

Return to Life: An Examination on the Function of Ritual in Moral Education in Chinese Colleges and Universities

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Abstract

An unusual act in human society, ritual results from long-term historical accumulation and aggregation. It contains rich educational thoughts and plays an active role in enlightening people with deep and lasting contagious effects on the human heart and soul. Applied in moral education in Chinese colleges and universities, ritual not only broadens the scope of moral education but also enriches its content as well as enhances its effectiveness. In today’s context, the limitations of “intellectually oriented moral education” have become increasingly apparent; therefore, it is highly necessary to examine ritual and explore its function in moral education.

Key words: Ritual; Moral education; Function

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INTRODUCTION

With the development of modern society, the limitations of “intellectually oriented moral education”, a previously

dominant model of moral education in Chinese colleges and universities, are becoming increasingly apparent. Intellectually oriented moral education places a lot more emphasis on solving cognitive problems than behavioral problems; it stresses the forms and structures of morals but excluding their rich cultural content; it makes students learn moral lessons through fictitious “moral application problems” (Gao, 2002, p.113), detached from the life-world. Such disconnection from humanity, morality, and life itself inevitably culminates in the loss of the essence of moral education and the emergence of alienation, which by no means develops morals in a real sense. Consequently, there arises an expectation for a diversified model of moral education that emphasizes individual values and actual effects in society. The educational thoughts and educative effects inherent in ritual meet such a need for returning to practice oriented moral education. Ritual incorporates moral education into individual lives and socio-cultural environments through diverse elements and scenes, creating an open system of moral education that is conducive to the internalization of morals and has a positive impact on moral education in colleges and universities.

1. RITUAL AND ITS EDUCATIONAL VALUE

Ritual is one of the oldest and most common socio-cultural phenomena in human society. Anthropologists have hardly reached a consensus on the definition of such an ambiguous concept. In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Emile Durkheim claims that ritual practices can take place anytime anywhere and they are a fundamental source of collectivity necessary for binding people into a community. Focusing on the realm of religious behavior, Victor Turner tried to offer an understanding of ritual derived from symbolism and

dramatology. For him, ritual is a means by which society establishes order through self-reflection (1993, p.261). Radcliffe Brown considered ritual to be shared emotional experiences with intensifying power as well as a socio-collective phenomenon, whereas Clifford Geertz called ritual “cultural performance” (1999, p.175). Drawing upon these conceptualizations of ritual, we may argue that ritual is a special human act performed by specific groups or cultures; it is communicative, transferrable, performative, and has the ability to strengthen the social order. “A ritual is a world of connotations, a symbol system characterized by the use of emotional means as signals” (Xue, 2003, p.39).

As an unusual yet ubiquitous act in human society, ritual rises above the mundane practical to convey certain values in the spiritual realm. In Albert Bergesen’s classification of rituals (2003, pp.49-76), although ordinary language practices and codes of conduct can be categorized as ritual, in most cases they communicate culture as well as bridge the individual and the collective in an unconscious manner; therefore, in our discussion of rituals that have cultural and educational values, ritual should be defined as a special, ceremonial act performed at specific times and on specific occasions. Durkheim summarized the functions of ritual in one basic theme: solidifying social cohesion and strengthening collective power, which he considered to be a universal and unanimous function in all human rituals (Xue, 2003, p.45). Brown (1999, p.175) believed that the social function of ritual is defined by the role it plays in establishing and maintaining normal social order in human society: “by regulating, maintaining, and transmitting from generation to generation communal emotional experiences through which communities are formed, ritual demonstrates its unique social function.” Ritual standardizes the expression of human affections and emotions so as to maintain their vigor and vitality. Conversely, it is these affections and emotions that control and shape human behavior, enabling normal social life to exist and persist. Ritual transforms previously external and enforced regulations into internal voluntary desires (Li, 1981, p.50). As Durkheim has pointed out, although rituals vary in their social functions, they are invariably variants of the same function theme, which is the “state of mind” with the ability to trigger specific “motives” and strong “emotions”. This theme not only represents the cultural consciousness of social communities but also widely impacts the spiritual life of society as a whole.

