

Mortuary Ritual Practices and Socio-cultural Changes in Rural China

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ABSTRACT Based on the ethnographic data collected in a rural village in Chongqing, this paper discusses changes and continuity of mortuary ritual practices in this village and uses it as a window to show socio-cultural changes that this rural community has gone through since 1949. The researcher has found that death ritual in the village has kept its basic traditional structure, but the performance of many rites is simplified and symbolic meaning of many rites has lost, especially among young villagers. The researcher argues that the contemporary sociocultural structure in this village consists of two distinctive components: traditional practices and beliefs, and the newly introduced ideology and values by the party-state and market economy.

INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal inevitability, but human responses are different. How people deal with death has always been closely studied by social scientists, because “customary responses to death provide an important opportunity for sensitive probing into the nature of human life” (Huntington and Metcalf 1991:25). Death-related beliefs and practices provide a window for viewing a society’s social organizations, cultural values, and worldviews. With a long-term perspective, this window can also allow us to see mechanisms of culture change and cultural adaptation to new socio-economic circumstances.

Mortuary ritual played an important role in traditional Chinese society. For over two thousand years, traditional death ritual that followed rich Confucian ritual canons was promoted by officials and educated elites. However, after the Chinese Communist Party came to power in China in 1949, the traditional death ritual was regarded as superstitious and as relics of feudalistic society. It was banned officially from being practiced. In the early 1980s, as China started its rural reform, the traditional death ritual was quickly revived in rural communities across China. What today’s death ritual looks like in rural China? What socio-cultural changes that rural China has gone through in the last three decades are reflected in the ritual practice? What is the contemporary socio-cultural structure in

the village? This paper aims to address these questions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Site and Methods

The ethnographic data for this paper were collected in a village in Chongqing Municipality in southwestern China from 1998 to 2013. In 1998, the researcher spent about one year at the village and then paid a few short visits to the village till 2013. Xie Village is located at the northeast edge of Chongqing Municipality. Xie is the surname for the largest kin group in this village. It has a small old ancestral room that hosted their *jiashen* (family gods). Sacrifice of incense and mock paper money is offered to the gods by individual families on important occasions such as Chinese New Year or Qingming Festival. Xie Village had 114 households and 519 people in 1998. Today, it only has 56 households and 178 people according to the village registration record. China’s fast urbanization process in the past two decades has greatly reduced the village population. Many villagers have purchased houses in cities, thus becoming urban residents (*chengshi jumin*).

The research methods used in this study include literature review, open-ended in-depth interview, and collecting written materials used in mortuary ritual practices. Participant-observation is a useful method for this study, because this

study involves observations at funerals, graveyards, and temples. During the researcher's stay at the village, he attended two funerals, and participant-observed other rituals related to death and afterlife, such as visiting tombs on Chinese New Year's Day, offering sacrifice of mock paper money and incense to ancestors on Ghost Festival (in August), and worshipping deities at a local temple.

Informant interview is another method the researcher used in collecting data. After settling down in the village, he began to interview people on a random basis. The length of the interviews ranged from 2 hours to 20 minutes. They were all open-ended, and conducted in the local dialect in informants' home. Among all the interviews, four in-depth interviews with ritual specialists are the most important in reconstructing the sequence of mortuary ritual in the village. One was with a chief priest; one with a *hoban* (literally meaning person singing scripts with chief priest); one with a eulogy writer; one with a *yingyang* master (or geomancer). Besides the verbal data the researcher taped from the interviews, he also collected copies of scripts priests used at a funeral. The chief priest became the researcher's key informant. Whenever the researcher had problem understanding scripts or their performance, he would be the one to turn to. The researcher's close relationship with the specialists and interviews with them yielded a large amount of data related to the performance of funerary rites in the village that enabled the researcher to reconstruct a profile of death ritual in the village.

Data analysis is a process of resolving data into its constituent components so as to reveal its characteristic elements and structure (Dey 1993:30). For this study, the first step to analyze data is to know the data. Transcripts of the interviews, especially the interviews with the four ritual specialists were filed and labeled into various categories. Data within each category were compared. Further distinctions were made within each category so that sub-categories were created. Proper names were given to each category or sub-category according to properties or characteristics of a rite, ways the rite was performed, and the time it was performed. Having categorized the interviews, the researcher compared them in order to check the consistency and variation across informants. In order to get an accurate picture of the structure of the mortuary ritu-

als in the village, and to check the validity of interview data, the researcher compared the data in each category or sub-category of the interviews with the similar pieces of data in the researcher's field notes that recorded what the researcher observed at a funeral and in written ritual scripts that priests used at a funeral. By double-checking and cross-checking, the validity of the data is ensured. It provides a solid basis for reconstructing the mortuary ritual in the village and revealing the villagers' views of death and death ritual.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mortuary Ritual in Chinese Society: A Historical Review

Traditional Chinese society abounded with various family rituals, such as cappings, weddings, funerals, and ancestral rituals. These rituals conveyed the notions of patrilineality and assumptions about mutual dependence between the living and the dead that supported the traditional Chinese kinship system. Ideas of gender inequalities and social hierarchies that were basic to social relations beyond kinship in traditional Chinese society were also clearly demonstrated through the performance of these rituals. Anthropologist James Watson (1988:3) even argued that the standardization of family rituals, the most important being weddings and funerals, is central to the creation and maintenance of a unified Chinese culture. "What we accept today as 'Chinese' is in large part the product of a centuries-long process of ritual standardization" (Ebrey 1991:4). This standardization and increasing uniformity were promoted by the codification of these rituals by Confucian scholars and imperial state, and the popularization of Confucian ideology.

