，理之不可易者也。”

4. Han points out that “principle” (*li* 理) here is not a metaphysical term. According to Han, it does not mean “laws of nature” (*lifa* 理法) nor the “fundamental principle” (*yanli* 原理), but “norms” or “criteria.”

5. *Lunyu ji zhu*, Xue Er: “禮者，天理之節文，人事之儀則也。”

6. *Mengzi ji zhu*, Li Lou I: “節文，謂品節文章”; *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 56: “節者，等級也。文，不直回互之貌”; *Ibid.*, “問：‘節文之文。’曰：‘文是裝裹得好，如升降揖遜。’”

7. *Zhongyong huo wen*: “惟聖人之心，清明純粹【清明以氣言，純粹以質言】，天理渾然，無所虧闕，故能因其道之所在，而為之品節防範，以立教於天下，使夫過不及者，有以取中焉。”

8. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 78: “許多典禮，都是天敘天秩下了，聖人只是因而救正之，因而用出去而已。凡其所謂冠昏喪祭之禮，與夫典章制度，文物禮樂，車輿衣服，無一件是聖人自做底。都是天做下了，聖人只是依傍他天理行將去。”

human affairs completely, despite the ontological status of a human being, who constantly struggles between (moral) oughtness and human desires.⁹ Ritual propriety is described as the sage's teachings that perfectly correspond to the Heavenly principle, without the slightest possibility of being arbitrary or intentional. In this regard, ritual propriety can obtain the consummate quality.

We should also consider that Neo-Confucian ritual propriety is fundamentally connected to the notion of the original human nature. It acts as a key liaison between Heavenly principle and human beings in that the heaven-conferred nature (*tianming zhi xing* 天命之性), intrinsic to every human being, is the endowed Heavenly principle in one's heart-and-mind in Neo-Confucian thought. Therefore, ritual propriety can not be considered externally imposed social norms or customs but the embodiment of the inner principle. Conducting ritual propriety in this sense is none other than realizing a human being's original nature. Thus, then, we can understand that the first part of Zhu Xi's statement, "the classified and refined patterning of Heavenly Principle," indicates the accessible instructions proposed by the sage to help human beings observe their intrinsic principle.

This understanding clues into how to interpret the latter part of the statement, "the formal code of human affairs." As seen above, the sage transformed the Heavenly principle into a tangible form of regulations or formalities in the Neo-Confucian view. The formal code of human affairs stands for the feasible instruction manual containing such regulations, established by the sage, whereby human beings can start practicing to realize the original nature in their everyday lives. Now, we can re-read the original statement as follows: "Ritual propriety is the accessible form of the classified and refined patterning of Heavenly principle presented by the sage which functions as the formal code of human affairs as the instruction manual to conduct in day-to-day living, for fulfilling original human nature." Zhu Xi's first definition of "Ritual propriety is identical with principles" is the pithy expression of this complicated and varifold context.

Learning by Familiarization (1): Habit Formation

In the Neo-Confucian belief, ritual propriety is viewed as natural to human beings because of the nature of ritual propriety as the embodiment of the Heavenly principle, which is regarded as the source of original human nature. Therefore, it should be natural for human beings to harmonize their deeds with the Heavenly principle in conducting human affairs in principle. However, Neo-Confucians had a keen perception of the obstacle conditions of human beings to achieve this end, represented as material disposition and human desires. These congenital conditions serve as the hindrance of realizing the inner principle in Neo-Confucian thought. To resolve this problem, Neo-Confucians paid great attention to the early Confucian concept of "overcoming selfishness and returning to ritual propriety" (*keji fuli* 克己復禮) and reinterpreted it.

For Neo-Confucians, the ideal status of original human nature can be easily impaired by human desires, often deeply related to the sense of selfishness (*shiji* 私己). In order to overcome selfishness, human beings need to observe the proper criteria of moral deeds, i.e., the sage's teachings of ritual propriety. By conforming with ritual propriety, human beings should and could appropriately control their selfishness, thereby unifying with the Heavenly principle. This idea is what "overcoming selfishness and returning to ritual propriety" means, according to the Neo-Confucian view. However, pursuing this goal demands a lot of deliberate and gradual effort. Therefore, Neo-Confucians devised the method of "learning by familiarization" as the spadework for their final purpose and introduced the *Elementary Learning* (*Xiaoxue* 小學) as the start point of practicing ritual propriety.

Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077), one of the Neo-Confucian forerunners, highly praised ritual propriety as critical for teaching students. Although his contemporaries neglected practicing ritual propriety as unrealistic, Zhang Zai believed that ritual propriety could provide students with a solid foundation for deeper learning. His intellectual descendant Zhu Xi took over Zhang Zai's idea and compiled the *Elementary Learning* for children's education by extracting relevant passages from various Confucian classics. The text mainly covered the variety of topics of ritual propriety: it ranged from daily etiquettes, such as sprinkling and sweeping the ground (*sasao* 灑掃), responding and answering (*yingdui* 應對), and advancing and retiring (*jintui* 進退) to ethics of relation, such as love for parents (*aiqin* 愛親), respect for elders (*jingzhang* 敬長), reverence to

9. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 130: "聖人行事, 皆是胸中天理, 自然發出來不可已者, 不可勉強有爲爲之"; *Ibid.*, vol. 68: "聖人便是天, 天便是聖人."

masters (*longshi* 隆師), and affection to friends (*qinyou* 親友). Zhu Xi explains the reasons for naming the text as “elementary learning” and teaching children with the text as follows:

It is imperative to let [people] study and learn [these things] since their childhood. [By doing so], [I] wish to make [them] foster habits with wisdom and achieve transformation in their heart-and-mind, and thereby [they could] remove [potential] apprehensions regarding incompatible or overwhelmed situations [when they will be in their adulthood].¹⁰

From the above excerpt, we could imagine how children adapt what they have learned from the text as proper criteria for their behaviors and how they accustom themselves to the given ways of dealing with various situations by fostering habits. More importantly, children would feel natural about their behavior mode when they behave in a specific way that matches their habit-learning. Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107) describes this point as follows:

When people are in their early childhood, they do not yet have any assertive perception or thought. Aphorisms or reliable theories should then be exhibited before them every day. Let them fill up their ears and stomach through constant disciplines, even if they do not yet clearly understand [those aphorisms or theories]. If keeping [this discipline] for a long time, they would naturally become comfortable with and be accustomed to [what they have learned], as if they intrinsically had it.¹¹

As Cheng Yi states, the Neo-Confucian learning objective is to “become comfortable with and be accustomed to” what one has learned so that he/she feels “natural” about one’s learning as if their learnings were their natural attributes. This Neo-Confucian expectation indicates that their learning strategy is based on habit formation. Interestingly, such a perspective is similar to the characteristics of habits observed by modern neuroscientists.

First, habits...are largely learned;...they are acquired via experience-dependent plasticity. Second, habitual behaviors occur repeatedly over the course of days or years, and they can become remarkably fixed. Third, fully acquired habits are performed almost automatically...Fourth, habits tend to involve an ordered, structured action sequence that is prone to being elicited by a particular context or stimulus. And finally, habits can comprise cognitive expressions of routine (habits of thought) as well as motor expressions of routine. (Graybiel 2008, 361)

From the above excerpt, we can understand that habits can be roughly defined as structured responses to stimuli and that they have been gradually acquired through repetitive behaviors. The fascinating point of habit formation is that habits produce almost automatic reactions in the long term and eventually become part of a routine.¹² Thus, habit learning is a kind of cumulative learning: the cognitive process through which one amasses relevant knowledge, abilities, or skills, followed by subsequent cognitive development. Cheng Yi’s wording of “*xun guo*” (薰聒, literally “to teach repeatedly in a loud voice”) in the *Reflection on Things at Hand* (*Jin si lu* 近思錄), as seen in the earlier excerpt, refers to the slow influence like processing of smoking food and the eventual transforming.

However, once a habit is successfully rooted, this acquired mode of behavior works involuntarily, responding to the stimuli. Moreover, it often functions subconsciously, influencing one’s consciousness that judges and determines what and how to behave according to each context. In other words, habits, as a kind of learned natural bodily reactions, could unconsciously or subconsciously control consciousness in some sense. Therefore, it is significant for human beings to cultivate childhood habits to make them feel comfortable with their learned behaviors that could last into adulthood.

