In early medieval China, among its upper classes, no religious ceremonies were more frequently performed and had a greater impact on daily life than the ancestral rites. Sacrifices to the ancestors punctuated the calendar, sanctioned the institutions of marriage and concubinage, and periodically reminded the living of their lifelong debt to those who came before them. One could argue that it was the most fundamental and universal form of religious worship in China. Regardless of social class, no matter who one was, one esteemed and made offerings to his departed kin. ¹ Furthermore, unhappy ancestors were not to be toyed with—they could have an adverse effect on the fortune and fate of oneself and one’s family. For rulers, since their powerful ancestors helped secure their present fortune, how and which ancestors were to be honored was an important political issue—one that often occasioned vigorous court debate. Despite the obvious significance of these rites, beyond the earliest period of Chinese history, Western scholars have written relatively little about them, especially about the form they took during the early medieval period. In other words, we only have a vague sense of how these rituals were performed and what their participants saw themselves as doing. We take it for granted that, at the very least, the upper classes had been performing these rituals for a long time and that the rites themselves changed little. We also assume that rulers undertook these rites because they legitimated their power, but it is not entirely clear how these rites did so. This chapter’s purpose is to explore in what ways and to what extent the ancestral rites were practiced in early medieval China (AD 100–600), as well as how these ceremonies were connected to the conveyance of political legitimacy.²

¹ Although commoners probably only worshipped their own most recent deceased kin, such as their father and grandfather, they would have regarded this as being akin to the sacrifices that the upper classes dedicated to more remote ancestors.

² My concern with the ancestral rites and political legitimacy has been inspired by Howard J. Wechsler’s pioneering study Offerings of jade and silk: ritual and symbol in the legitimation of the T’ang dynasty (New Haven, 1985).
In her seminal investigation of the jiao (suburban) sacrifice, Marianne Bujard has demonstrated that this hoary ceremony, in which the Son of Heaven presents offerings to Heaven in the capital’s southern suburb, was not ancient at all; instead, it was largely the brainchild of the Confucian Dong Zhongshu (197–104 BC). Moreover, it did not become a fixed part of imperial religion until Wang Mang (45 BC–AD 23) was China’s paramount leader. In a similar manner, my main contention is that the ancestral sacrifices that were current in the early medieval period had been in effect for only a short time. In fact, in terms of ceremonial practice, it was during the early medieval period that the ancestral sacrifices set out in the Ru ("Confucian") ritual codes became the ritual practice of both the rulers and upper classes. In other words, it was during this era that the basic features of Chinese religious life, such as ancestor worship and mourning practices, became Ru-ized, or put into vernacular English, Confucianized. This happened because the weak monarchs of this period were in dire need of supernatural and classical legitimatization; at the same time, eminent local families found Ru doctrines conducive to managing their increasingly complex households. The result was a warm embrace of Confucian rituals that would last for the rest of imperial China’s history.

My argument will proceed in the following manner: To give the reader a sense of the Ru interpretation of the ancestral rites, the first part of the chapter furnishes an idealized vision of the forms and activities of ancestral worship that the various Ru theoretical works articulated. To show that actual practice differed from Ru theory, the chapter’s second part briefly examines the ancestral rites put into effect by the Han dynasty’s imperial family. The third part looks at how early medi-

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3 See her Le sacrifice au Ciel dans la Chine ancienne: théorie et pratique sous les Han occidentaux (Paris, 2000).
4 Kaneko Shuichi, Kodai Chûgoku to kôtei saishi (Tokyo, 2001), pp. 94–99.
5 For me Ru 儒 means a “scholar of the kingly way”. That kingly way was the exemplary words, deeds, and rituals of the early Western Zhou kings, which could be found in the classics. For a fuller discussion of why I translate Ru in this way, see my “New approaches to teaching early Confucianism,” Teaching theology and religion 2.1 (1999), 45–54; 45–46.
6 In my book, Selfless offspring: filial children and social order in medieval China (Honolulu, 2005), I have argued that the transition from the Western Han to the Western Jin was a particularly important one because it witnessed the rise of Confucianism as the dominant ritual program and ideology of the educated elite. In particular, I show how the three-year mourning rites only became the ritual practice of the upper class in the Wei-Jin period. See chapters one and six.