According to archaeological data, burial practices can be traced back to Paleolithic times. Archaeological sites at the Huanghe and Yangtze river valleys that were dated to this period yielded burial sites containing pottery artifacts and animal bones, suggesting the existence of belief in afterlife (Wang 1982:311-313). By Three Dynasties Period (2200 BC-256 BC), a complete set of ancestral sacrifice rituals had been established (Liu 1993:41). Both archaeological evidence and textual sources from this period show the importance of divination and sacrifices related to an-

cestors. People believed in the existence of another world where their deceased ancestors lived. Ancestral rituals provided the living with a means to communicate with their ancestors. Ancestors were believed to possess power to affect the welfare of their descendants. Even the worldly powers of kings were believed to depend on their ancestors' blessing. Thus, the ability to influence ancestral spirits seemed to affect the political powers of kings. Ancestral rituals also linked kings to their kinsmen (Ebrey 1991:15). The practice of ancestral worship became the privilege of kings and nobles in ancient China.

The ancestral and other family rituals performed in the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 B.C.) were carefully recorded in two early Confucian classics, *Li Ji* (Records of Ritual), and *Yi Li* (Etiquette and Rituals). *Yi Li* provided step-by-step instructions on how *shi* (lower rank officers or gentlemen) should perform family rituals such as capping, wedding, funeral and sacrificial rituals to ancestors. *Li Ji* provided interpretations of these rituals. Some of its chapters contain questions and answers on family rituals, with either Confucius or his disciples giving the answers. Other chapters were philosophical essays on ritual, morality, or government. They became the most authoritative written sources on family rituals for later generations. Scholars in later centuries who wished to analyze or formulate family rituals invariably drew from these texts, directly or indirectly.

Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) lived and taught in an age of political and social disorder, just before the Warring States Period when China was divided into several states involved in bitter power struggles among themselves. This was an age when some princes killed their king-fathers to obtain political power and wealth, and the social political structure was rapidly disintegrating. Confucius blamed all these to the total collapse of conventional *li* (ritual) and *yue* (music) established by the sage-ancestors in the early Zhou Period. Therefore, Confucius advocated vigorously to revive the rituals in order to save and maintain the civilization. *Li* (ritual) thus became a central concept in Confucius teaching. Ritual performance became one of the fundamental means to put Confucian doctrines of *zhong* (loyalty) and *xiao* (filial piety), social hierarchy and differentiation of gender roles into practice.

Though Confucius had great influence on Chinese family ritual, he was only concerned with

rituals for rulers, nobles, and high-ranking government and military officials. Family rituals of common people were treated as "relatively marginal in early theorizing on ritual" (Ebrey 1991:15). It reflected a social reality at that time. Imperial government set up strict regulations on the performance of family rituals, especially mortuary ritual, by people from different social statuses. Legally, commoners were not entitled to set up ancestral shrines or to make offerings to ancestors other than their parents and grandparents. Ancestral rituals were reserved for rulers and the gentry class until the Sung dynasty (960-1279 A.D.) when two Confucian scholars, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi, legitimated their practice by common people (Rawski 1988:29-30).

Cheng Yi's best contribution to the Confucian discourse on family ritual was to legitimize that people of all ranks should be able to make sacrifices to their ancestors four generations back (Ebrey 1991:61). Zhu Xi's greatest contribution to the Confucian family rituals was his book entitled *Jia Li* (Family Rituals). It consisted of five chapters—one on general principles and the other four on cappings, weddings, funerals, and sacrificial rites respectively. In the book, Zhu Xi did not discuss the moral meanings of family rituals, or the sentiments that ought to animate the actions of participants. He just gave a matter-of-fact description of how family rituals should be performed. So the book was easy to consult for people who needed to perform certain rituals.

Zhu Xi discarded status limitations for performing ancestral rituals. He explicitly stated that the rites described in his book could be performed by gentlemen without office and by commoners. But he made two reservations. The first was that he specified carefully that rites to ancient founding ancestors of a lineage should only be performed by the heir of a great descent line. The second was that he did not envision each household setting up a family shrine to host tablets for four generations of ancestors (Ebrey 1991:106). Zhu Xi emphasized that the heir of a great descent line would preside at ancestral rites, and others should attend as participants. After Zhu Xi died, his *Jia Li* (Family Rituals) was accepted as an orthodox by both the scholarly community and the imperial state. It was used as the reference for family rituals.

Besides Confucianism, there were other two schools of thought that had tremendous impacts

on the development of death rituals in China. One was Daoism and the other was Buddhism. Daoism was an indigenous Chinese religion. It was fully developed by the end of the Han dynasty (206BC - 220AD). Zhuang Zi, one of the founders of Daoism, pointed out that life and death are natural and inevitable events for human beings like day and night interchanging. He believed that human life is composed of *qi* (natural energy). People live when *qi* is concentrated in their bodies. They die when the *qi* breaks up and leaves their bodies. He regarded life and death as the same interactive natural process and life in this world is the same as that after the death. Therefore, people should face death as they face life (Yuan 1996: 99-102).

Daoist's most important contribution to traditional Chinese death rituals is its concepts of *yin yang*, *wu xing* (the five elements), and *ba-gua* (eight trigrams) which guide Daoist self-cultivation and lead to the development of *feng-shui*. During the dynasties of Wei, Jin, Nan and Bei (220-589 AD), *fengshui* was widely adopted by people to select grave sites according to *feng-shui* principle in order to gain the highest blessing, and to time the funeral and burial (Wang 1982: 337).

Buddhism came to China from India during Han dynasty (206BC-220AD). It finally blended with Chinese culture and became Sinicized. Its concepts of reincarnation and hell provided answers to the question on what would happen to humans after death. The observance of 49-day period of mourning in traditional Chinese death ritual derived from Buddhism. This 49-day period was further divided into 7 periods, each consisting of 7 days. On every 7th day, Buddhist monks were invited to read scriptures to assist the deceased in reincarnation process. For Buddhist believers, reincarnation is completed stage by stage (7 days as one stage) within 49 days after the death (Wang 1982: 335). During this period of time, the deceased's worldly deeds will be judged to determine the rebirth of the deceased as a human being, ghost, or animal accordingly. The ritual of observing a mourning period of 49 days had become popular by the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A. D.). Buddhist monks' chanting scripts became an indispensable part of a traditional Chinese funeral.

