

## Analysis of Ritual Literature's Cultural Continuity Value with Tang's Sacrificial Rite as Example

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**Abstract**— As an integral part of Tang rite system, sacrificial rite was an important means of Tang Dynasty's social integration in terms of ideology. It has far more numerous and complete ritual literature than any former dynasty. By document research method this paper With Tang's sacrificial rites as example dissected various literary expressions of sacrifices and further discussed cultural continuity value of ritual literature from angles of history, literature, aesthetics, etc. on a basis of exploring and analyzing plenty of literature. The value of ritual literature not only lies in its record of rites and erudite, elegant cultural quality which belongs to Tang aristocracy, but also in the traditional Chinese morality and humanity reflected in it.

**Keyword**—the Tang Dynasty; Sacrificial Rite; Ritual Culture; Literature

### I. INTRODUCTION

China has been known as the "country of rites". Anciently, rite or ritual was a comprehensive concept which contains both political relation and moral awareness. It governs social order and dominates spiritual morality, playing a unique and substantial role in social politics, economy and culture. In a word, it was an important means of a state's social integration in terms of ideology. Tang' litterateurs created many more works involving more aspects of that dynasty on grand occasion, state sacrificial rite system or Tang Empire's fame and prestige far beyond any former dynasty. With Tang's sacrificial rites as example, this paper dissects various literary expressions of sacrifices such as suburban sacrificial rite, sacrifice to heaven, and further discusses cultural continuity value of ritual literature from angles of history, literature, aesthetics, etc. on a basis of exploring and analyzing plenty of literature.

### II. OVERVIEW OF TANG'S SACRIFICIAL RITUAL LITERATURE

For Tang Dynasty which canonizes Confucianism and Confucian scholars, developing Confucianism, establishing the system of ritual music, promoting moralization and making distinctions of rank were all important methods to strengthen the feudal regime throughout the dynasty. And many Tang emperors took actions to massively compile state ritual codes. Early and High Tang rite went through revisions (three stages: Rite of Taizong Emperor's Zhenguan Period, Rite of Gaozong Emperor's Xianqing Period and Rite of Xuanzong Emperor's Kaiyuan Period).

Taizong ordered rite officials and scholars including Fang Xuanling, Wei Zheng, et al. to revise old-timed rites of Sui Dynasty into 100-volume Rite of Zhenguan Period. As Gaozong came to power, it was again revised and amended into 130-volume Rite of Xianqing Period. In Xuanzong's reign, Xiao Song and Wang Zhongqiu compiled a new edition in 150 volumes, Rite of Kaiyuan Period of Great Tang Dynasty by reaching a compromise between the previous two books. Rite of Kaiyuan Period built a milestone in Chinese rite development, producing a far-flung influence on the establishment of rite system in later dynasties. Song's scholars such as Ouyang Xiu spoke highly of that in Sacrificial New History of Tang Dynasty: "Tang's Five Rites had become complete by that time. Later generation continued it, but could never outshine the great work despite minor amendments or revisions." The emperor felt unhappy for officials knowing little about rites of suburban sacrifice and temple sacrifice devastated by An Lushan-Shi Siming Rebellion, so the officials of Ritual Department in the Court of Imperial Sacrifices speeded up their work. In the 9th Year of Zhenyuan Period, Wang Jing offered Record of Suburban Sacrificial Rites of Great Tang Dynasty. As Erudite of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, Wei Gongsu finished New Rites of the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. In the 13th Year of Yuanhe Period, Wang Yanwei gave New Rites Written at the Palace of Qutai in Yuanhe Period. Later on, Continuation of New Rites of Yuanhe Period came out. Besides, there are other classics such as New Auspicious and Ominous Rites of Great Tang Dynasty by Zheng Yuqing, a great scholar during Yuanhe Period. [1]. Compiling rites in Zhenyuan Period and Yuanhe Period "adds family rituals, domestic instructions and other common rituals of the gentry to auspicious and ominous rites among the Five Rites for popularization and practice"[2]. Obviously, Tang Dynasty witnessed changes of rites. However, every change has a central purpose—establishing the rite system to strengthen the cohesion of the regime thought, emphasize absoluteness of centralism and improve the royal authority against the background of changes at that time.

