

“Luo Er Incident”: The Dilemma and Reflections on the Practice of Public Spirit

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Abstract

The high-profile “Luo Er Incident” has sparked extensive media attention, and triggered discussions on public spirit among scholars. An interpretation of the association between “Luo Er Incident” and public spirit and a thorough analysis into the predicament currently facing the practice of public spirit is conducive to shaping a rational approach to the incident and restoring attention to the practice of public spirit. On this basis, by following the evolution patterns of the generation and development of public spirit, the practice of public spirits could be promoted through establishing public spirit standards, deepening perception of public spirit, strengthening identification of public spirit, enhancing practice of public spirit, and enabling self-consciousness of public spirit.

Key words: Luo Er incident; Public spirit; Predicament; Evolution patterns

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1. THE EMERGING OF THE ISSUE

Recently an article *Luo Yixiao, Please Stop* went viral on Wechat friend circles like a swift wind and aroused much debate towards this case. The virtual nature of the internet

failed to block the netizen’s benign desire to practice the public spirit. In this unique society full of strangers the public is inclined to believe every detail of the incident and take some actions. From “selling words to save the daughter” by Luo er to everyone’s initial “retweeting of the article for the sake of love”, the “Luo er incident” fast devolved into a torrential wave of donation. The flooding love of hordes of people is backed by merely one good wish that the public wants to support this fragile little life. With every single tweeting, leukaemia-inflicted Luo Yixiao can get one yuan donation additionally. Therefore innumerable “fans” were attracted by this article, and the configured donation function had brought in donated money exceeding 2 million yuan. However the “Luo er incident” had undergone a “script up-side-down”. What’s rendered before the public eyes was transformed into a through-and-through marketing pitch which not just gave the public a chance to fulfill their public spirit, but also to get slapped on their faces and traumatized in their hearts. In the end the practitioner of the “Luo er incident” and related Wechat teams released the message that all the donation would be returned.

What’s behind the far-reaching spotlight focused on the “Luo er incident” not only is the struggle of tension between collective philanthropic endeavors waged through network platforms and the elusive donation event itself, but also triggered scholars to reflect on the dilemmas faced by the public while practicing the public spirit.

2. CORRELATION BETWEEN THE “LUO ER INCIDENT” AND PUBLIC SPIRIT AND EXPLANATION THEREOF

Why the “selling word to save daughter” by Luo er can attract so much public participation? What kind of correlation exists between the “Luo er incident” and the

public spirit? These questions can all be explained from the angles of the causation and developmental process of the incident itself.

2.1 From “Collective Action Dilemma” to “Active Participation”

The core idea of the “collective action dilemma” theory can be expressed as the perspective that the impact and contribution made by each individual is negligible to the big organization which leads to the lack of the motivation for the spontaneous participation. In the traditional social cooperation paradigm in order to maximize their own interests individuals are unwilling to undertake too much cost due to be paid for the realization of mutual interests. For this reason in the collective undertaking it is highly likely to witness the phenomenon of individuals taking the advantage of a larger group, and this will ultimately hinder or sabotage the realization of the public interests. So in this theoretical field the individual is considered to be trapped in an outsider mindset and a thought of singular entity. Nevertheless in the “Luo er incident” the netizen didn’t ignore their impact and strength and didn’t put themselves beyond this issue. Au contraire, as the article’s publication netizens made the move and offer the help enthusiastically by all means. The active netizen participation is a breakthrough to the traditional collective action dilemma and an embodiment of characteristics of the citizen participation in the public spirit and also the embodiment of the “public kindness” which is the goal of the public spirit. From the “collective action dilemma” to the “active participation” the “Luo er incident” allowed the public to have a taste of the public spiritual beauties such as care, sympathy, participation and responsibility showcasing the collective power and human kindness.

2.2 From the “Structure of Grade” to “Stranger Society”

The structure of grade is the logic of order of the traditional moral society. This cultural soil emphasizing the bloodline and local kinship as people’s living principle nourishes an intense egoism and an “acquaintance society”. Such a negativity! This also made the philanthropic participation and welfare donation and similar actions generally considered to be the work scope of government and other social organizations, and the individual participation is ignored. The stranger society is a relative conception in contrast to the traditional “acquaintance society” and a social phenomenon which is incubated and sprouted under a larger context of fast expansion of economic domain, significant increase of people flow and enhancing public service and socializing level. The alienation among people and frequent human flows caused by various factors as well as all kinds of tensions occurring amid the society transformation will all undermine the function of morality. From the egoism and negative customs cultivated by the traditional “structure of grade” to the public spirit hailed by the public life order

of the stranger society, in this transformation stage of the society the brandishing of the public spirit of citizens is an urgent requisite. In the “Luo er incident” the netizens generously opened their purses to Luo Yixiao whom they had never met. Through the social media platforms in this unknown stranger society people helped Luo Yixiao in different ways to cast a light of hope for her life and bring the spiritual momentum to make her head forward. The public uses their fully charged enthusiasm to fulfill the public spirit. It is this public spirit that embodies the citizen mores unifying the moral tendency and social life paradigm.

