

# A Defense of Form: Internet Memes and Confucian Ritual

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**Abstract:** By applying the normative basis of Confucian ritual activity to the repeatable designs of internet memes, this essay explores the ways in which socially recognized forms can allow individuals to engage in thoughtful activity with what is represented by but cannot be reduced to form: the particulars of human experience. The goal of this insight is to suggest that the value of art and ideas cannot be isolated from how individuals interact with them, and thus critique should examine how well an idea or piece promotes an active, creative, and critical relationship to a person's own experiences.

To a generation that spends a large amount of time on the internet, memes have become a part of life. Although they appear infrequently on professionally-minded websites, one click into the realm of social networks, blogs, and forums reveals that internet memes are posted and referenced almost constantly. The notable internet meme research website *Know Your Meme* explains, "Internet memes have risen in popularity with the rise of Internet Culture as more and more people identify with and participate on the Web as their primary method of expression and content consumption."<sup>1</sup> Given their prominence in modern entertainment and communication, memes undoubtedly have cultural importance and should be subject to critique. But what about them can we critique?

To answer this question, we must first know what makes a meme. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a meme as "a cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance

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<sup>1</sup> "About Know Your Meme," *Know Your Meme*, accessed December 8, 2013, <http://knowyourmeme.com/about>.



of a gene.”<sup>2</sup> In simpler terms, *Know Your Meme* describes an internet meme as “a piece of content or an idea that’s passed from person to person, changing and evolving along the way.”<sup>3</sup> According to both descriptions, the nature of a meme is organic—it is a cultural process akin to the biological processes that perpetuate life by creating diversity. The key attribute of a meme, then, is the way that its common form is used differently in each reproduction. Each type of internet meme has recurring elements by which it can be recognized. These elements might include a repeated image or character, a common text or speech pattern, an expected action that takes place, a specific graphic layout, or other similar structures of content. Because the formula of a meme is explicit, those familiar with a meme recognize its reproductions by name even more easily than one might recognize the genre of any work of art, film, or literature. Thus, the savvy viewer already understands the way the meaning is meant to be portrayed. The form provides the context for the jokes or observations that each individual meme is making with the content that is not already prescribed by the form, including any breaks from the expected form. Over time, these individual changes become part of the general form of the meme, as new versions of a meme are inevitably made with the old versions in mind. In this way, memes maintain an awareness of their own history; they bear the stamp of their genealogy in each particular creation.

Let us look at an example. An internet meme that has recently been popular is referred to as “Doge,” which is, according to *Know Your Meme*, “a slang term for ‘dog’ that is primarily associated with pictures of Shiba Inus (nicknamed ‘Shibe’) and internal monologue captions.”<sup>4</sup> Typically, a manipulated photo of a Shiba Inu will include text in the Comic Sans font scattered across the image, with formulaic words such as “wow,” “much,” “such,” and “so” paired with words, occasionally misspelled, that are related to what is happening in the image. Part of the humor is derived from the cuteness or oddness of the dog’s expression and imagining the pronunciations of the words. The text is often implied to represent what the “doge” is thinking. To make one’s own version of a “doge,” one would begin by taking an image of a

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<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “meme,” accessed November 20, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/239909>.

<sup>3</sup> “About Know Your Meme.”

<sup>4</sup> “Doge,” *Know Your Meme*, accessed February 9, 2014, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doge>.

dog and similarly captioning it by following these rules. There are then many things one might choose to do to make this "doge" different than the normal instance of the meme, such as how one manipulates the image of the "doge," what setting it is placed in, and what kinds of words are chosen to fill in the captions.

This example might already have one wondering: what is the point of an internet meme? Some might suggest that memes are a low form of art or even question if we can refer to them as art at all. They are a logical product of the internet age, successfully propagated because they are instantly understandable, extremely repeatable, and easily sharable. People catch on quickly, become fluent in the rules, and soon feel like a clever member of a community from the comfort of their own homes. On a cultural stage that is democratically accessible to all (at least, to all with internet access), memes appear to be the lowest common denominator, a medium that asks little of both its audience and its creators. Many would argue that this makes them trivial or reduces their meaning. But if we want to remain critical towards meme culture, we should neither write off memes as harmless entertainment nor approach them with the instinctive resistance we often have toward popular culture. We first need to have a good argument as to what about them can have value or be problematic.