Tang's state ritual mainly falls into rites for sacrifices to heaven, earth and spirit of the dead, Confucius awarded The Lord of Culture Ultimate Sage and Great Accomplisher and Jiang Shang awarded The King of Wucheng (Military Feat). Sacrificial rites came up to 55 according to *Rite of*

*Kaiyuan Period*. Among them, it is the most complex to offer sacrifices to The Reigning Sovereign in Heavens on Round Altar at the winter solstice, pray for good harvest to the same deity on some day (not fixed) of the 1st to 10th day of the lunar 1st month according to Chinese Era [combination of the Heavenly Stems (Xin which stands for maturity of grains here is the eighth of 10 stems) and Earthly Branches] and offer the grand sacrifice in Hall of Brilliance in the late autumn. The three sacrificial rites were held by the emperor. [3] K.C. Chang believes the rise and development of political authority are the key to origination of Chinese civilization, and political rights are mainly obtained by morality, religion, monopoly of rare resources, etc, among which it is the most important to monopolize the way of communing with heaven, earth and spirit of the dead. [4] That points to sacrificial rite.

In Tang Dynasty, there were a myriad of literary works in all forms on rites and ritual music. Let me take various examples here:

First of all, sacrificial songs. Ancient emperors sacrificed to heaven and earth in suburban areas and erected ancestral temples to sacrifice to their ancestors. Ritual music is a song or a piece of music which sing of heaven, earth and ancestors. Totally 417 pieces were included in Music Record, Old History of Tang Dynasty. Complete Tang Poems compiled in Qing Dynasty recorded 368 songs of suburban temples. In General Anthology of Yuefu Poems, we can find 216 songs, including 8 Odes to the Sacrifice at the Round Altar written by scholars such as Chu Liang, Yu Shinan and Wei Zheng. The 8 songs are Yuhe, Taihe, Suhe, Yonghe, Shouhe, Shuhe, Kai'an, Yuhe (its lyric is different from the first song of the same name in Chinese) respectively for eight ceremonies (ask for god; the emperor goes out; mount the hall and offer jade objects and silk fabrics; meet sacrificial vessels; play sacrificial music and after sacrificial ceremony, eat the offered meat and drink the wine; perform civil dance in the beginning and military dance in the end; perform military dance; send the god). They're a complete set of sacrificial songs, which stand for happiness and harmony between earth and heaven. Besides, such songs as those of sacrifice to The Reigning Sovereign in Heavens, sacrifice in Mount Tai to Heaven, the ceremony of praying for good harvest and the ceremony of praying for rain keep intact up to now.

Second, prose-poem. Prose-poem "is grand and great as a reflection of state affair". It is just second to Odes (a section consisting of dynastic odes and allegory poems) and Hymns (a section consisting of sacrificial songs) in the Book of Songs. The sub-type of literature is directly related to the rite ceremony. A Collection of Prose-Poems in All the Ages, quite a complete anthology compiled by Chen Yuanlong upon imperial edict in early Qing Dynasty. Volumes 47-52 in the anthology are dedicated to "Works of Rites and Ceremonies". We may see masterpieces sprang up in the Collection. As a sub-ceremony culture, prose-poem mainly writes compliments. However, look through these works and you will find the prose-poems have more praise for rite's sake than the poets' sincere feelings.

Third, many pieces of prose are directly related to

sacrificial rites. These works retain regulations of Tang's rite system, even reflect evolution of Tang's rite thought. Discussion on Ritual Music, On How to Evolve Ritual Music and Discussion on Sacrifice of Bai Juyi in Outstanding Flowers of Literary Garden are typical examples. There is an endless list, so I have to stop here.

Last but not least, lots of poetry is embodied in Volume 320: Suburban Sacrifices, Outstanding Flowers of Literary Garden. Moreover, some poems of the "Heaven Sacrifice" are directly relevant to sacrificial rites. In addition, unearthed literature such as Dunhuang Literature, stele inscription and epitaphs as well as results of researches on these is enriching the research on Tang's ritual literature. In Dunhuang Literature, over 250 elegiac addresses and more than 100 essays on rite, over 10 inscriptions and more than 10 epigraphs. All these literature provide us the first-hand material to explore and describe the clues of development of ritual literature in Tang Dynasty, significantly accelerating recognition and restructuring of the Tang's ritual literature.

