

Analysis of the Independence and Reconstruction of Consumption Rituals: A Comparative Study of Chinese Ancient and Modern Festival Consumption

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Abstract. According to the existing research, large-scale consumption behaviors and activities, as a commodity value realization mode with great production significance in China's traditional production system, rarely have independent identities such as "Double Eleven Shopping Festival" and "June 18th Promotion in the Middle of the Year" nowadays. However, this does not necessarily explain the problems including sluggish consumption but reflects its characteristics such as form bearing and connotation attachment to other festivals. From the perspective of communication rituals, consumption itself may have existed as a specific social function at this time. Nonetheless, consumption, as a connotation, was independently recognized and ritualized by the society, which fails to be fully completed until the emergence of "Double Eleven". This paper will focus on the reflection of "rituals" in consumption and festivals in an attempt to recognize the transformation from "festival consumption" to "consumption festival" with comparative and integrated thinking.

Keywords: Consumer Culture; Communication; Rituals; Festivals.

1. Introduction

Modern culture is in rapid fission. The significance and value of many ritual behaviors, including festivals, deserve to be reevaluated and examined, instead of being as carefree and fascinated as we imagined in our childhood. Although consumer culture has existed since ancient times, consumer festivals such as "Double Eleven" are undoubtedly a modern construction. When we marvel at and immerse ourselves in its great momentum, it is probably necessary to clarify its root according to the historical evolution and prove the falsifications of some modern construction attempts with the thinking of Chinese traditional cultural festivals.

2. Transcendence and Integration of Emotion: Dependence of Consumption Significance of Ancient Festivals

Under the condition of the natural economy, families undertake the dual functions of production and consumption at the same time.[1] In addition to consumption, scholar, farmer, artisan, and merchant all depend on the family unit and agricultural production, living their lives rooted in the system of small-scale peasant economy. According to Yan's Family Precepts: Family Management, "The essence of living people relies on crops to eat and textile to wear. Fruits and vegetables are produced in the garden. The goodness of chickens and pigs is born in a sty. And the materials of the buildings, straws, and candles are all made from plants. To keep their living, they have enough to feed themselves with life necessities even though closing their doors, but there is no salt well at home." [2] The family's means of subsistence are not only a problem of insufficiency in food and cloth but also a stable family production system that is produced and sold by itself. Only some that can't be self-produced such as well salt will be put into market transactions. Therefore, consumption exists only as an external behavior of household products and as a supplement to the natural economic system. At the same time, from the perspective of economic structure, the restriction of small-scale production means that the basic self-sufficiency of living materials is not easy. Especially after considering productivity factors such as the ability to resist risks and the level of the labor force, "men can't cultivate enough food and women can't make enough clothes" [3] is the situation of most families.

Under this economic background, only a few officials and rich families can enjoy and develop materials besides the means of subsistence to enjoy a richer life with the right to education.[4] With the solidified class exploitation mechanism, these upper social strata have also established a stable structure in income ability, which means that only this group can form a non-turbulent and reliable soil for the construction of the consumer market. Although Confucianism always argues that “wealth and expensiveness are what people want. But you can’t enjoy them if you don’t achieve them properly. Being poor is what people hate. But you can’t get rid of them if you don’t deal with them in a righteous way,”[5] it seems to be sheer footnotes for the rich in the performance of class differentiation within the consumption structure, which only echos the discipline to be remembered when the society is needed to stabilize.