Due to its “performative nature”, to some extent ritual can be regarded as a “fictitious world,” in which the emotions and mentalities of its performers are, however, real. The performers create a meaningful “ritualistic situation” through performative acts such as body movements, dancing, singing, and playing of musical instruments, coupled with the use of scenery and other props. In the process of ritualizing such fictitious

situations, the participants acquire a symbolic identity through which they review and experience the spiritual solace and needs brought by the symbolic meanings inherent in ritualistic situations. Dilthey argued that the goal of education is to promote the formation and transformation of the human essence through a process of mastering the rules of human changes. Ritual promotes the formation and transformation of the essence of the educatee through the cultural values that it conveys. It is potential education, organized education, and also an unusual form of education. As the symbolic meaning of the ritual plays its role, the cultivating and educational functions of ritual make an impact on the participants through first-hand experience. In this process, however, ritual is no longer an expressive act; it is instrumentalized into a receptacle filled with motives, affections, emotions, and meanings.

By the ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth they served God, and by the ceremonies of the ancestral temple they sacrificed to their ancestors. He who understands the ceremonies of the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth, and the meaning of the several sacrifices to ancestors, would find the government of a kingdom as easy as to look into his palm! (Books of Rites, Doctrine of the Mean).

The practice of using music and ritual to establish and maintain social order can be traced back to as early as the pre-Qin period. Music and ritual elevated the entire social order to a divine state; their status was even higher than that of laws and regulations. Confucius wanted ritual and music to become not only means to perpetuate the patriarchal clan system and maintain hierarchical order but, more importantly, a means of education that helps to build lofty character and promote social harmony. Nowadays the educational functions and value of ritual are becoming increasingly evident. True inheritance requires that education should transform culture from a state of on stock to an active, real-life state; that is, it should activate cultural symbols embodied in material objects, languages, and technical media and transfer them to the medium of real people in real life so that they can be mastered by humans. Ritual not only shapes the lives of the educatees and determines what may lie ahead of them; at the same time, it also guides people’s subjective construction of objective reality (Myers, 2006, pp.1-3) in ways that enable them to adapt to certain social order. Thus ritual becomes a bridge between social realms and systems, opening up the possibility of social learning important in schools and curricula (Wulf, 2009, p.2).

2. ANALYSIS OF THE FUNCTION OF RITUAL IN MORAL EDUCATION IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Just like other social activities, ritual is a cultural event permeated with cultural traditions. It has a

pattern of behavior governed by cultural traditions. By communicating cultural and ideological contents at a specific time in a specific form, it enables moral education to truly return to life, performing a moralizing, educative function accordingly.

2.1 Ritual Broadens the Scope of Moral Education in Colleges and Universities

“As social animals, animals that cannot live in isolation, humans are destined to form a tribe, a clan, or part of an ethnic group and are consequently deeply dependent on such collective experiences”. (Esslin, 1981, p.20) Moral education can never be offered in isolation; it must rely on experience, instinct, and insight. In a time when moral education in colleges and universities is shifting from being closed to be open, from unidirectional to multidimensional, from traditional to modern, the expansion of the scope of moral education seems particularly important. No other social activity can exceed ritual in its ability to solidify social cohesion. Exercising such strong binding power and collectivity, ritual promotes the construction of a shared space, known as “a community”, for educatees and provides them with a full range of experiences out of the narrow individual realm into society and life. The tiny space of the theatrical stage represents the vast social time and space; similarly, the world of ritual, constructed by performance and scenes, also represents a time and space that are infinite and mysterious. The social time and space on stage is a psychological time and space fabricated by actors and imagined by spectators; similarly, the mysterious time and space in a ritualistic situation is also a psychological time and space fabricated and imagined by its participants (Xue, 2003, p.33). In such contexts, we may view ritual as a form of inductive education, the goal of which is not to develop individual potential but to induct the individual into a communal reality, into the life and spirit of a community, a family, a clan, a town, and an ethnic group (Zhang, 1992, p.132). Ritual offers the educatee an opportunity for reflection and evaluation. It becomes deeply ingrained in the heart of the educatee, thereby extending the scope of moral education from centering on the individual to centre on public life.