Learning by Familiarization (2): The Groundwork for Neo-Confucian Ideal of Realizing the Original Human Nature

In a preparatory stage of learning, it is necessary to clarify whether the object

10. *Zhuxi ji*, “Xiaoxue shu ti”: “必使其講而習之於幼穉之時，欲其習與智長，化與心成，而無扞格不勝之患也。”

11. *Jin si lu*, vol. 11, “Xiaoxue Lui”: “人之幼也，知思未有所主，便當以格言至論，日陳於前。雖未曉知，且當薰聒，使盈耳充腹，久自安習，若固有之。”

12. When it comes to learning, some studies in neuroscience see “proceduralization of behavior” as the “indicator of successful learning” (Gasbarri et al. 2014, 198).

of knowledge is worth learning. For Neo-Confucians, ritual propriety is surely deemed the legitimate subject to learn because the sage establishes it. Namely, the authority of the sage supports the quality of Neo-Confucian learning of ritual propriety as valuable to get accustomed so that learners feel comfortable with it. As discussed, the *Elementary Learning*, which served as the first and foremost introductory text for children's learning of ritual propriety in the Neo-Confucian tradition, came into the spotlight. The text was highlighted to learn because it was believed as the sage's instruction manual to live one's life properly. Therefore, Neo-Confucians argued that it was necessary to learn ritual propriety since childhood to habituate oneself to conduct it properly.

Practically, the text had come to the fore by many eminent Neo-Confucians. For example, Xu Heng 許衡 (1209-1281), the great Neo-Confucian master in the Yuan dynasty, prioritized teaching of the *Elementary Learning* over other texts for young scholars. He even confessed, "I respect and believe in the *Elementary Learning* as divine."¹³ We can find other similar examples among Joseon scholars, too. Gim Goengpil 金宏弼 (1454-1504) called himself a "child of the elementary learning" and exerted himself to regulate his deeds by that text.¹⁴ Yi Hwang 李滉 (1501-1570) also mentioned the text in the regulations of his private academy (*shuyuan* 書院); he said, "Students should take the Four Books and Five Classics as the sources and the *Elementary Learning* and the *Family Rituals* as the gates [of learning]."¹⁵ Yi Yi 李珥 (1536-1584) added the *Elementary Learning* to the Four Books and called them the "Five Books." Jang Hyeon gwang's 張顯光 (1554-1637) reference—"Nothing precedes over learning ritual propriety in teaching and learning"—also illustrates the importance of the text.¹⁶

The shared emphasis on the text among the prominent Neo-Confucian

scholars indicates their particular attention to the idea of learning by familiarization.¹⁷ As we have seen earlier, learning by familiarization is like habit formation. It is noteworthy that learning ritual propriety is distinguished from studying aphorisms or theories in that it requires practicing in one's own body rather than speculative or cognitive thinking. Neo-Confucians anticipated accustoming learners to the sage's saying and various virtues, such as filial piety, by daily practice of rituals displayed in the text. In so doing, learners were expected to become familiar with the suggested customs and virtues and to feel natural to those things as if possessing such features *ab initio*.

The Neo-Confucian advocacy of "learning and practicing the proprieties presented in the *Elementary Learning* since childhood" reflects the idea of learning by familiarization. This methodology plays a leading part in the Neo-Confucian learning theory. In his commentary on the *Analects*, Zhu Xi describes the learning phase as follows:

If a child first reads a specific book, it indicates [that the child is in the stage of] [initial] "learning" (*xue* 學). If [the child repeatedly] reads that book over a hundred times, it means [his/her entering into the stage of] "familiarization" (*xi* 習). If already getting familiar with [the reading], so [the child] could recite [the whole book] without troubles, then it refers to [his/her being in the stage of] "pleasure" (*yue* 說).¹⁸

Learning requires familiarization [with the learning material]. [Learners would] naturally feel profound pleasure after fully getting familiarized with it.¹⁹

Zhu Xi, as seen above, divides the phase of learning into three stages: "(initial) learning," "familiarization," and "pleasure." According to him, the learning process includes the initial acquisition of knowledge, familiarization with the new knowledge through constant discipline, and the final obtaining of pleasure resulting from the in-depth learning. If one learns about new things for the first