2.3 From “Spiral of Silence” to “Justice Seeking”

The “spiral of silence” was primarily proposed by the famous German communication scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. This theory points out that when an individual intends to express his own opinion he will check out the opinions of persons surrounding him. When he finds that his opinion is in accordance with the “majority” or the “advantage” point he is likely to express his own mind in a proactive fashion. If not, he will succumb to the surrounding pressure and get “silent” or just give in (Neumann, 2013). In the “Luo’er incident” as more and more articles had been retweeted, the public gradually extended their attention to related details of the incident. The exposure of the financial status of Luo’er, his purpose of publishing the article online and the further background facts have enabled each participating citizen to acquire more information about the incident in the process of pursuing philanthropic purpose. With more truth unveiled about the incident the fury of many netizens was instantly unleashed out. As for the incident of the public didn’t select the silence mode facing the overturning event progress or its sensitive nature, neither did they fear being isolated by voicing their own ideas. On the contrary after the incident was exposed, the public had waged a continuous justice tracking to the questions such as whether this incident could be categorized as a marketing campaign, the concrete treatment expenses, the money being raised and its whereabouts. Finally Luo er and related companies promised to return all the donated money. The public made their voice heard in a rational style through seeking the justice. The change from the “spiral of silence” to the “justice seeking” manifests the “deep participation” characteristic of the practice of public spirit, and even more so embodies the safeguarding effect played by the public spirit to the public, public interest and individual interest.

3. THE DILEMMA OF THE PRACTICE OF PUBLIC SPIRIT

Although the “Luo er incident” lets the public feel the strength of the public spirit, at the same time the

astonishing overturning of event and the elusive incident itself also reflects the multiple dilemmas faced by citizens when practicing the public spirit.

3.1 Alienation of Network Space

The network space as a special public space not only can effectively establish a public dialogue platform and provide an open dialogue mechanism, but also possess a powerful public opinion radiation and consolidation function. The cultivation of the public spirit can borrow the momentum from the online hot stories to achieve the swift dissemination and heated discussion, and can be identified and incarnated through this mechanism. The merits of internet is not just restricted in this, the internet can apply a certain graphical metaphorical tactic to construct and scramble for the public topics and create an environment for the cultivation of public spirit (Guo & Li, 2012). Therefore the network space shall be soaked in the public spirit of justice, equality and openness, and manifest the same. However the network space in actuality is choked with good and bad, true and false. The alienation phenomenon is reflected through many things such as a more entertainment-oriented stance and encroachment of the moral baseline, an overly commercialized operation and viciously distorted facts, to name a few. For the hot topics the social media always fails to give out the rational voice and form a correct public media atmosphere to guide the public. On the contrary the phenomenon of vicious distortion and exaggeration is rampant to the facts. As an important special space existing in parallel to the real life, the network space also brings huge impacts to the real life. Therefore in this ongoing crucial stage of society transformation the practice of the public spirit indeed faces a tremendous challenge.

3.2 The Lack of Instrumental Reason

The instrumental reason refers to the realization of the maximum functionality of an object through the application features of tools or technical means to achieve a certain kind of beneficial service to people. In order to achieve a primary presupposition of value rationality the most urgent requisite is the existence of a corresponding instrumental reason, on which basis the value rationality can be better achieved. Therefore the realization of the value rationality of the public spirit must be founded upon the instrumental reason of the public spirit and dependent on the advantage of the instrumental reason to achieve its value rationality in a better way. However in the “Luo er incident” the technical supports such as the regulative restriction including the donation rules of the social media, the confirmation of qualification of the donors, information review, legal accountability and risk evasion and the friend circle thumb-up functions including the cancellation right of the thumb-up initiator and the legal right protection platform have not been effectively manifested. Therefore after the overturning event the

netizen cannot appeal to the social media platforms to seek their rights. Therefore it is this lack of instrumental reason in the network platform that makes the value rationality of the public spirit dissipate. Ultimately the public spirit which warms the public in ardent passion dropped to the icy temperature and at the same time shatters the public confidence to the instrumental reason of the public spirit.