On the other hand, ritual concretizes abstract moral concepts in the practice of educatees. It can become a bridge and link that transform social morals into individual morals. In other words, social morals can be instantiated in the moral practice of educatees through specific rituals, thus gaining practical meanings and values in real social life. Therefore, to some extent, abstract moral theories and codes separated from corresponding rituals are void and useless. In addition, moral codes of conduct permeate all social relations. Only by engaging in specific social practices and building real connections with society can one gain first-hand experience of the meanings and contents contained in these moral codes

and truly understand their essence accordingly. Educatees participating in a ritual feel the real merely from the fictitious. In this sense, ritual is an unusual act rooted in an unusual mood and unusual mentality. However, in this context, ritual has extended the scope of moral education from the individual realm to the social realm, from imagination to practice.

2.2 Ritual Delivers Content of Moral Education in Colleges and Universities

The growth of a community—be it a social group, an ethnic group, or a nation—is always accompanied by the development of a capacity for memory and recollection. Such collective memories are passed down from one generation to the next by organized, communal groups in ways that are “related to ritual” and “related to language” (Wang, 2007, p.42). In civil society ritual is typically practiced by the common folk as a way of life and a survival skill in their daily lives. But for moral education, ritual is the process of practicing a mode of thinking and an ideology. Through a combination of various elements and scenes, a wide range of contents of moral education is deeply and thoroughly ingrained in the mind and behavior of the educatee in a step-by-step process.

Firstly, the messages delivered in a ritual are consistent with the content of moral education. Ritual represents some kind of historical memory and social memory, which is not only accumulation but also inheritance of social history. As such, ritual has a narrative function. It is a “replay of yesterday”, through which past events pave the way for future endeavors. In this sense, therefore, ritual is more like a silent textbook. The process of practicing a ritual is also a process of transferring knowledge and information as well as conveying feelings and emotions, which is precisely what moral education aims to achieve. Therefore, ritual naturally becomes an important carrier of moral education in colleges and universities. It not only serves multiple functions ranging from transmission of collective memory and cultural traditions to transfer of knowledge and humanistic values in a group but also cultivates character and culture in the individual. It is in essence a process of transmission and internalization. The process of internalization in particular requires more than transient, perceptual, and superficial fluctuations of emotions during a ritual; more importantly, “this strong religious atmosphere and emotional experience... creates life-time memory for thrilled educatees, who constantly act under its ever-lasting influence consciously or subconsciously throughout their lives.” (Tillich, 1988, p.190)

Secondly, ritual is to some extent historical reconstruction of the content of moral education in colleges and universities. The term “historical reconstruction” here refers to an “Aufheben” approach to traditional rituals, preserving what is useful and discarding what is not in today’s contemporary context. Such

sublation mostly manifests itself in ideological content. Traditional rituals are integrated with current mainstream ideology under the premise of an accurate grasp of its trends of development and a thorough understanding of its content and essence, enabling traditional rituals to perform a function of reinterpreting history. In this process, the educatee not only remembers the past but also experiences the present. Through this process of historical reconstruction, the educational value of ritual not only manifests itself in the connotation of historical traditions but also reflects the ideological characteristics of the times.

2.3 Ritual Enhances the Effect of Moral Education in Colleges and Universities

Ritual takes special forms. It consists of a series of formal components, segments of behavior, and operation process with stringent requirements concerning what form it takes. As such, ritual can be viewed as a display and performance of certain social order. Only by means of such formalism can corresponding situations be created through ritual so as to cultivate, aggregate, elevate, and solidify relevant emotions of target learners in these situations. The unique formalism of ritual enables the participants to develop awareness of the messages being conveyed in a rapid and discernible manner. Ritual achieves its educational purpose by arousing similar inner feelings among the participants through individual observation, imitation, first-hand experience and words and deeds of other participants on the scene, as well as the atmosphere created on site. Education is to arouse all that one fails to realize (Jaspers, 1991, p.65), and ritual serves precisely this arousing function through creation of specific scenes.