This task is not specific to memes, of course, but I believe that internet memes have an explicit awareness of their own forms that makes them unique. This awareness, I will argue, actually gives them the potential to have great expressive value, a value that can easily be overlooked by a deconstructive postmodern worldview that asks us to be resistant to forms and their biases. Because memes use a repeated form as a means for expression, I find them to be reminiscent of the account of ritual action in Confucianism as described in *The Analects of Confucius*.<sup>5</sup> I will use the ideas of this tradition to examine how the familiarity of a repeatable form can be used positively and creatively, which in turn will provide a standard by which we can productively critique memes and other popular culture trends.

At first, Confucianism sounds nothing like internet memes. Confucianism is an ancient Chinese philosophical system that seeks to make virtues and ethics into an achievable practice. It is a methodology for cultivating an ideal communal existence and passing

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<sup>5</sup> Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., trans., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).



it down to others. Internet memes, on the other hand, are images or other media files that require little practice or technical skill to make, and they rarely aspire to do more than entertain. A “doge” is not likely to have a significant impact on one’s ethical approach to the world. Despite the dissimilarity, the two concepts share common traits in their methods of expression. In the *Analects*, *li* or “ritual propriety” is what most directly provides a blueprint for how one should act in order to achieve the ideal Confucian existence, and it is what I find analogous to the forms of memes.<sup>6</sup> In short, *li* is the ritual tradition that guides proper actions and interactions in social circumstances. Though the norms of *li* during Confucius’s time are not described in detail in the *Analects*, the purpose of adhering to *li* is frequently discussed. It is this purpose that will give us a way to articulate the potential value of cultural objects such as internet memes.

In Confucianism, *li* serves as a vehicle for positive personal transformation because it improves interpersonal expression. To explain this interpretation of *li*, we must first discuss what the self is to Confucianism. According to Tu Weiming, Confucian thought believes that personhood cannot be realized in isolation from others because “human beings come into existence through symbolic interchange.”<sup>7</sup> It is the expressing and sharing of meaning in a communal setting that creates the individual in any sense that can be considered human, given that a reflective self-awareness cannot develop without relating to other perspectives. Subsequently, Confucianism wishes to create effective relational beings. This does not simply mean that a person is able to communicate with others, but that all relationships are understood not to the extent that they are useful for personal gain but to the extent that other people have their own perspectives as well. To successfully be a person is to be attentive to other people, a mode of being that is best represented by the concept of *ren*. *Ren* is often translated as “benevolence,”<sup>8</sup> but, as Tu notes, it is perhaps more meaningful for Confucian thought when it is considered as “co-humanity.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>7</sup> Weiming Tu, “Jen as a Living Metaphor in the Confucian *Analects*,” *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1985), 82.

<sup>8</sup> Sin Yee Chan, “Can *Shu* be the One Word that Serves as the Guiding Principle of Caring Action?” *Philosophy East and West* 50.4 (2000): 508.

<sup>9</sup> Weiming, “Jen as a Living Metaphor in the Confucian *Analects*,” 84.

Since knowing others requires understanding how to treat them ethically, being humane and empathetic is entailed within the Confucian idea of a social existence.