Since the Tang Dynasty, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, the three major components of the so-called Chinese great tradition had grad-

ually merged with folk beliefs and practices (the little tradition). This syncretism was shown clearly in the widely-accepted belief that after death, a person would go through trials by ten kings who ruled ten courts in the underworld or hell. This belief reflects Confucian doctrine of filial piety expressed by "sincerely observing mortuary rites and reminiscing one's forebears", Buddhist ideas of reincarnation and karma, and Daoist concepts of gods and ghosts (Wang 1982:342). The merger of the great tradition (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism) and little tradition (folk religions) fueled the practice of elaborate funerals. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, a uniform structure of mortuary ritual had emerged based roughly on Confucian classical models outlined in *Yi Li* and *Li Ji*, simplified by Zhu Xi and others, and promoted by the imperial state. It consisted of nine standardized death rites as follows (Watson 1988:12-15):

1. Public notification of death by wailing and other expressions of grief.
2. Donning of white clothing (shoes and hoods made of sack cloth or hemp) by mourners.
3. Ritual bathing of the corpse, often accompanied by a final change of clothing into burial clothes.
4. The transfer of food, money, and goods from the living world to the world of the dead by offerings or burning.
5. The preparation and installation of a soul tablet for the deceased.
6. The ritual use of money and the employment of paid professionals.
7. Music, high-pitched piping from the *suo na* and percussion from drums and gongs, to accompany the corpse and to settle the spirit.
8. Setting the corpse in the coffin and packing it so no movement was possible and then sealing it airtight in the coffin.
9. Expulsion of the coffin from the community.

Confucianism suffered a setback at the end of 19th century after China was defeated by Britain in the Opium War in 1842 and had to open up trading ports for Western colonial powers. Confucianism became the scapegoat of Chinese backwardness. Radical intellectuals launched movements to revitalize the country by adopting Western science and democracy and reforming traditional Chinese culture. Traditional family was regarded as the source of all evils (Meng 1919).

Confucian family rituals were considered as superstitious and backward. Hu Shi (1919: 577), an outstanding Chinese intellectual, advocated the reform of the traditional mortuary rituals, and fiercely attacked traditional mortuary rites, calling them as “hypocritical”, “savage”, and “superstitious” and should all be eliminated so as to build a more rational mortuary ritual that fit modern living. More specifically, he advocated short term mourning period, new form of mourning garments (that is, any clothes attached with a piece of black cloth), no sacrifice, and simple obituary notice. However, when his mother died, Hu Shi yielded to the pressure from his family and participated in making sacrifice to his mother. He even consented to wear hemp clothes instead of the simple black armband he advocated. But he refused to wear mourning hat and straw belt as were required by the local custom (Whyte 1988: 292). His action indicated that traditional Chinese culture still had great power at the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in mainland China. After it had consolidated its rule, it started its ambitious plan to break the old social order so as to transform China into a socialist state. Traditional family rituals, especially death rituals and ancestral worship, became an obstacle to its plan, and thus became a target of its reform. The beliefs in gods, ancestors and ghosts contradicted the CCP’s contention that there is no supernatural world and that human beings are the masters of their own fates. The belief in *fengshui* of graves not only conflicted with CCP’s materialist philosophy, but also affected the government’s plan for public construction. The function that mortuary rituals helps to reinforce kinship ties and lineage organization challenged the CCP’s call for the people to put their loyalty to the party and the nation first. Ritual specialists were looked upon as quacks profiting by false pretenses, and as potential rivals to the CCP’s authority. The concern about whether a person had male descendants to offer sacrifice to his/her soul was directly related to the preference for sons that posed a major obstacle to the implementation of current official birth-control policy. Moreover, the traditional death ritual was considered as a substantial waste of materials and resources, such as coffins, cemetery land, mourning clothes, incense and paper ritual objects, depriving the living of limited materials and natural resources (Whyte 1988: 293-94). Therefore, the CCP ambi-

tiously set out to change the traditional mortuary rituals. They were branded as relics of feudalistic society and officially banned from practice. As alternatives, the CCP promoted cremation, and memorial meeting without sacrifice of food and incense, and the use of mourning clothes. Instead, black armbands and small white flowers were used at memorial meetings (Baker 1979: 202).

From the late 1950s to the late 1970s, China witnessed a series of political movements, including the Great Leap Forward, the Four Clean-ups Campaign, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and the Anti-Confucius and Lin Biao Movement. All these political campaigns had one thing in common: they were all anti-tradition and anti-religion. Popular religion and ritual practices were labeled as “*fengjian minxin*” (feudal superstition), a potent signifier of “backwardness”, and a by-product of ignorance and poverty. During these years, church and temple properties were destroyed or confiscated. Many monks, nuns, Daoist priests, and ritual specialists were persecuted and banned from practicing their faith. Religious activities, including mortuary ritual, were prohibited (Wang 1982: 69-92). Offenders of the new rules were severely punished. Under such a political condition, elaborate traditional funerals could hardly be practiced in those years, not even secretly due to the visibility of funerary rituals.

With the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the return of Deng Xiaoping to political power, China underwent great economic and political change. In the post-Mao period, the control of popular culture, though increasingly more relaxed, has not disappeared completely (Anagnost 1994: 222). The state continues to hold a dogmatic line in discouraging folk religion, but its efforts have been mocked by the resurgent vigor of popular culture that has accompanied the economic reform (Anagnost 1994: 224). In rural China, decollectivization of agriculture as a part of rural economic reform started in 1978. It has not only improved peasants’ economic life, but also weakened the rigid control of the CCP over the masses. Traditional mortuary rituals reappeared and quickly became widely practiced again in rural China.