13. *Luzhai yi shu*, vol. 13, "Guoxue shi ji": "先生自得『小學』書，則主於此書，以開導學者。嘗寄其子書曰：『小學』·四書，吾敬信如神明然。能明此，他書雖不治，可也。"

14. Gim Goengpil's master Gim Jongjik 金宗直 (1431-1492) highly appraised his disciple by giving Goengpil the title of "Xu Heng's successor." *Gobong jip*, vol. 3, "Go Seungeuirang Hyeongjo jwarang Geung Daegwang boguk Sunglok daebu Euijeongbu Ueuijeong Gyeom Yeonggyeong yeonsa Geum Seonsaeng Haengjang": "先生初從佔畢齋金先生請業，先生以小學授之曰：『苟志於學，宜從此始。光風霽月，亦不外此。』先生眷眷服膺，手不釋卷。人或問反時事，必曰：『小學童子，何知大義？』嘗作詩，有『小學』書中悟昨非之句。金先生批曰：『此言乃作聖根基，魯齋後豈無其人乎？』先生篤志力行，常以小學自律。"

15. *Toigye jeon seo*, vol. 41, "Yisan Yeon gyu": "諸生讀書，以四書五經為本原，『小學』，『家禮』為門戶。"

16. *Yeoheon jip*, vol. 10, "O Seonsaeng Yeseol Bal": "教莫先於禮教，學莫切於禮學。自昔聖人之重禮也，其以是哉！"

17. *Yulgok jeon seo*, vol. 27, "Gyeok Mong Yo Gyeol": "先讀『小學』，於事親·敬兄·忠君·弟長·隆師·親友之道，一一詳玩而力行之...五書五經，循環熟讀，理會不已，使義理日明。"

18. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 20: "如小子初授讀書，是學也。令讀百數十遍，是時習也。既熟，則不煩惱，覆背得，此便是說也。"

19. *Ibid.*, "學只是要一箇習，習到熟後，自然喜說不能自己。"

time, he/she would feel awkward with such unfamiliar objects. This sense of unfamiliarity would disappear after sufficient exposure to the objects. Only then be he/she ready to acquire the proper understanding of the learning material. Therefore, learners should put effort into getting acquainted with their material. As aforementioned, Neo-Confucians suggest the appropriate level of familiarity as thorough as if the learning innately belonged to the learners. Otherwise, the following problem can occur.

Suppose to make someone, who is usually fond of assuming a haughty attitude, act respectfully by force. [Then, the person might] be able to take a respectful attitude for a time. [However, he/she would] gradually become arrogant as usual, feeling comfortable [with the old habit] in his/her heart-and-mind.²⁰

The above excerpt shows the difficulty in absorbing new things upon old habits. The tenacious old habits often hinder learners from familiarizing themselves with desirable new customs. However, paradoxically, the excerpt also implies that once being successful in creating good habits, it is tough to break them because habit is persistent by nature. Hence, Neo-Confucians propose the *Elementary Learning* as the primary text for establishing appropriate habits in terms of the Neo-Confucian set of values and emphasize learning it since childhood to help children's habit formation.

However, the Neo-Confucian learning methodology of familiarization does not simply concern habit formation by repetitive disciplines. Instead, Neo-Confucians impart the philosophical implication to their method in terms of cultivating one's nature. Zhu Xi illustrates the reason for demanding "learning by familiarization" through the metaphor of calligraphy.

The sage and the wise depicted such forms [of ritual propriety] from where they classified and refined [the Heavenly principle] and made people learn by modeling them on those forms. It is just like children's learning of the art of calligraphy. How could children be good at handwriting from the beginning? They must draw strokes one by one, relying on the exemplars. If keeping [this practice] for a long time, then [their handwriting] would

naturally become beautiful.²¹

The aesthetics of calligraphy pursues universally appreciated beauty for everyone. It means that a commonly shared perception of beauty exists among all people. It also indicates that human beings possess the aesthetic sense to appreciate such beauty. Due to this aesthetic sense, people can perceive beauty when looking at an excellent piece of calligraphy work. Yet, people cannot immediately make strokes beautifully. They must learn through emulating sample scripts by great calligraphy masters if they wish to realize their inner aesthetic capability in calligraphy. In other words, they must first practice brush strokes by tracing the lines of the examples one stroke by one stroke until they become familiar with brushwork. After the familiarization process, they are finally ready to unfold their aesthetic capability.

