

"Popular customs vary greatly... The sage [Confucius] said that to secure the ease of superiors and bring order to the people, nothing is better than ceremony.... [I]f 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.... The essence of ceremony is contained in the word '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 [respect and obedience] towards parents, honor and respect for superiors, [and] harmony between husband and wife ... This proves that internally you already possess the basic elements of ceremony and deference.... If you could really, in dealing with others, be extremely cooperative, in conducting yourselves be extremely obliging... 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....

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.... 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 . . . Craftsmen are also quick to get into violent quarrels.... 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...

As to you soldiers living in camp, you can't avoid having rough and crude personalities ... 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....

In an ancient book it says, 'The humble gain; 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" (297-300).

-Wang Youpu, excerpt from "Exhortations on Ceremony and Deference"