Death as Passage in Xie Village

In Xie Village, according to my informants, every family now holds elaborate funerals for its

members who die, with the exception of small children. Children who die young are considered as *gui erzi* (son of spirits) or *gui nuer* (daughter of spirits) and are doomed never to reach adulthood. It is believed that to bury them with a formal funeral will bring misfortune to the family. Funeralary ritual in the village, though complex, consists of the following sequence:

- (1). Initial rites right after death, including *Shao daotou fuzhi* (letting off fire crackers and burning paper money at the death to inform villagers of the death), *Mahan* (ritually bathing the deceased), *Ruguan* (putting the corpse into the coffin).
- (2). Funeral rites: *Kaifang* (opening the roads), including *pobai* (breaking the white, which let filial descendants put on white mourning dresses), *qingshui* (fetching water from the river nearby as holy water to cleanse pollution caused by death), *canzao* (visiting the stove god to report to him the death), *kaiwufang* (opening Five Roads for the deceased to travel to the other world), *yingwang anwei* (welcoming back the soul of the deceased, and setting it on the table, indicating that the deceased is still an important member of the family, and are now ready to receive offerings and prayers), *tuanfu* (praising the deceased, emphasizing his/her contributions to the family), *baican* (praying to gods for the deceased to release him or her from all of his/her crimes or misdeeds committed in this world), *chusang* (the funeral procession, moving the coffin out of the village to the burial ground and bury him or her), *shao fangzi* (burning paper house and other items of daily necessity made of paper for the deceased to use in the other world), *shao huotang* (a rite to see if the deceased is happy with the funeral and to drive away all hungry ghosts that wander around the house and village after the death of one of its members, and to bring fortune back to the house and the village).
- (3). Post-burial rituals, including 49 days of mourning period which requires the bereaved family to visit the tomb on every seventh day, the family members go to the tomb to make offerings of food and mock paper money to the deceased, and to host a banquet for relatives and friends (Local-

ly, this is called *shaoqi*), offerings to the deceased on the 100th day after the burial, the deceased's birthday, and the death anniversary, and sacrifice of food and mock paper money at major festivals, such as the Chinese New Year, the Qingming Festival, the Ghost Festival.

The death rituals at Xie Village can be seen as a "rite of passage". Van Gennep in his book *The Rites of Passage* proposed a threefold sequence for all rites of passage that move people from one stage of life to another. This sequence consists of rites of separation that remove a person from a previously occupied stage; rites of transition or liminality that effect and symbolize a social transformation; and rites of incorporation that reintegrate a person into a new stage. The importance of these stages varies for different rites of passage. In his discussion of funerals as rites of passage, Van Gennep (1908:146) pointed out that although one would expect rites of separation to be the most important component of funeral rites, transitional rites predominate. It is also important to note that each sequence of rites may contain within itself features of rites of separation, transition and incorporation, hence constituting a rite of passage in itself (Danforth 1982: 36).

When death occurs at Xie Village, initial rites of loud wailing, setting off firecrackers, burning *daotou fuzi* right after the death, and the change of clothes into *shouyi* all indicate the community's realization of the separation of the deceased from the family and the living world. The transitional or liminal period of the death rituals is long, starting with ritually bathing the dead to burning the soul tablet of the deceased. During this period, money, food, house and many other daily necessities are transferred from the living world to the otherworld by means of burning. This period is considered as ambiguous and dangerous. The deceased is neither in one state nor in the other, but in a "betwixt and between" status (Turner 1969: 93). He/she is vulnerable to harm by ghosts and evil spirits. Great measures are taken to ensure a safe transition. The hiring of specialists including priests, fengshui master, and funeral musicians is for this purpose.

The rites that fall into the category of rites of transition include *mohan*, *qingshui*, *jingzao*, *kai wufang*, *yingwang anwei*, *tuanfu*, *baican*, and *chusang*. During the process of performing these rites throughout a night, the dead body is

washed of dirt and sins from this world so that the deceased will be clean upon entering the otherworld. The soul of deceased is also washed ritually of dirt from the otherworld when being called back home by priests. The soul is first provided a temporary dwelling place in the soul tablet. The dead body is given a bed (the coffin), and later a resting place (the grave) selected specially by a *fengshui* master. All the roads in the five directions are opened up for the soul of the deceased to travel to the otherworld. Bridges are constructed to help the deceased to cross the river that separates this world from the otherworld. Gods and ancestors are informed of the death and are requested to protect the deceased from hungry ghosts or demons who are also offered with food and mock paper money. Older women are invited to pray to help the deceased to have a smooth passage through the ten courts and be reincarnated. The ultimate goal of all the rites is to effect a smooth and successful transition for the deceased from one status to another without hurting the living, or being harmed by ghosts or evil spirits.

The rites of incorporation include burning the soul tablets of the deceased and ancestors together in the courtyard. It integrates the deceased with his/her ancestors in the otherworld. Thus, a new relationship is established between the living and the deceased. As a member of the ancestors, he or she will be offered sacrifice of food, incense, and mock paper money by the descendants regularly.

Van Gennep focuses only on liminal persona such as the bride and groom at the wedding, the candidates at the initiation, and the deceased at the funeral. As a matter of fact, the rites of passage also affect non-liminal persons such as parents, relatives and friends, who undergo certain changes in the process of ritual performance (Turner 1967:7; Yu 1985: 240). The funeral has certain social psychological effects for the relatives left behind. In Xie Village, the rite of *pobai* separates the bereaved family from the community. In the transitional period, their relationship with the deceased and their social status in the community are also changed. They are mourners and should observe a mourning period for 49 days, during which they should not participate in public activities. The celebration on the 49th day after the burial marks the end of the mourning period, reincorporating the family into the community. The family can thus assume its normal life.

Van Gennep's three-stage theory enables us to understand the death rituals in Xie Village and to see that transformation is the dominant feature of the ritual practices. One of the major functions of Chinese death rituals is to transform the discontinuity of biological death into social continuity and to transform the corpse into an ancestor (Thompson 1988: 73). Performance of rites that ensure a safe, fast and complete transformation is the most critical aspect of Chinese death rituals. Chinese death rituals help the deceased to adjust to the new environment and help the living to understand that the deceased has become one of their ancestors (Li 1971: 107). Priests' performance ensures harmony between the living and the dead, and between the dead and deities.