### III. DESCRIPTION OF RITUAL LITERATURE BY SUBURBAN SACRIFICIAL RITES

Tang's ritual literature has both ritual and literary connotations. Especially, sacrificial songs, prose-poems and suchlike, involve exceedingly abundant sacrificial rites. These works represent imposing scenes of various sacrificial ceremonies, discuss specific rites or explore the meaning behind ceremonies. Here I take suburban sacrifice for example:

Suburban sacrificial rite is important in "auspicious rites"(Sacrificial Rites).Record of Ritual Music, New History of Tang Dynasty writes, "Sacrifice shall be offered to The Reigning Sovereign in Heavens at the winter solstice and ancestors worshipped at ancestral temple in the first month of winter. The ritual ceremonies are respectively held at the altar and ancestral temple. Alas, there is no other sacrificial rite with more grandeur and more complete offerings!" Many poems of Tang depicted sacrificial ceremonies at the southern suburb. Wang Bo stated in his Ode to the Sacrifice Ceremony at the Southern Suburb (with Preface) in the 1st Year of Zongzhang Period, "I watch a grand ceremony at the southern suburb and enjoy divine achievement across the world." It indicates the ode was composed by Wang himself after watching the ceremony. The whole sacrificial ceremony follows the procedures: Check the auspicious day, clean up the palace, erect the altar in advance, arrange the carriage, practice fast and put sacrificial vessels night and day, offer sacrifices and burn them up. We can imagine how respectful and serious it looks by returning to the past.

In the 3rd Year of Jinglong Period, Zhongzong Emperor personally offered sacrifices at the southern suburb. Xu Yanbo gave his Ode to The Grand Sacrificial Ceremony at the Southern Suburb, a flowery prose-poem, to the emperor. According to its account, "The Queen participated in the ceremony and acted as assistant to the emperor." It clearly shows us the role of the Queen Wei on the ceremony. This agrees with the record that "The Queen played her role as

the sacrificial assistant on the sacrificial ceremony at the southern suburb on the 13th day of the lunar 11th month” in *New History of Tang Dynasty*. The queen’s assistance in suburban sacrificial ceremony, another event improving political status by sacrifice after Wu Zetian, suggests reform of rite owing to political change in the court at that time.

In the spring of the 10th Year of Tianbao Period, Xuanzong finished three grand sacrifices (in the Taiping Palace to Laozi, in Ancestral Temple to ancestors and at the Southern Suburb to Heaven and Earth). Du Fu “felt overjoyed and recorded his feelings of the three sacrificial ceremonies” by brilliant and broad *Three Odes to Royal Sacrificial Rites* to highly praise the emperor. In the ode to the sacrifice at the southern suburb, he continued the former expressions of these prose-poems such as meaning elucidation, course elaboration, scene description. However, he presented complainants about the reality and gave suggestions to state affairs in imaginary dialogue between the author and the emperor of the second part.

Xiao Yingshi’s *Ode to Sacrifice to the Reigning Sovereign in Heavens at the Winter Solstice* writes the high Tang dynasty when the emperor offered sacrifice to the deity to show his reign across China with all the ethnic groups’ submission and the complete ritual music. In Wenzong Emperor’s reign, Jia Su also composed a prose-poem of the same name. Present-day Chen Shuguo considers it a real-world account of the *Sacrifice to The Reigning Sovereign in Heavens*.

Besides prose-poems, many Tang poetic works record suburban sacrifices. Watching the Royal Parade back from the *Sacrifice at the Southern Suburb* by Xue Cuncheng, *Congratulations on Secretary Wang Jian Appointed the Assistant General for the Sacrifice at the Southern Suburb* by Zhang Ji, *Impromptu of Being Appointed the Assistant of the Sacrifice at the Southern Suburb on the Winter Solstice* by Quan Deyu are all composed according to their participation in or appreciation of the sacrificial ceremony, vividly showing the ceremonious suburban sacrifices from Dezong Emperor’s reign to that of Xuanzong Emperor.