Likewise, human beings should practice ritual propriety to realize their original nature, i.e., the endowed Heavenly principle in their heart-and-mind. As Neo-Confucians argue, human beings hardly realize their original nature because of the obstructions of their material disposition and human desires. Practicing ritual propriety through the familiarization process is like emulating sample scripts to master calligraphy. For Neo-Confucians, ritual propriety is the instruction manual established by the sage to guide ordinary people to realize their innate principle. In particular, regulating oneself by ritual propriety is necessary to remove obstacles and restore the original state of their nature. By habituating themselves to conduct ritual propriety accordingly, human beings could attain the ideal condition to realize their original nature.

Seeking Genuine Knowledge: Moving to the Deeper Stage of Learning

The principal objective of the familiarization strategy is to attain naturalness in conducting ritual propriety. However, Neo-Confucians realized that learning based on physical repetition without genuine comprehension was insufficient to seek their final goal. Although "learning by familiarization" is the essential

20. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 24: "如平日愛倨傲, 勉強教他恭敬, 一時之間亦能恭敬. 次第依舊自倨傲了, 心方安."

21. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 36: "聖賢於節文處, 描畫出這樣子, 令人依本子去學. 譬如小兒學書, 其始如何便寫得好. 須是一筆一畫都依他底, 久久自然好去."

method in the phase of “elementary learning,” the final objective goes beyond such an introductory learning phase. It requires comprehending things in the world through apprehending principles, which is the primary scheme in the stage of “great learning” (*daxue* 大學).²²

Neo-Confucians claim that all things under heaven and earth inherently possess principle (*li* 理) endowed from Heaven. Accordingly, all things in the world become the objects for understanding in the Neo-Confucian theory.²³ “Apprehension of principles,” along with “investigation of things” (*gewu* 格物), represents the Neo-Confucian learning methodology of comprehending the world.²⁴ Theoretically, this methodology intends to explore all kinds of principles within the myriad things under heaven and earth. However, such exploration first demands to weigh the importance of matters—what to precede and to follow, or what is urgent or not urgent. In Neo-Confucian thought, things relevant to the Heavenly principle and human relations (*renlun* 人倫), the core elements that comprise ritual propriety, prioritize all other things in terms of apprehension of principles.²⁵

Then, what does it mean to apprehend principles regarding ritual propriety? It does not mean simply understanding the ritual formalities or relevant information from texts. Given that such basic knowledge and practice are already acquainted from the stage of learning by familiarization, we could guess that apprehending principles targets a deeper and more thorough understanding. Neo-Confucians seek such a profound understanding through “genuine knowledge.”

As discussed, the sense of naturalness is regarded as the most significant attribute for learning and practicing ritual propriety. The quotation below shows Zhu Xi’s claim about how to attain harmony, which can be interpreted as the

synonym of naturalness.

You must apprehend the principles, and then only could you attain [harmony in conducting human affairs]. If you know that doing a thing in a certain way is consistent with what is right, then you cannot but naturally do it in that way. For example, even if a guest and a host make a bow a hundred times, they should circulate the glasses only three times; this case is truly in the right. In another case: “When entering the palace gate, [Confucius] bent his body; [he] hardly had breath, as if not breathing, and [he] reverently bent his legs under him when passing the [vacant] place [of the sovereign]. If you do not understand that a subject should serve a ruler in that way, you could never comprehend harmony. And besides, for example, if embers are dropped upon someone’s hand, then [that person would] immediately complain of the pain. [However], if cauterizing with moxa, [that person would] barely feel pain by it. It is just because [that person] knows burning moxa is suitable for [treating] his/her illness. [Because the treatment] is due to [what that person] is willing to [get], he/she would naturally not feel pain.”²⁶