3.3 The Social Mentality Game

In the “Luo er incident” the improper marketing of one person is possible to make the whole society fractured on the “loving heart” topic and let those “teary retweeters” feel a setback in justice, let those “fortunate ones failing to retweet” feel “overwhelmingly smarter” than others, let the just-warmed-up social sympathy freeze again, etc. The gaming between various social mentalities also reflects the turbulence and agitation of the public spirit, at the same time also reflects the citizen’s altitude to the public spirit. The social mentality in the network space originates from the social life and differentiates from the real life. In the network space of the main bodies of participation have brought in the diversified opinions, wherein the virtual self will bring some irrational expression. All of these make the originally highly complicated social mentality more elusive and hard to grasp. How to let the citizens waving the public spirit banner not to incur losses due to the trivial kindness of helping up a slipping elderly person, and those muted passers-by feel lucky with their negative “outsider” mentality. How to gather the proactive social mentalities into a stroke of positive strength to play an overarching guidance power in this complicated social mentality to affect the behavior of each citizen. This is an issue truly deserving some profound thinking.

4. THE PRACTICE AND REFLECTION OF PUBLIC SPIRIT

It’s proclaimed in the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee that the overall target of the reformation is to improve and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics and to promote the modernization of the state governance system and the governance capability. The public spirit of citizens is undoubtedly the most motivating element among the state governance capabilities, thus needing to be nurtured, protected and exerted by law. As a spiritual property of an individual the public spirit’s generation and development have their own logic evolutionary pattern and come in line with the process from the establishment of public spirit standard, deepening of public spirit recognition, reinforcing of public spirit practice until the ultimate fruition of the self-consciousness of the public spirit. The logic route of the public spirit practice shall be footed on the public life field and combined with the cultural

ambience of the era. In the soil of the Chinese society, the following aspects deserve to be cemented.

4.1 The Establishment of the Public Spirit Standard

The key for the establishment of the public spirit standard is to give a scientific definition of the term “public” which shall be intimately related with the origin, generation and development in all circumstances. In the public fields the public spirit is the manifesto of co-regulation of both the morality and law, and is deemed as the fusion between the public morality and the spirit of the rule of law. For this reason the public spirit seems to be infinitely inclusive. How to define the term “public”? How to determine the public spirit standard? Is the public spirit a political spirit or a moral one or a unity of the two? How is it related to the social order? How does it manifest itself in the social public fields? What kind of connection is there between the self-expression of public spirit and “others”? These are the questions to be answered for the determination of the public spirit standard. The contemporary renowned scholar Robert Putnam wholly expounded the concept of public spirit which is the political equality expressed in a collective mode and the active participation of public affairs constitutes the “public spirit” of the collective body. It is certain that the public spirit is firstly a spirit of political value. At the same time, it is a kind of morality which is embodied through the self-conscious observance of the social order and public life order and the requirement of self-perfection.

Therefore the public spirit standard can be determined through two dimensions: the spatial dimension and the value dimension. The spatial dimension refers to that the public spirit occurs in the public field. This public field not only refers to the actual physical space such as the public areas and the virtual public spaces in the new media forms such as social media. More importantly it also includes the structural space which makes the relationship a little tricky because of human flow, combination and regrouping. The establishment of this standard is beneficial to the more explicit determination of the areas where the public spirit occurs, showcases the public characteristics. The public spirit value dimension can establish the public spirit standard through three aspects of the state level, society level and the citizen level. The practice dimension of the public spirit can be expounded through three layers which are the participation, service and self-governance of the public spirit.

4.2 Deepening the Recognition of the Public Spirit

The public spirit is a systematic structure, wherein the public area is the space where the public spirit occurs, the responsibility spirit is the moral basis of the public spirit, the democratic spirit is the core value of the public

spirit and the participation spirit is the practice doctrine of the public spirit. These intrinsic spiritual elements are organically integrated. The essential nature of the public spirit refers to the public nature beyond the selfishness and is the most important and fundamental merit rooted in the modern society. In the west the development since the city state of ancient Greek until the modern civil society has laid down the foundation for the transmission of the public spirit and the people’s rational recognition of the public spirit.

The early study of the public spirit in our nation was mostly centered around its political fields. As the gradual expansion of the public fields, the meaning for participating in public events far exceeds its political scope. In the modern society, the deepening of the recognition of the public spirit firstly entails the people’s correct understanding of the public spirit. The public spirit does not expel the individual interest, but rather is the attitude and behavior of rational criticism and active participation in the public life on the basis of leading the citizens to fully realize the correlation between the public interest and the individual interest. The public spirit by no means signifies the individual has to sacrifice their own personal interest completely, but rather means that the individual interest can be better attained through the collective safeguard of the public interest. Secondly the deepening of the recognition of the public spirit entails that the multiple channels of the society, schools, family and internet shall propagate the knowledge of public spirit. Multiple means shall be applied to disseminate the rational understanding of the public spirit. This is helpful to a better cultivation of public spirit in the public life fields, thus enabling the public spirit to be acknowledged and fulfilled in a better mode.