Men of letters in the Tang Dynasty also sang the praises of *Sacrifice at the Hall of Brilliance*. Ethereal as he is, Li Bai ever wrote *Ode to the Hall of Brilliance*. As the grandest sacrificial ceremony for mountains and rivers, sacrifice in Mount Tai to Heaven is most praised by Tang’s men of letter. All the civil and military officials, financial envoys, kinsmen of the emperor as well as litterateurs requested for the sacrifice to heavens and composed many prose-poems and odes. These literary works amounted to “over 1000 throughout the sacrificial ceremony”. Ritual literature is mainly characterized by these heyday works’ elaboration on grand occasions such as the ceremonies of Suburban Sacrifice, Sacrifice to Heavens and Sacrifice at the Hall of Brilliance.

#### IV. CULTURAL VALUE OF RITUAL LITERATURE

As a vivid account of traditional Chinese “rite”, ritual literature has irreplaceable values. The value of Tang’s ritual literature, above all, lies in its identity as historical

material. To be specific, ritual literature’s record and description of sacrificial rites provide a great help to learn vicissitudes in thought and culture of Tang society and research Tang’s rite system. So, it has very high values. Various grand ceremonies held by the Tang Dynasty are all indispensable representations of royalty orthodox and great reunification. Sacrificial songs, orations, prayers and prose-poems record, keep and disseminate the regulations and ceremonies of sacrifices.

Next, ritual literature has cultural value for research on Tang literature. It greatly enriches Tang literature so that the mindset and work of Tang’s litterateurs can be read. In the Tang Dynasty, the feudal court emphasized sacrificial songs for its functions including harmony between heaven and earth, praise of the emperor’s achievements. After reviewing those songs, we can find most songs for suburban and temple sacrifices were written by important officials or poets. These men of letter were “close to the center of royalty”, but also called “the higher intelligentsia”. So, these are not only works on which Tang literature directly researches, but also important references for researching into Tang’s literary creation. In these works, we can probe into litterateurs’ living state behind ritual culture to help give an explanation closer to historical truth for Tang literature.

Third, ritual literature’s erudite, elegant cultural quality of the aristocracy enriches aesthetics of Tang culture. We view the aesthetical spirit of mainstream traditional Chinese culture. “Advocated abolished rites, restored lost music...throughout the year.” Sacrificial rites reflect the reality of state peace and unrest. Flourishing ritual literature represented by prose-poem and ode shows an aesthetic state of gentleness, serenity and harmony in ritual culture. It reflects the mainstream ideology which takes aesthetic taste of the imperial court and scholar-gentry as orthodox and persists in real-world cultural order and code. The “elegant, pure” artistic spirit just represents Confucian aesthetics.

However, I thought the deep cultural value of Tang’s ritual literature lies in showing us traditional Chinese mores and thought by unique literary aesthetics. Reading these works helps us to develop a rational, ethical and positive outlook on life. Wang Guowei once said, “System and rite are the tool of morality.” [8] To explore continuity value of ritual literature, we have to mention the morality and humanism of ritual literature when dating back to its origin. Just as Chen Lai says, “Further the culture develops, less classical meaning the classics have, and more important value meaning they have.” [9] Integrating traditional thought experience to serve the present is an important means of cultural continuity. This notion complies with our present spiritual need and social environment. Literature vividly reflects morality and humanism of ritual culture’s connotation so as to properly affect our souls, purify our emotions and stimulate our will power by rite cultivation. Only in this way can value of ritual literature be truly represented.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In a word, Tang’s ritual literature not only provides us

no simple literary depiction, but account of great historical value. Analyzing and using rites in Tang literature help present the rite system and ritual standards to give more materials for researching into the rite system. Moreover, discussing development of Tang literature from the angle of changes in Tang rite system and interpreting Tang's literature from the wide perspective of culturology provide a great help for disclosing its in-depth cause. Besides, properly interpreting and elucidating humanistic and aesthetic value of ritual literature make significant contributions to cultural continuity and value orientation of ritual literature.

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