“Knowing,” in the above state of “If you know it, then you cannot but naturally do it,” refers to “genuine knowledge.”²⁷ For Zhu Xi, the ultimate goal of investigating things and extending knowledge is to reach a thorough understanding of learning objects, that is, acquiring genuine knowledge about the objects.²⁸ Here, theoretical knowledge is essentially accompanied by practice. Namely, genuine knowledge aims for the inseparable integration of knowledge and practice.²⁹

In the Neo-Confucian view, the reason for human beings’ failing to

22. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 36: “今日勉之，明日勉之，勉而至於不勉。今日思之，明日思之，思而至於不思。自生而至熟，正如寫字一般。會寫底，固是會。不會寫底，須學他寫。今日寫，明日寫，自生而至熟，自然寫得。”

23. *Daxue huo wen*: “天道流行，造化發育，凡有聲色象而盈於天地之間者，皆物也。既有是物，則其所以為是物者，莫不各有當然之則，而自不容已，是皆得於天之所賦，而非人之所能為也。”【朱子曰：“物乃形氣，則乃理也，物之理方為則。”】

24. Although “apprehension of principles” pays more attention to inward principles, while “investigation of things” to outward things, they are generally interchangeable in terms of comprehending things and extending knowledge.

25. *Daxue huo wen*: “致知之要，當知至善之所在，如父止於慈，子止於孝之類，若不務此，而徒欲汎然以觀萬物之理，則吾恐其如大軍之游騎，出太遠而無所歸也。”【朱子曰：“格物之論，伊川意雖謂眼前無非是物，然其格之也，亦須有緩急先後之序。如今為學，而不窮天理·明人倫·論聖言·通世故，乃兀然存心於一草木器用之間，此是何學問？”】

26. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 22: “要須是窮理始得。見得這道理合用恁地，便自不得不恁地。如‘賓主百拜而酒三行’，固是用恁地，如‘入公門，鞠躬如也。屏氣似不息。過位，蹞蹞如也。’苟不知以臣事君合用如此，終是不解和。且如今人被些子燈花落手，便說痛。到灼艾時，因甚不以為痛？只緣知道自家病合當灼艾。出於情願，自不以為痛也。”

27. “*Jiande*” (to know or perceive 見得) in the above Zhu Xi’s quotation has the same meaning as Chengzi’s expression of “*shi jiande*” (to truly know or perceive 實見得) when he explains the concept of “genuine knowledge” with the example of a person, who was frightened by observing a tiger in the flesh (*Er Cheng yi shu*, vol. 15: “他人語虎，則雖三尺童子，皆知虎之可畏，終不似曾經傷者，神色懾懼，至誠畏之，是實見得也”); *Ibid.*, vol. 18: “知有多少般數，煞有深淺。向親見一人，曾為虎所傷，因言及虎，神色便變。傍有數人，見佗說虎，非不知虎之猛可畏，然不如佗說了有畏懼之色，蓋真知虎者也”).

28. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 15: “致知所以求為真知。真知，是要徹骨都見得透。”

29. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 116: “不真知得，如何踐履得？若是真知，自住不得。”

properly conduct (moral) oughtness in their real-life context is not because they do not know “what” is morally good or right; but because they do not know “why” it is so. Genuine knowledge is none other than knowing the reason why.³⁰ By clarifying the reason for oughtness, knowledge can assure actions—they are not forcefully imposed but are naturally and voluntarily conducted with a sense of comfort and ease. This status is what genuine knowledge seeks for by apprehending principles.

Now, we should renew our investigation of the Neo-Confucian definition of ritual propriety with the following question: “Why did Neo-Confucians regard the formal code of human affairs as the classified and refined patterning of Heavenly principle?” In Neo-Confucian thought, seeking the fundamental source of oughtness is the correct way to understand why something is considered proper.³¹ In the above example of cauterizing with moxa, the cause of the disease is analogous to the oughtness of the treatment. The physical pain from the moxa cautery could become acceptable or even could be perceived as painless if the patient identifies his/her ailment and thus understands that such therapy is needed. Simply speaking, the patient can accept the applied therapy as natural and appropriate based on his/her awareness of the cause of the disease.