Change and Continuity in Mortuary Ritual in Xie Village

The structure of traditional Chinese mortuary rituals has not undergone fundamental changes for about two thousand years since the Han Dynasty (Lu 1990: 203). In 1998, the death rituals of Xie Village maintained many typical features of traditional Chinese mortuary practices. The nine mortuary rites standardized in late imperial China as summarized by James Watson (1988: 12-15) could be found in the death rituals in Xie Village. They overlapped in these respects: 1) public notification of death by wailing; 2) wearing white clothing to express kin relationship; 3) ritualized bathing of the corpse; 4) transfer of food, money, and goods from the living to the dead; 5) preparation and installation of a soul tablet for the deceased; 6) ritualized use of money and the employment of paid professionals; 7) music to accompany the corpse and settle its spirit; 8) sealing the corpse in an airtight coffin; and 9) expulsion of the coffin from the community.

However, the death rituals in Xie Village have undergone many changes. One obvious structural change, according to the researcher's informants, is the change in the scale of the funerary ritual. Pre-1949 formal mortuary ceremony was longer in time and more elaborate in scale. A full-scale funeral lasted at least three days and nights, whereas today it usually lasts one night and one morning. It used to involve more funeral specialists. There were more professional Daoist priests and Buddhist monks, as well as other specialists and participants.

Some rites, such as making offerings to gods in the local temples or shrines, are not practiced, because there are now no temples or shrines in this area. They were destroyed in the 1960s. In the past, a funeral parade often went a long distance and would pass other villages or bridges. The parade would stop and make offerings to the local gods that controlled the village or the bridge. Friends or relatives would set up altars to perform roadside offering (*luji*) to pay respect to the deceased. This is no longer the case today. The state government set up boundary lines among villages. The deceased can only be buried within the boundary of their own villages. As a result, these rites are cut off.

Another important change is that in the pre-1949 period, the formal large-scale mortuary ceremony was held only among the elite class. Many common people could only afford *xiao kaifang* that could be performed by one priest. The communist revolution wiped out the whole elite landlord class and distributed their properties equally among the peasants. The rural reform in 1981 increased the average income of each family. So now, if anyone dies in the village, as long as he or she is an adult, the bereaved family will perform *da kaifang*. Mourning clothing has undergone changes. Before 1949, all *xiaozi* had to wear *xiaofu* (mourning dress). A set of *xiaofu* included a white hemp coat, a pair of white hemp pants, a pair of white shoes and a *xiaopa*. *Xiaopa* was actually a piece of white cotton cloth for a participant at a funeral to wear on his/her head. *Xiaopa* worn by a *xiaozi* was longer than those worn by visitors. *Xiaopa* worn by *zheng xiaozi* (sons, daughters-in-law, grandsons, and unmarried daughters) were attached with hemp threads. Today, wearing white coat, pants and shoes is discontinued. But *xiaopa* has survived as one symbol of mourning in the village.

Ritual specialists have gone through changes, too. There are no full-time professional Buddhist or Daoist priests in the village now, since all the temples were destroyed in the village and adjacent areas during the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976. Therefore, present-day priests never learn any scripts or ritual performances in temples, but from their masters. Priests have families and farm their fields most of the time. When performing rites, priests today even do not wear traditional costumes. Performing funerary rites is a part-time job for them. Making money is the incentive. Priest membership has

become “professionalized” and “commoditized”. At one funeral the researcher observed, the priests even stopped performing the last rite until the bereaved family paid the money they asked for. Without the last rite, all the previous rites are performed in vain according to the ideological underpinnings of the local folk religion. In another dimension, the revival of religious specialists is related to supply and demand rules in availability of religious rituals.

Ritual and Changing Attitude toward Ancestors

Another obvious change in the death rituals practiced in Xie Village is the attitude toward ancestors. Ancestor worship in China predates the advent of Buddhism and the rise of religious Daoism by about two thousand years. It is believed that for thousands of years Chinese have worshiped their ancestors and lived “under the ancestors’ shadow” (Hsu 1971). Ancestor worship is based on the belief that the soul of the deceased persists and has the power to bring either blessings or evil influence to its descendants. Those who do not make proper sacrifice to their ancestors will be punished by them (He 1995: 80). Most of the researcher’s informants, especially young informants in the village do not have this belief now. They believe that their prosperity is at their own hand and is not bestowed by their ancestors. They are not afraid of their ancestors. They do not believe in the existence of the world for the dead. To them, to die is like blowing out a candle. Life is terminated at the death.

In traditional Chinese society, the ritual for worshipping ancestors was often performed by means of making sacrifices to ancestor tablets and to ancestors’ graves. Worshipping ancestor tablets was carried out either at home or at the ancestor hall of a lineage (Chen 1967: 172; Li 1984: 8). The domestic ancestor worship provided sacrifice to the household ancestors, while the extra-domestic ancestor worship (worship at an ancestral hall) focused on lineage ancestors (Freedman 1970: 164-165). Sacrifice might consist of daily burning incense, burning candles and mock paper money, and offering food and drink on special occasion (Yang 1961: 39).

In Xie Village, Xie, as one surname group, has a room which used to be the ancestral hall for the group and it is now called *gongfang* (communal room). There is an altar in this room on

which sat one ancestral tablet to a man named Xie Xingtang who died in 1810. He was the earliest ancestor that the Xies could trace to. Over the altar on the wall, there was a paper scroll with 6 Chinese characters: *tian* (heaven), *di* (earth), *guo* (state), *qing* (kinsmen), *shi* (teacher), and *wei* (place). They represent the family gods of the Xies. According to the researcher's informants, heaven and earth are worshiped as the source of life; the state (or emperor before 1911) is worshiped for its power and the hope that a good emperor or state government would bring peace and prosperity to the people; kinsmen actually refer to the ancestors who are expected to bless their descendants with happiness and fortune; teachers have a place at the altar because education is highly valued as a way to change social status and life.