If the truest nature of humanity is the social aspect of experience, then personhood in the highest sense—to live based on an attunement to intersubjectivity, or in a state of *ren*—is only achieved when a social awareness is integrated seamlessly into one's activity without the need for abstract reasoning or forced attention. According to Confucianism, we are most human when we internalize what it means to be a person within a community. Achieving *ren* requires making meaningful interpersonal conduct into a habit, and this is the purpose of *li*. As a reproducible system of suggested actions, *li* sets defined and mutually accepted parameters for expressing respect and the personal nature of relationships. Instead of rendering expression trivial and impersonal, *li* is meant to provide clarity without reducing meaning. Its ability to do so can be found in the process of mastering *li*. Simply reproducing the forms of *li* does not mean that one has reached an intersubjective awareness that can be considered *ren*. *Li* is a method that is used in the process of achieving *ren*, but it does not constitute *ren* in itself. The *Analects* are rich with metaphors about music that serve to help clarify this process. To become truly talented in music, "one begins by playing in unison and then goes on to improvise with purity of tone and distinctness and flow, thereby bringing all to completion."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, one first apprentices oneself to *li* so that he or she can learn the shapes required to effectively perform and communicate within the established tradition. Only once these shapes are understood can the purpose of the form be understood on a greater level, allowing nuanced expression through innovation and improvisation within *li*.

This innovation is derived from the specific experiences of the individual as opposed to the rules of tradition, translating subjective insight into actions that make it understandable and compelling to others. In this manner, *li* turns from a rigid set of patterned activity that one must learn into a system with a fullness of expressive meaning and emotion, allowing for an individual aesthetic style to arise in each particular action. Though *li* provides the structured context necessary for communal understanding and the directed training necessary to integrate a social awareness into one's daily action, the style of this action is meant to be individualized so that *ren* can be expressed.

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<sup>10</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 88.



Chenyang Li compares *li* to the grammar that allows language to convey meaning, making fluency analogous to the mastery of *ren*.<sup>11</sup> Li writes, “Whereas *li* has an emphasis on social objectivity, just as grammar has an emphasis on linguistic commonality, *ren* has an emphasis on human subjectivity.”<sup>12</sup> Similar to the way that poetry can create meaning by breaking the rules of grammar, one who has achieved *ren* has the ability to shape and alter the actions of *li* based on their attuned understanding of human interactions. Deviations from form are unintelligible if the form is not first known, but once a community has grasped the forms of the language or of *li*, any deviations can be communally understood as a resistance to the form in order to favor *ren*. Even within *li*, true feelings are meant to be the core of what guides action and not the details of *li*. “In mourning,” the *Analects* say, “it is better to express real grief than to worry over formal details,”<sup>13</sup> and likewise, the value of “polite language” is not for the sake of being polite alone but “in drawing out its meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Confucius would often consider the “appropriateness” (*yi*) of rituals, and he tells us that questioning *li* “is itself observing ritual propriety.”<sup>15</sup> This suggests that the system of *li*, though it must be consistent in order to maintain a common meaning, is still meant to be questioned critically so that it retains the affective nature of expression and remains relevant to interpersonal dynamics.

Just as an understanding of *ren* treats the self as a network of context with other people, achieving *ren* is not something that affects only the individual. It is perhaps for this reason that Ames and Rosemont chose to translate *ren* specifically as “authoritative conduct”<sup>16</sup> in their translation of the *Analects*. The choice implies that the individual who has achieved *ren* is an innovator, an author of *li*, and also that they impact others in a way that carries authority. This authority contributes to how others understand *li* and human intersubjectivity. A person who has mastered *li*, according to Tu, is “exemplifying a form of life worth living . . . by establishing a standard of self-transformation as a source

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<sup>11</sup> Chenyang Li, “*Li* as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between *Li* and *Ren* in Confucius’ *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 57.3 (2007): 317.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>13</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 83.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

of inspiration for the human community as a whole."<sup>17</sup> The rituals of *li* gain their efficacy for expressing human experience because they are shaped by those humans who have achieved a compelling understanding of interpersonal living and are able to demonstrate it authoritatively. They provide not just a model for the realization of the individual but for the type of activity required to achieve community. As Tu writes, it is the "active participation in recognizing, experiencing, interpreting, and representing the communicative rationality that defines society as a meaningful community."<sup>18</sup> Thus, the self, constituted by communal relationships, creates the community that in turn, through the shaping of *li*, gives the individual a way to express, and thus realize, the self. It is this reciprocity that reflects what the *Analects* deem "the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety"—"achieving harmony (*he*)."<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, the Confucian mode of being allows for experience to be shared without reducing our understanding of ourselves to the abstraction that is required by the very act of expression. It is always aware that there is something more than form within experience that cannot be adequately generalized and expressed completely. This awareness comes from the way it maintains a dialogue between *ren* and *li*—and subsequently between style and rules, experience and expression, self and others, and subjectivity and objectivity. A form is made familiar to a community so that the individual, unfamiliar, irreducible experience of a person can be expressed as something new and yet related to the experience of others. This leads others to examine their own experience and become creative, attentive beings.

