

Changes in Grassroots Publicity and Funeral Rites in Rural Areas

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ABSTRACT. *Rural funeral rites exert a profound impact on information exchanges and social interactions taking place in the rural society, and play a significant role in shaping people's ethical perceptions and carrying forward traditional cultures and customs. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, a variety of approaches have been utilized by rural grassroots organizations in their publicity work aiming to transform outmoded habits and customs. These publicity efforts have been focused on the reform of funeral ritual practices. In this paper, a case of the Wangjiafangqian Village in Lyncan County, Shandong Province is presented to explore the characteristics of the changes in funeral rites and their underlying causes from the perspective of publicity conducted by grassroots organization.*

KEYWORDS: *Ethnography; Rural grassroots organization; Rural communication, Changes in rite practices*

1. Case description

Located in the south of Shandong Province alongside its border with Jiangsu, Wangjiafangqian Village is a place with typical characteristics of China's northern rural areas. Accessible to sophisticated transport networks and infrastructure facilities, the village has a population of 1960, and most of the residents are employed in the stone processing industry. There are three reasons why Wangjiafangqian Village is selected as the location where the ethnographic case study in this paper is conducted: 1) The village is the hometown of the author, who, as a member of the "villagers", is very "familiar with the local language, religious beliefs and values" and thus is able to "provide a deeper insight based on the local environment"; 2) The village is characterized by strong lineage influences, low population mobility and well-preserved traditional rites. 3) As a part of the former Yimeng revolutionary base areas, the village has a large wealth of "red" history. Thus, an examination of the publicity implemented by the village's rural grassroots organization is of great typicality and representativeness.

2. Content and channels of publicity conducted by rural grassroots organizations

The reform of funeral practices in the village can be divided into two stages. The first stage spans from the 1950s to the 1990s. During this period, the reform was mainly focused on the forms by which funerals were conducted. The reform measures mainly included implementing cremation, carrying out tomb flattening to restore land, constructing cinerary halls, and prohibiting extravagant funeral ceremonies such as hiring musicians and burning paper as sacrificial offerings. The second stage spans from the 1990s up to date. During this period, emphasis was placed on publicity aiming to transform the outmoded habits and custom, guide the masses to be more generous in caring the old rather than spend lavishly in funerals, and advocate thrifty funerals. Comparing the specific content of the reform in these two stages, one could see that the focus of the funeral reform has been gradually transforming from specific forms of rites towards an advocacy of change in concepts and ideas. In that process, the emphasis is shifted from luxurious burials of the deceased to the “general care” of the living. In 2017, a wedding and funeral council was established in the village, which is an organization responsible for supervising and managing affairs relating to weddings and funerals, and conducting active publicity on transforming outmoded habits and customs. The publicity on transforming outmoded habits and customs is mainly implemented through the following three channels in the village.

First, the interpersonal communication channel. Under the leadership of the village's party branch, the villagers' committee and wedding and funeral council have taken a leading role in publicizing the necessity to transform outmoded habits and customs. Immediately after its establishment, the villagers' committee started to hand out flyers door to door to inform villagers of the criteria about “how to hold weddings in a new way and funerals in a thrifty way”, placing particular emphasis on explicit prohibitions concerning “hiring musicians and holding lavish feasts” so as to achieve to goal of a “full coverage of every household and villager”. Members of the villagers' committee are mostly from the same lineage. With a consanguineous and geographical intimacy, villagers hold a natural preference to village cadres from their own lineage and maintain a more intimate relationship with them. When publicity is conducted through the interpersonal communication channel, the fact that the publicity workers who are propagating content like “prohibition over hiring musicians or lavish weddings and funerals” are “acquaintances” from the same lineage would significantly influence the degree to which villagers are willing to accept the publicity content. Such a lineage-structure rural society has fully penetrated to the fabric of the rural grassroots organization. In the face of etiquette and favor, people are often willing to sacrifice some rational cultural traits like principle, justice and fairness, regardless of the cost associated with the law and contract.

Second, the mass media channel. In its quest to transform outmoded habits and customs, the government of Lvnan County urged to use a variety forms of publicity, for example, “delivering radio broadcast to every village and TV programs to every

household”, “operating publicity vehicles operated at a daily basis” and “painting colored slogans on every wall”, to vigorously publicize the significance of establishing and consolidating the wedding and funeral councils and implementing thrifty and civilized procedures in wedding and funeral affairs, so as to guide the general masses to rid of bad habits and build a new, civilized and thrifty custom. Outdoor print media like wall paintings, huge posters and banners mainly contain background images featuring the rural life scenes, with slogans that are structurally symmetrical and catchy, for example, “build new customs through generous care and thrifty funerals, and carry forward the virtue of respecting and supporting the old”, and “provide communal dishes in funeral to save money by tens of thousands yuan”. These plane media are mostly distributed in places with high density of villager activities, with their content not being replaced over a long period of time. Thus, they have already imbedded into villagers’ living scenes, exerting an imperceptible influence on villagers’ perceptions towards relevant policies. The loudspeaker in the village is mainly used to broadcast information relating to village affairs, or inform villagers of participating a variety of public activities. To villagers who are relatively less educated and maintain relatively monotonous daily activities, these rurally characteristic media channels serve as an effective complement to the content propagated through the interpersonal communication channel, especially when the publicity content has not been effectively conveyed.