Even though Xie has an altar for family gods, the room has been used as a storage room for the Xies. Spare furniture, logs, and two empty coffins almost fill the room. The last communal sacrifice to ancestors performed in this room was before 1949, as the researcher's elder informants remembered. Today, only on festival days, such as Chinese New Year or Qingming Festival, some elders of the village might come to burn incense at the altar.

Families of the Xie lineage do not set up individual ancestral altars in their homes. When the villagers want to make sacrifices to their ancestors, they will burn mock paper money at the graves of their ancestors, or at roads close to the village, or in front of the family gods in the communal room. On Chinese New Year's Day, food and drink are offered in addition to paper money and incense at the graves. Sacrifices to ancestors at their graves are now performed by each individual household on certain occasions throughout the year. But before 1949, the Xie lineage held a communal sacrifice to ancestors once a year at Qingming festival. They would prepare a feast and all the males of the Xie lineage would go on a pilgrimage to their ancestor tombs far away.

The researcher asked his informants whether there was any connection between the prosperity or decline of a family and sacrifice to ancestors at graves. The researcher received negative answers. The researcher asked them why they spent money and time making sacrifice to ancestors at graves. The researcher was often told that it was a custom practiced by all families in the village and a way to remember the dead.

Do the villagers worship their ancestors? The researcher's informants used the word *jinian* which coincides with "memorialism" (Freedman 1979: 302) in meaning to explain their behaviors in burning mock paper money and incense to their ancestors. The changes in the death ritual and its related beliefs reflect the changing attitude toward ancestors in the village. What has caused the decline of ancestors' role in the life of their descendants?

In his study of ancestor worship among the Tallensi of Ghana, Fortes (1965) argued that ancestors are significant points of genealogical unification/differentiation that serve to identify segments of the lineage system, while at the same time they also exercise a moral guardianship over their descendants. In his study of Chinese ancestor worship, Yang (1961: 53) pointed out the ancestor worship, operating with elaborate mortuary and sacrificial rites, consolidated and stabilized the Chinese kinship system, which in turn gave life to the ancestor worship in China.

In traditional China, the agnatically constituted lineage stood out as a religious congregation worshipping its common forebears (Freedman 1979: 301-302). Every lineage had its ancestral hall, shrine, or at least the tomb of a focal ancestor at which rites to ancestors were performed. If a lineage had broken down, the worship to its ancestors might have been affected and declined. In his study of ancestor worship and clan organization in a rural village in Taiwan, Chen (1967: 172) found the co-relationship between the decline of ancestor worship and the loss or dying out of the social functions of the clan organization. These functions included serving as an agency for social control, providing psychological security to its individual members, and working as a main group for its members' social activities.

Xie Village used to have a few lineages before 1949. These lineage organizations were dismantled in 1950. Lineage properties were confiscated, taking one lineage, Xie lineage, as an example. Its ancestral hall was turned into a storage room. Its annual communal sacrifice to ancestors ceased. With it, the elders of the Xie lineage lost their authority to organize ceremonies to worship ancestors, and gradually they lost control over the young lineage members.

Family division is another factor that has contributed to the loss of the authority of the elders and ancestors in the village. It is common

that after a son gets married, he will be given a share of the family property to set up his own household. When all the children are married, the parents usually do not have much left. They have to depend on their children for support when they are old. The theory that sees the experience of inheritance and succession as the source of the fear of deceased ascendants might be used here to account for the lack of fear to ancestors in the village. Since descendants do not receive much from the deceased at the time of the death, they do not blame themselves that their desire to inherit properties or authorities has caused the death. So they are not afraid of the retaliation from the deceased.

The Communist ideology with its materialistic basis is another factor leading to the decline of ancestor worship. For decades, the Chinese Communist Party has tried to instill in the minds of peasants that there is no god, no otherworld, and no supernatural beings (including ancestors) through its control of mass media, education, literature and other propagandistic instruments. From 1949 to the late 1970s, ancestor worship and elaborate death rituals were banned by the state government. Through its monopolistic control of the national bureaucracy, legislation, military, and law enforcement, the government had the power to ban the practice of ancestor worship and mortuary ritual. Meanwhile, through its control of the mass media, education, literature, arts and other propagandistic instruments, the government tried to terminate traditional beliefs by labeling them as feudal superstition, and to instill its sanctioned moral tenets upon the rural masses. These have left a noticeable impact on the villagers, especially young villagers. The researcher's young informants regarded the traditional belief in death and the after-life as superstitious. This supports Huang's (1993: 164) argument that Marxist and neo-Marxist's critical theory (or philosophy) is equally applicable to socialist China.

According to Huang, this critical theory claims that in Western bourgeois society, the elite classes maintain cultural hegemony through, aside from their control of the means of production, the dual forms of external political control in the form of state bureaucratic machinery—namely the legal system, the police, courts and the military, and internal moral persuasion through education, mass media, literature, arts and beliefs. The themes, tastes, values, ethos,

and even aesthetics of this hegemonic culture have been successfully and unconsciously reproduced by the underclass (Huang 1993: 144). In Chinese case, the revolutionary elite imported Western ideology and values through Marxism, and imposed them onto villagers' daily life through both the external political control and the internal moral persuasion (Huang 1993: 144).

Besides the change in ancestral worship, the death rituals seem to have lost its religious implication among young villagers. All the researcher's young informants (age 18-35) told him that they did not believe in the existence of another world and the afterlife. They did not believe in gods or deities. For them, success in life was at their own hand, depending on their own hard working, not on the *fengshui* of the graves of their ancestors. They did not understand many rites performed by priests at a funeral. They participated in the performance because they were required to do so by their parents. They considered it as a local custom that they had to follow. They accepted death ritual as a way to honor their parents.