Likewise, the query about the source of oughtness, or morality as a human being, is retroactive to the fundamental question related to the ontological dimension of human beings. In the Neo-Confucian perspective, ritual propriety is regarded as oughtness, and Neo-Confucians deem the Heavenly principle as the source of ritual propriety. This structure reflects the Neo-Confucian intention to elucidate ritual propriety from the ontological source of human beings.³² Suppose human beings become conscious of their ontological source, i.e., the Heavenly principle. In that case, they could apprehend that the oughtness is not forcibly imposed but is naturally endowed. Thus, conducting ritual propriety could be understood as the realization of oneself on an ontological level. Neo-Confucians expect that such a perception could positively lead human beings to perform ritual propriety with naturalness and ease. This

thought underlies the Neo-Confucian ideas of “learning by familiarization” and “genuine knowledge.”

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the Neo-Confucian concept of ritual propriety and its learning strategies of learning by familiarization and seeking genuine knowledge by the apprehension of principle. Neo-Confucians attempted to redefine ritual propriety in terms of principle (*li* 理). They boldly argued that “Ritual propriety is identical with principles” (*li ji li* 禮即理). This argument was paraphrased as “Ritual propriety is the classified and refined patterning of Heavenly principle and the formal code of human affairs” (*li zhe tianli zhi jiewen renshi zhi yize ye* 禮者, 天理之節文, 人事之儀則也). These statements, raised by Zhu Xi, are overlapped by the complex philosophical ideas in Neo-Confucian thought—namely, the relationship between the Heavenly principle and human affairs, the unification between human ontology and (moral) oughtness, and the theories of learning. By these statements, Zhu Xi made a metaphysical transition of ritual propriety from social institutions or norms to the laws of nature or fundamental principles. In so doing, he was able to establish the ontological foundation of ritual propriety and justify studying and practicing it. Ritual propriety acted as the philosophical junction between the Heavenly principle and human affairs and provided human beings with dependable criteria in both social and moral contexts.

However, such Neo-Confucian transition of ritual propriety did not make light of the importance of practice. The strategy of “learning by familiarization” reflects the Neo-Confucian idea of how learning should be structured. Neo-Confucians took the familiarization process as an initial guide to the higher level of study and reinforced the notion of genuine knowledge based on practice that was pertinent to another notion of integration of knowledge and practice (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一).

30. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 64: “如君之仁, 子之孝之類, 人所共知而多不能盡者, 非真知故也。”

31. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 117: “凡看道理, 須要窮箇根源來處. 如為人父, 如何便止於慈? 為人子, 如何便止於孝? 為人君, 為人臣, 如何便止於仁, 止於敬? 如論孝, 須窮箇孝根原來處. 論慈, 須窮箇慈根原來處. 仁敬亦然. 凡道理皆從根原處來窮究, 方見得確定, 不可只道我操修踐履便了.”

32. *Zhuzi yu lei*, vol. 64: “知天是起頭處. 能知天, 則知人·事·親·修身, 皆得其理矣.... 如君之仁, 子之孝之類, 人所共知而多不能盡者, 非真知故也.”

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Abstract

This paper aims to elucidate the philosophical meaning of the Neo-Confucian concept of ritual propriety (*li* 禮). In the Neo-Confucian view, the advent of ritual propriety occurred by the tension between the moral ideal and ontological predicaments of human beings, such as material disposition (*qibing* 氣稟) and human desires (*renyu* 人欲). Although human affairs (*renshi* 人事) should be conducted according to the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理), it would be extremely difficult for human beings to accomplish it. To resolve this problem, Neo-Confucians pay significant attention to ritual propriety, which serves as appropriate criteria in one’s everyday life. They define ritual propriety as the “formal code of human affairs,” which indicates the accessible instruction manual established by the sage, whereby human beings could start practicing to realize their original nature, which is the endowed Heavenly principle in their heart-and-mind. They also suggest the way to practice ritual propriety called “learning by familiarization” (*xishu* 習熟). This learning strategy requires one to accustom oneself to accordingly conducting ritual propriety since one’s childhood, like habit formation, as a groundwork for the higher level of learning. Seeking “genuine knowledge” (*zhenzhi* 真知) through “apprehension of principles” (*qiongli* 窮理) as the next step of learning ritual propriety. In so doing, Neo-Confucians investigate the source of oughtness of human beings.

Keywords: ritual propriety, human affairs, Heavenly principle, learning by familiarization, genuine knowledge