Third, the network channel. The Internet and smart phones have been highly popularized in rural areas, and WeChat has risen to be the most popular app among local villagers. As an instant messaging application with chatting as its basic function, WeChat can effectively meet villagers’ need to maintain contact with their friends and relatives, and increase their emotional bonds. With social network relationships established on WeChat, not only a communication channel has been established, but also an open, transparent and participative public space available to everybody has been constructed. In normal times, members of the villagers’ committee utilize WeChat groups to exchange work-related information with village cadres from other villages of Fangqian Town or to make work schedules; the township government also publish latest work instructions or require grassroots village cadres to upload images or videos that are able to reflect how relevant work is progressed in WeChat groups, so that performance evaluation could be carried out based on such information. WeChat work groups not only significantly improves the efficiency of grassroots administrative organizations, but also plays an effective role in supervising their work.

3. Changes in rural funeral rites

Traditional funeral rites, as a large system consisting of various types of practices that can span as long as a few years, have been relatively well preserved in the locality. Funeral rites examined in this paper only concern practices implemented over the period from death to burial. The traditional rite procedures include “dressing, road directing, soup offering, encoffining, guarding the corpse, mourning, travelling expenses offering, kneeling courtesy and funeral procession. Each step is

conducted in strict accordance with the correct “hours”. After years of publicity on transforming outmoded habits and customs, the changes in funeral rites in the village mainly present the following characteristics:

First, simplified specific rite details. A complete procedure of funeral rites has been basically carried forth in the village, however, the nitty-gritty details relating to sub-rite steps have been greatly simplified. For example, in the original rites, there were strict requirements on body movements and gestures over courteous practices like “thrice kneeling and nine times bowing” in order to convey a respect to the deceased. Today, requirements on postures have been significantly loosened, and bowing and even nodding, to some extent, is practiced to replace kneeling. Different degrees of simplification of each detail, in the end, significantly reduce the length of the entire rites, thereby lowering the degree of fatigue felt by rites participants. Compared with the former “ten-day rites for regular families” and “over a month of rites for big families” from death to final burial, today’s rites only last 3 to 7 days. Although operative details of some sub-rites can be simplified, the integrity of the entire rite process has been preserved.

Second, “modernized” sacrificial offerings. Since the 1950s, the publicity on transforming outmoded habits and customs has never been stopped, and mandatory prohibitions were even reinforced over practices like “burning paper objects” or “hiring musicians”. However, instead of disappearing completely, these sacrificial practices have been replaced, for example, by audio equipment. Nonetheless, the original “drum” music is still played throughout the entire rite process, representing a compromise of villagers after their failed attempt to disobey the mandatory reform policies. Ritual scholar Rodney Needham argues that the sound produced by musical instruments in rituals influences participants’ emotional and sentimental experience, and such sounds usually bear distinct meanings. Although hiring musicians is explicitly banned, the music is able to regain its presence as sound symbols through the carrier of modern audio players.

Third, increasingly prominent roles played by females in rites. With the implementation of the one-child policy and increasing social status of women, the roles of females in funeral rites are rising to be more prominent from the initially hidden corners. Some of the rite procedures that were originally only be practiced by sons can now be replaced by daughters. With respect to sacrificial offerings, the original “everlasting light” representing sons start to have its substitute – the “daughter light” – in recent years. Behind these rites are values and conceptions of the entire group. Therefore, when villagers’ values change, the rite practices will also be changed accordingly. Although females still play a secondary role in the front-stage funeral ceremony, their presence has gained nevertheless a qualitative leap from nothing to something.

4. Conclusion

The rural society is characterized by its closeness, a reason why traditional rites and customs can be relatively completely preserved. In feudal societies, the

closeness of the rural society was caused by poor transport conditions, ineffective information communication and low education levels of villagers. In modern times, however, such a closeness is mostly caused by their traditional mindset. Instead of entirely disrupting the old lifestyle, modern technology has been used to update the traditional lifestyle.

In that regard, we can understand the particular characteristics that have emerged amid such changes of rites: powerful publicity actors are more persuasive than publicity content; a variety of modern life necessities have emerged in paper object offerings; and audio equipment have replaced musicians. These represent not only a comprise arising from useless resistance to policies, but also a continuity of the old, entrenched mindset. The process in which the role of females gradually emerges from the “backstage” to the “frontstage” indicates that the change in people’s conception could lead to a spontaneous change in the form of rite practices.

Traditional Chinese culture has a special “ultra-stable structure”. In the rural society, villagers are the best examples of such a fundamentally spontaneous and natural characteristic that acts as a stubborn resistant force against reforms and transitions. While conducting publicity work, rural grassroots organizations should gain a profound insight to the deep cultural structure of rural society and utilize scientific, rational thinking approaches to actively guide villagers out of the closed loop of thinking. How to grasp such a deep structure and provide better services to villagers is still a pressing question needing to be addressed.

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