The function of ancestral cult has changed for young people in the village though the same symbols, such as mock paper money and incense sticks, are used and the same rites, such as making sacrifice at the gravesite, are performed. But one underlying principle of ancestral cult remains the same, that is, the observance of filial piety to one's parents.

Ritual and Changed Women's Role

Another obvious change associated with the death rituals is the women's roles in the ritual performance. According to my informants, traditionally women could not touch the soul tablet and the *fan* of the deceased. At the two funerals the researcher participated, he noticed that female *xiaozi* (filial descendants) were allowed to carry both the soul tablet and the *fan*. The researcher's informants told him that it was acceptable now in the village. Three factors led to this change.

The first factor is the improved social status of women under the socialist rule. For centuries, Confucian tradition relegated women to an inferior position in Chinese family and society. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has strongly advocated the liberation of women and gender equality. After the CCP came to power in China

in 1949, its government took a series of steps to free women from the oppression of the patriarchal system in Chinese society. Its constitution acknowledges and emphasizes women's equal rights in participating in economic, educational, social and political activities. The two marriage laws (1950, 1980) further protect women's rights in marriage, divorce, family relations and family property ownership, which women were never entitled to in traditional Chinese society. The CCP encouraged women to join labor force and pursued the policy of equal work and equal pay for women and eventually incorporated 90% of adult Chinese women into the labor force (Zuo and Tang 1994: 124).

As the result of the CCP's efforts, the status of women in Chinese society has greatly improved. The most dramatic change has been the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. In traditional Chinese society, the mother-in-law used to control the daughter-in-law and tended to abuse her (Fei 1985: 8-9). Today, the roles have been reversed. The mother-in-law, weak and old, is usually in an inferior position in the family. Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1985: 8-9) mentioned that a daughter-in-law beat her mother-in-law in public because of the resentment that the mother-in-law had given a very good dowry to her daughter. The researcher's own informants also told me such kind of stories.

The relationship between husband and wife has also changed. The wife used to be submissive to her husband and was not expected to make significant decisions on family affairs. Today, apart from agricultural production, the wife and husband together make most of decisions on family consumption, children's education, family expenses and other affairs. The father-son axis in traditional Chinese society described is changing toward the husband-wife axis in family life. Cooperation and communication between husband and wife has been increasing.

The second factor is the birth control program imposed by the government. It may ultimately weaken, or even fundamentally change the traditional peasant family (Huang 1998: 9). The program only allows a couple to have one child, regardless of its sex. If a family only has a daughter or two daughters in the case that the husband is the only son in his family, the family line will be terminated since the daughter will eventually get married and moves to live with her husband. The continuity of the family line,

one of the four features of Chinese family and kinship outlined by Francis Hsu (1965: 642-44), is in danger. After the parents die, they and their previous ancestors might be unattended and unfed and become wandering ghosts because they have no descendants under the family surname to offer them sacrifice. The acceptance of women to carry the soul tablet or *fan* at a funeral, a duty traditionally done by males, is a strategy to challenge this threat. Culture adapts to new social circumstance.

The third factor that affects the women's role during the performance of funerary rites is the migration of adult male villagers to cities looking for temporary or long-term jobs. In case of an accidental or sudden death, sons can hardly return home in time. The warm subtropical weather in the village makes it impossible for a bereaved family to preserve the corpse for a long period of time. Women are the only alternative relatives to take over men's traditional positions at a funeral. Women are also in charge of making sacrifices to ancestors in front of their tombs on special occasions such as Chinese New Year's Day, and the Qingming Festival in April.

Ritual and Changed Peasant-State Relationship

The relationship between the state or party-state and the rural masses has undergone tremendous change since the decollectivization in the early 1980s. This change is shown clearly in the very fact that the traditional mortuary ritual has gone through official ban and revival. The nature of the state-society relations in rural China since 1949 has been categorized into six models by social scientists:

1. the patron-client model, in which the state, through its agents (local patrons) control the access to all essential goods (Oi 1989);
2. the center-periphery model, in which local and regional cadres pursue the interests of their areas against the demands of the state center (Shu 1988);
3. the moral political model, in which ideological positions are used by peasants to struggle for power, and to respond to the state policies (Madsen 1984);
4. the participation model, in which peasants through active political participation influence the implementation of state's policies (Burns 1988);

5. the single lineage village model, in which a group of patrilineally related men collectively own and manage property and have autonomy from the state (Chan et al. 1984);
6. the state hegemony model, in which the state, through its monopolistic control of the national bureaucracy, law enforcement, education and mass media, is capable of instilling its values and tenets upon the peasants, and placing general but not complete compliance among the peasantry (Huang 1993).

According to the researcher's informants, the performance of traditional death rituals had been banned by the government until the late 1970s. The government regarded it as feudal superstition that would pollute the spirit of the people. The ban was strictly carried out by the government through its local agents, that is, cadres at the production team and brigade levels, and by *minbing* (militiamen) controlled by the cadres. Temples were destroyed or confiscated. Priests were forced to resume secular life. Practitioners were punished. Most families abided by the government policy. A simple funeral without priests' performance of funerary rites was practiced. A few families illegally hired one priest to perform *xiao kaifang* secretly at home. The priest dared not play loud music or read scripts aloud. A bereaved family even dared not make sacrifice of food, mock paper money and incense at the tomb during the day. They did it at night without firecrackers. In the early 1970s, one villager, who was a cadre at the brigade level, held a traditional funeral for his mother. He hired six priests from a neighboring county to perform funerary rites. When the news came out, he lost his job as the cadre and was branded as a bad example of practicing a feudal superstition. He was deprived of the access to political power and economic resources. His social status dropped to the bottom in the village. He was ranked together with landlords, rich peasants, reactionaries, and bad elements. He became an outcast. The state hegemony model proposed by Huang (1993) and the patron-client model proposed by Oi (1989) explain the state-society relationship in those years. Cadres, as local patrons, through their monopoly of resources and law enforcement, successfully controlled the life of their clients (that is, local peasants) according to the government's policies.