4.3 Strengthening the Recognition of the Public Spirit

On the basis of the understanding the public spirit the citizens shall receive active education to acknowledge the public spirit. The acknowledgement of the public spirit is concerned with the good governmental rule, national democratic rule of law and the buildup of a harmonious society. At the same time the public spirit is also the guarantee to the citizen’s orderly and effective participation into the public life. The strengthening of acknowledgement of the public spirit to a certain extent can better enlighten the public rationality of citizens and entice them to join and blend in the world of public life to construct an autonomous, self-disciplined and self-powered egoistic society and gradually achieve the benign interaction between government, society, citizens and other entities (Gao, 2014). The strengthening of the public spirit is helpful to the concentration of people’s power in the field of public life and the better preservation of social capital and better invigoration to the citizens to participate in the public affairs. Therefore if to acknowledge the

public spirit from the angle of the social capital theory it can be clearly seen that the mutual respect, trust and tolerance among citizens derived from the intense acknowledgement of the public spirit are more beneficial to the buildup of the protocol in the public fields, thus allowing the social capital to be better preserved and accordingly better promoting the formation of a civilized and orderly social life.

4.4 Strengthening the Practice of Public Spirit

The basic practice mode of the public spirit is the public participation. Only by means of wide participation into the political life, community self-governance and other forms of public affairs by citizens that the wisdom and power of the collective body can be better exerted and the public interest can be better protected. An ideal public atmosphere can be created. An excellent public order can be fixed and a better life can be realized. Therefore the strengthening of the practice of the public spirit asks for the widening of the means of political participation in the public field and the community life and public affairs for citizens which are the platform for the citizens to practice their public spirit. At the same time in the process of strengthening the public spirit practice the rule of law also needs to be further improved. The function of legislature to punish the evil and encourage kindness shall be fully exerted to better regulate and urge the citizens through law to behave according to the public rules and social protocol self-consciously. In the “Luo’er incident” the public gave the donation through the fact that Luo’er used his personal Wechat account to “sell words” seeking assistance. This altruistic act of netizen brandishes the public spirit. In this case the company assisting Luo’er to implement the marketing might undertake related legal responsibility for “illegal donation”. Therefore only if the legal terms can be further perfected, the individual right embedded in the participation process of citizens can be better preserved, and the citizens are more likely to practice the public spirit. The reason is when a stranger beside of you falls down, even somebody attempts to extort money, but the law will use the fact to speak of the fact and reveal the truth, and the dishonest perpetrator will suffer the due punishment. Besides except for the practice platform and the legal guarantee the practice of the public spirit also needs an effective reinforcement to better promote the practice of the public spirit. The scholar Zhao Xiaping considers that the structural reinforcement, organizational reinforcement and the reflexive excitation are the innate mechanism of shaping the public spirit and can beef up the shallow participation, moderate participation and deep participation in the public spirit practice. The practice of the public spirit is a citizen act which requires the support of many platforms and multi-faceted promotion. Only through the comprehensive implementation of many ways the practice of the public spirit can be better reinforced.

4.5 Promoting the Self-Consciousness of the Public Spirit

The public spirit has to release its deserved value in the public fields to ultimately form the citizen’s innate habit of self-conscious participation, and further a spiritual self-consciousness of citizens and the habitual power like a “psychological inclination”. The theory of the psychological inclination can be traced back to the Aristotle’s analysis of the power of “habit”. The French political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville proposed in 1835 for the first time that the psychological inclination is the thing that shapes the concept, opinion and thought and other psychological habit and is the grand total of the morality habits and wisdom habits in a society. The self-consciousness of the public spirit is to require the citizens to form a stable, frequent and persistent attitude and behavioral mode on the basis of the correct treatment of the individual interest and the interests of others and to gradually transform them into a psychological habit. This self-consciousness of the public spirit is the spontaneous attention to the public kindness, the initiative care to the fate of the community and the active promotion of a capable government, and can better solve the conflicts between non-antagonistic bodies in the public fields and ultimately push forward the harmonious development of the society.

The current society is in a crucial transformation period from a traditional society to a modern one. Amid this period of society transformation of the social stratification, interest differentiation and various social conflicts are becoming increasingly obvious. Without any doubt the public spirit is a soft power to the social construction and development and can constitute a formless huge power. At the same time the public spirit is also the important spiritual guidance to the realization of the “China’s dream”. Our nation is still in the primary stage of socialism and also in the primary stage of the buildup of the civil society. Although the public spirit of citizens faces some dilemmas, the new opportunities are still existent. In this new historical era of deepening reformation breaking down the dilemmas facing the public spirit and shaping the public spirit of citizens can definitely push forward the social development and bring about vibrancy to the comprehensive buildup of a moderately prosperous society.

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