When it comes to the formation of morals, moral learning and moral education exists only when people experience certain values from their heart, to which they respond with either acknowledgement, reverence, trust or denial, disgust, and abashment. Just as Vasylyuk (1989, p.9) has pointed out,

one always experiences and can only experience by himself what is happening and what crises may arise from his living environment and changes in life. No one can do so in his place, just as even the most experienced teachers cannot substitute their students in understanding the contents of the same lecture.

Only by placing an emphasis on experiential activities can moral education truly reach out to the individual, make an impact, and gradually cultivate individual characters and personalities.

Embedded in culture and closely related to real life, ritualistic activities incorporate education into individual lives and social culture, transforming a static model of moral education in colleges and universities into a dynamic one. Thus, rituals are to a great extent capable of offering the educatee moral experience, meeting the need for full psychological participation in the process of

learning, and creating the optimal learning condition for moral internalization. During a ritual, everyone is both an agent and a recipient. They share the same thoughts in their mind and experience the same feelings, which make them susceptible to mutual empathy and intensification. They often bring with them some kind of faith and piety and regard what they do as a must from an ethical standpoint. Lofty emotions that are buried deep in their heart and hard to be awakened on normal occasions arise consequently, cleansing the spirit, purifying the soul, and enlightening the mind. Ultimately, through specific forms, the content of a ritual is internalized in the mind and knowledge system of the educatee, thereby truly enhancing the effect of moral education in colleges and universities.

3. ACCOMPLISHING THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTION OF RITUAL IN MORAL EDUCATION IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

As stated previously, ritual is an effective means by which moral education in colleges and universities returns to life. However, not all rituals have a positive impact on moral education. An inappropriate ritual may be counter-productive or even destructive. Further, rituals performed in real life may often be plagued by such problems as the contradiction between form and content, the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern, and etc. Therefore, we need to focus our attention on the choice and design of a ritual in ways that combine systematically the spiritual essence of a ritual with its forms in order to fully accomplish its educational function.

3.1 Choosing Rituals

Firstly, we need to integrate traditional and modern rituals. Colleges and universities in many countries in the world have unanimously adopted an approach to moral education that emphasizes the role of traditional culture in shaping national spirit. When societies are undergoing a special period of transition, it becomes even more necessary to stress the binding power of the core values of a society by criticizing and inheriting traditional culture. In contemporary China, moral education among the youth should become a core part of educational activities in this transitional period because it is related to the acknowledgement and consolidation of the belief system of a large population of young students (Wang, 2009, p.52). Currently, many traditional rituals that have educational value are being gradually forgotten; by contrast, many new rituals without much educational value are well received among college students. Therefore, we should selectively incorporate highly educative traditional rituals into the daily lives of college students. These rituals should be closely related to traditional culture and to the

greatest extent reflect the Chinese national spirit, national consciousness, and national traits. Take Qingming Festival (Tomb-Sweeping Day) for example, as a festival with rich cultural, spiritual and educational content, it provides a great opportunity for education through rituals. Not only does it facilitate educatees in developing cultural literacy, it can also easily arouse recollections of saints and sages and their deeds, inspiring educatees to emulate these saints and sages, so as to achieve the goal of moral education. At the same time, we should also criticize and discard ritualistic contents and forms that seem inappropriate for our times or conflict with the developmental needs of today's society and individuals.