The similarities between internet memes and *li* have hopefully become apparent. Both involve a community choosing to adopt and follow guidelines so that specific acts can have a common context upon which creative expression can be exchanged. Even a simple "doge" is a relatively complex object of communal fluency, representing a tradition while adding to a continuing conversation. A significant difference, of course, still stands: the tradition that a "doge" participates in seems much less important and valuable than the Confucian tradition. This is, to a degree, undeniable. With my comparison, I do not mean to

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<sup>17</sup> Weiming Tu, "Embodying the Universe: A Note on Confucian Self-Realization," ed. Roger T. Ames, *Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), 183.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 74.



imply that internet memes are the tools that will allow humankind to achieve a new mode of being. I am, however, suggesting that the repetitive and seemingly low-brow nature of many modern cultural trends is not inherently problematic.

If creations such as internet memes use their reproducible forms as a means to express something more complex than their form, then they, like the actions of *li*, can be vehicles of meaning that put us in touch with human experience, even if their typically simplistic and flippant nature might prejudice us to believe otherwise. Their accessibility means that it is easier for more people to actively participate in the community by creating their own versions without simply replicating what other people have made. On the other hand, we can now see the problems that come from engaging in nothing more than replication—an act which is inevitable within any sizeable community. Form can become arbitrary and disengaging when it arrests the viewer at familiarity; people can consume unthinkingly and begin to understand their lives in terms of externally-prescribed forms instead of using the forms as a way to create their own terms. To speak in someone else's terms without using them to say something new is like following the rituals of *li* as if they are simply rules that must be met and then thinking that one has gained a nuanced understanding of oneself and other people in the process. Such a relationship to form prevents people from having a genuine awareness of themselves and their relationships, which, in Confucianism, prevents them from achieving personhood—their expressive stagnation reflects a lack of individuality.

How might these positive and negative implications look with our “doge” example? It is easy to imagine a “doge” meme that fails to be original or funny. Once one has encountered a number of “doges,” examples that do not add to the form or involve an unexpected twist are bound to be found boring. It might feel like the creator is trying too hard to participate. The people who make such memes are not exemplifying an expressive fluency within the community, for they do not recognize what it is that makes the meme humorous. There must be more than a dog sitting in the same place as the last “doge” meme, with the words slightly altered—perhaps much more than this if one is not a big fan of the “doge” meme. A successful “doge” meme, on the other hand, might cause one to see something normally taken seriously through the eyes of a silly dog with an odd speech pattern, revealing something new and unexpected about it. Instead of encountering

this situation through the lens of that “doge” meme, however, it is encountered with the added experience that the meme presented, making one look at the experience in more, as opposed to fewer, ways and presenting new creative tools to express what is seen. A meme that succeeds in doing this could be described as authoritative—an exemplification of *ren*.

From these cases, we see that a positive or negative relationship to cultural objects is not inherent in the object but in the way that people use the forms given to them. We can find productive and creative ways to look at our own experience using just about anything if we look hard enough, but those creations that present everything as familiar and repeatable can be seductive when their forms provide all of the answers and ask only for passivity. Contrastingly, when memes and other cultural objects hold up to reflective examination and are made authoritatively and compellingly, they can promote an empathetic relationship to others, an active, creative and critical mode of being, and the very attainment of self. It is the capacity of art to allow us to exercise our selfhood that we should seek in cultural objects when we set ourselves to the critical task. By making our own memes to express our own insights, we can become (at least slightly) more human.

