HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 2: Confucius
Section 5: 禮 *Li*[rituals] as a Metaphor for Social Conventions

- The 禮 *li*[ritual] conception is bound up with language—the named roles
- The names used and the roles are similarly transmitted, taught and learned by example—thus we say language is conventional
- Example: Cantonese rituals have two interrelated roles: 妹妹 *mui mui*[little sister] 哥哥 *go go*[elder brother]
- Each named role uses the others role name in the greeting ritual
- A role is a normative status with a normative behavioral *path*
- This helps connect 命 *ming*[identity] and 名 *ming*[role name]
- We ritually confer role & status names, e.g., conferring a PhD degree adds the *'Dr*.' to 'Hansen'
- Your place in the social/normative order is determined by the ritual bestowing of a name, hence a status and a role
- Conventions can be arbitrary. Chinese put the surname first, Western convention put it last. So local Hong Kong students tend to treat "Professor Chad" as more respectful than "Professor Hansen"
- This is because I came to adopt 陳 *Chén*[surname] 漢生 *Hànshēng*[name] as my Chinese name
- It works in two senses: It neatly transliterates my English name and sounds like a normal Chinese name
- However, given the arbitrary difference in the ordering convention, the counterpart of my English name forms my Chinese surname
- These language conventions are learned informally, the same way the 禮 *li*[ritual] are--by imitating and responding to the verbal performance of others around us

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- We learn a 道 *dào*[path] of language – but languages differ in localities and over time-- language is an example of a social 道 *dào*[path]
- Confucian tradition traces all 禮*li*[ritual] in the core sense as ceremony and the metaphorical expansion to all social conventions back to the culture-forming-sages who along with the practices, created the language that was interwoven into them
- The sages, while unusually wise and good, were understood to be mortal, limited, actual historical eating and breathing people who lived, married, had families and died—they were not immaterial supernatural gods
- Their authority, thus, is as ancestors, not as supernatural status or as creators of nature.
- They are the original uses of term, practitioners of roles, and models of what we strive faithfully to transmit and accurately acquire
- The normative authority is in our commitment to correctly acquire, practice and transmit what we learn
- A social 道 *dào*[path] is the pattern enshrined in these generationally perpetuated practices—using the metaphor of following the traces of the previous walkings that form a path or trail
- You learn social 道 *dào*[paths] by seeing them performed, mimicking the performance, being corrected (or praised) and then yourself taking a role in socially shared ritual performances
- Confucius speaks of loving the 禮 *li*[ritual] itself, the love of performing something with 德 *dé*[virtuosity] reflected in the aesthetic value of the shared production