Secondly, we need to integrate formal and informal rituals. In a broad sense, ritual can be a solemn, sacred ceremony held on special occasions; or it can be functional, mundane etiquettes and actions (Guo, 2000, p.3). In other words, rituals can be categorized as formal or informal. Although informal rituals function merely in an unconscious manner, they can still accomplish their function in moral education by means of cultural shaping and standardization. Generally speaking, calendrical festivals and ideological rituals such as National Day ceremony, opening ceremonies in schools, and graduation ceremonies are relatively formal; rituals of life and status are relatively informal such as birthday celebrations. Accordingly, these rituals can be integrated to organize moral education activities. For instance, the coming-of-age ceremony is a typical example of an important ritual that combines ideological ritual and ritual of life. It performs in an integrated manner multiple functions among the participants including responsibility education, moral education, and identity education.

Thirdly, we need to integrate common rituals and special rituals. Common rituals are rituals well respected and constantly practiced in society. They can be assimilated and used as a resource in moral education. Moreover, the interaction between and the combination of the internal and the external will greatly improve the educational effect of these rituals. For moral education in colleges and universities, in accordance with the unique physical and psychological characteristics of college students, we should choose special rituals that are specific to a campus, a region, and an era.

3.2 Designing Rituals

Firstly, we should enrich the content of a ritual. A ritual includes many key elements and segments; it relies on the creation of special situations to convey specific content. To prevent a ritual from formalizing, we should enrich and integrate its content as needed. On the one hand, we should effectively combine world views, views of life, and values with the key elements, segments, and situations of a ritual; on the other, we need to be flexible in altering and adjusting the content of a ritual as required by its form. For contents that can be displayed by means of ritualistic

scenes and atmosphere, necessary selection becomes even more important. Thus, rituals create situations that effectively display the content, establish the process, and ultimately achieve the purpose of moral education.

Secondly, we should develop norms for ritualistic practices. To ensure that a ritual can accomplish its function in moral education, a corresponding set of norms needs to be set. The educational significance of a ritual lies not only in its outcome but also in the process. Therefore, we need clearly defined norms governing many aspects of a ritual including time, place, attire, verbal expression, and use of symbols in order to demonstrate its solemnity. Norm-setting does not mean that we need to attend to every single detail of a ritual. Instead, rigidity should be combined with flexibility; that is, we need both macro guidance and adaptability contingent upon time and place. In addition to clearly defined norms governing tangible ritualistic elements, a ritual should also be prescribed in the moral realm by relevant norms that, in the case of violation of these norms, trigger condemnation and guilt in moral consciousness. This intangible pressure prompts the participants to reflect on and improve their own behavior, thereby making the transition from "heteronomy" to "autonomy".

Thirdly, we should innovate ritual carriers. While the content of ritual education is being enriched, its carriers also need further innovation in a number of aspects including experience, simulation, inspiration, symbolic signals and etc.. Under the premise that we grasp the basic principles of the forms of a ritual and display the basic framework of its content, we should innovate its carriers with the aid of modern technologies and tools. Besides such traditional rituals practiced in schools as opening ceremony, graduation, flag-raising, and launching ceremony, we should also flexibly design ritualistic educational activities that are adaptable to specific historical and social contexts. Through scenes, segments, and atmosphere, innovation of a ritual should be able to reproduce, reconstruct, and demonstrate the content of moral education as well as deepen its effect. New carriers are capable of effectively building new relationships between and among knowledge, emotions, and beliefs as well as activating more components of moral education so that the educational function of a ritual can be fully accomplished.

CONCLUSION

Ritual is a cultural artifact in human society; it steers people toward a moral dimension. As a means of moral education in colleges and universities, ritual not only imposes moral constraints on the individual behavior of each educatee; it also provides shared moral goals and values for a community. Thus, ritual has immense moral significance and educative power for the growth of the

educatee. However, when practicing ritualistic education in colleges and universities, we should not only take precautions against a sense of fatigue caused by ritual repetitiveness and a sense of “mere formality” caused by ritual formalization with no substance; more importantly, we should also guard against a sense of “demoralization” caused by ritual instrumentalization, which allows the moral intentions of a school to be concealed by rituals. Otherwise, we won’t be able to make moral education truly return to life.

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