The commune system was dismantled and replaced by the household responsibility system in the village in 1982. With it, the local cadres lost their monopoly over many resources. Politically, the state government has completed one political reform in rural China. It has set up *cunmin weiyuanhui* (villagers' committee) and *cunmin daibiao huiyi* (villagers' representative assembly) at the grassroots level. It has started direct free election for director, deputy director and members of the villagers' committee by villagers (O'Brian 1994). The power of the elected cadres in Xie Village is greatly restricted. They have few resources at their disposal since the village has no industry and the land has been contracted to the villagers. During the researcher's stay in the village, local cadres did not sponsor any meetings or distribute any resources. The villagers did not consult local cadres in their production or other activities. They sent cadres to the township government to pursue interests for the villagers, such as getting funds from the government to repair the irrigation system and helping villagers apply for loans to build houses. The patron-client model gave way to the center-periphery model proposed by Vivienne Shu (1988). Local cadres are expected to represent villagers and protect their interests, not vice-versa.

Though traditional death rituals have revived in Xie Village and many young villagers participate in ritual practice, they do not cherish religious beliefs associated with the death rituals. There is no otherworld and no afterlife. Their behaviors can be explained by Huang's model. The state, through its monopoly of education and mass media, has changed the young villagers' worldviews. They have accepted the government point of view that regards traditional mortuary ritual practice as *mixin huodong* (superstitious activity). But the government cannot force them to completely abandon traditional death rituals. They still participate in the ritual performance because they try to follow a local custom and to please their surviving parents.

The young villagers at Xie Village are better educated than their parents. They have experiences of working in cities and have tasted urban life. Politically, they are more active than their parents. As the researcher's young informants told him, they took active part in the free election for *cunzhang* (village director). Their active political participation may influence the implementation of state's policies. The relationship be-

tween the young villagers and the state fits the participation model put forward by John Burns (1988).

CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the mortuary rituals in Xie Village in Chongqing and socio-cultural changes reflected in these ritual practices. It has covered some major areas of the village social life associated with a person's mortality, such as the funeral ceremonies, sacrifice to ancestors, the relationship between the living and the dead, the relationship between the peasant community and the party-state, the changed role of women in a family, and the cluster of beliefs in the existence of the world of the dead and the continuity between the living world and the world of the dead. What have we learned about the contemporary sociocultural formation in Xie Village from the changes in its mortuary ritual practices? This study has found that the current socio-cultural structure in Xie Village consists of two distinctive components: traditional practices and beliefs, and the newly introduced ideology and values by the party-state and market economy.

With regard to the mortuary practices and death-related beliefs, the traditional part is still predominant. Though the traditional mortuary ritual has been simplified, the basic mortuary structure has survived in spite of the great efforts the party-state has made to eliminate the traditional mortuary practices and beliefs. Very clearly, the Daoist priests' performance of rites to ensure a safe transformation of a dead person into an ancestor, and the performance of the *yin yang* master to secure good *feng shui* demonstrate the importance of traditional cosmology in the village social life.

The other component of the socio-cultural structure as reflected in the mortuary ritual in the village is derived from the culture that the party-state tried to impose on the rural masses and from the latest market economy promoted by the party-state. Through its monopolistic control of the national bureaucracy, legislation, military, and law enforcement, the party-state had the power to ban traditional mortuary practices that had lasted hundreds of years and to introduce new ones, such as memorial meetings and cremations. For about 30 years, the villagers had to comply with the party-state policy and had to modify their traditional sociocultural structure. Elabo-

rate traditional funerals were not practiced during those years. Meanwhile, through its control of the mass media, education, literature, arts and other propagandistic instruments, the party-state tried to terminate traditional beliefs by labelling them as feudal superstition and to instill sanctioned moral tenets upon the rural masses. The rural reform and market economy established in rural China since the late 1970s have turned the mortuary ritual practices into a business with ritual specialists such as priests and *yin yang* master as sellers and a bereaved family as buyer. As a result, the traditional mortuary ritual has undergone many changes. Young villagers now do not cherish those traditional beliefs anymore. They are only concerned if the rituals are properly and timely performed.

The traditional mortuary ritual practices will continue to play an important role in the social life of Chinese rural communities, but will be more and more formalized and ritualized as Chinese rural communities move toward modernization. The facts that the contemporary mortuary rituals have been greatly simplified and the separation of beliefs and practices among young villagers with better education clearly indicate this tendency in the development of the mortuary practices in Xie Village.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study was conducted in a village in Chongqing in China. When doing anthropological study of Chinese society, the researcher have to keep in mind that China is a huge country with vast regional cultural diversities and yet Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group in China, have identified themselves as Chinese for thousands of years. This feature of unity and diversity in Chinese culture has caused lots of debates in anthropology of China or China studies. In the study of mortuary ritual, James Watson's theory of orthopraxy and standardization of rituals in Chinese culture was challenged by Donald S. Sutton who pointed out that some reported orthopraxy standardization was illusory, resulting from defensive, subversive, or self-deceiving writings of local elites, and argued that what was crucial to the preservation or elaboration of a particular ritual segment of mourning was not official or elite pressure or the desire to be orthopraxy, but emotional obligations on the part of ritual participants, as well as a variety of local

micro-political requirements. The researcher's findings at Xie Village in Chongqing show that regional variations do exist and even various priest groups in the neighborhood regions conduct funeral rituals differently, but the elementary structure of funeral stays the same. Reputation of the priests is established by audience's evaluation of their correct and attractive performance of rituals. This supports Watson's theory. Orthopraxy is more important than orthodoxy in contemporary Chinese mortuary ritual. However, the researcher also found out that young villagers today participate in mortuary ritual practices simply due to emotional obligations and a way to show economic and political powers of their family. This supports the second part of Sutton's argument. Therefore, the researcher recommends that researchers of China studies should be cautious when applying their findings in one region to other parts of the country, and should compare their findings with others' findings, especially those of native researchers or recorded in historical books and local gazetteers.

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