In contrast, the festival is in the category of mass culture, whose influence is extensive with its formation rooted in the folk. For example, on New Year’s Eve in Tang Dynasty, citizens adhered to the custom of waiting for the New Year’s arrival. As Record of Three Qins stated, “On New Year’s Eve, every family prepares delicious food at the place where the family stays up late or all night to welcome the New Year and people get together for a hearty drink”[6], and the folk celebrated the New Year with a month-long continuous feast. A Collection of Literature Arranged by Categories recorded, “From the Yuan Dynasty to the end of a month, people were in a reunion to eat and drink together for fun.”[7] Meanwhile, “After the Spring Festival every year, people feasted on the food and drink, where people appealed to each other to have a seat,”[8] that is, neighbors treat each other. Most of these festivals, which originated from and served the folk, directly contained people’s beautiful wishes for a bumper harvest, epidemic elimination, reunion, respect for the elderly, social justice, love, etc. Therefore, the emergence of these festivals is often not a myth construction in the political sense, but a simple endogenous emotion. The connection of these emotions and the borrowing of folk stories such as myths allows festivals to be an emotional link and collective ceremony. That is to say, under the small-scale peasant economy, people’s consumption sentiment, which does not expand, breaks through the so-called economic inevitability and customary training through specific festivals before completing the self-legitimacy. In addition, the society still shows the desire for ethics and agriculture-based thought after the formation of this ceremony, so it is worthy of being recognized and reconstructed by the rulers politically. Therefore, this breakthrough finally shows the characteristics of cross-class in a divided society. The cultural participation of the lower class people has not been isolated because of the lack of power. In fact, its connotation has accumulated more and more in the blending with the upper class, which is reflected in consumption, that is, the prosperity of holiday consumption. When Monk Ennin arrived in Yangzhou in 838, he recorded his first New Year’s Eve in China (December 29th). “Taoism’s customs refer to burning paper money together and laymen light firecrackers at night to say long live the emperor. In the street shop, hundreds of varieties of meals are full.”[9] Record of Horticulture states a shop outside the Changhe Gate in Suzhou in Tang and Five Dynasties, “each festival monopolizes one thing to sell, which is all over Beijing.”[10] In addition, the New Book of Tang: Record of Food wrote that some people said “young and strong in a society ruled by the Emperor Daizong of Tang are equal to eating two liters of rice”. Nonetheless, the population of Chang’an was less than one million at that time. According to Mr. Wu Xiaoliang’s rough estimation, Chang’an citizens consumed about 1.2 million kilograms of rice on New Year’s Day.[11] Biography of the Old Father in Dongcheng said, “The folk customs are especially distinct. Families of kings, consorts, your masters, and royal families have poured money to buy chickens to compensate for their value.” It’s about the prevalence of cockfighting during the Cold Food Festival, which caused the price of chicken to rise and ordinary citizens failed to afford it, so “the poor make fake chickens”...[12] All these indicate that even though the social development of different dynasties or spaces is different and even if commerce is not mainstream in the daily life of agriculture-based society, the consumer still expands on a large scale in the typical “cultural rituals” of festivals with its obvious dependency. “People are poor but still need new clothes and wine,” is one of these proofs.[13]

3. Independence of Consumerism: Presenting as Festival Noumenon

Social representation theory points out that the ideas, images, social knowledge, and social consensus shared by social members in a specific time and space are symbols or systems with social significance.[14] Traditional festivals including Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Dragon Boat Festival, Tomb-Sweeping Day, and Chinese Valentine's Day as unique cultural symbols carried people's simple and direct life feelings and prayers in ancient China. It was this collective prayer in a similar life field that originated and prospered the bottom-up ritual construction. In the era of mass communication, the memory space and relationship communication of festival culture present new laws, especially in the era of mobile media when festivals are embedded in the symbol space of multiple media, providing a drill ground for the contemporary inheritance of traditional festival culture.[15] Under the logic of the old and new media, the traditional festival cultural symbols are mixed with more social orientations in the inheritance and evolution, forming a more unique and complex one in the cultural ideographic mechanism. When this system is considered under the functional genes of industrial society, it is mostly the direct social and political bias in the texture of some countries, which also highlights the structural significance of consumption. In the promotion tide on November 11th every year, merchants stimulate group consumption through advertising promotion, social network promotion, large-scale event promotion, price reduction promotion, service promotion, and other promotion strategies, attracting the attention of consumers.[16] At this time, unlike the formation of ancient festivals, the festival construction of "Double Eleven" is full of strong procedural certainty and realistic functionality, providing discounts, strengthening policies, and clarifying processes... In other words, "Double Eleven" as a festival is a business planning project and a field where many elements such as capital and policy are hatched under social functional thinking, rather than a spontaneous activity and simple culture that embraces people's wishes. This means that consumption has officially become the noumenon of the festival from form to content, which is presented as the whole of the festival. In short, the transformation from "festival consumption" to "consumption festival" has been completed.

4. Reconstruction of Consumer Festivals: From the Perspective of Communication Ritual View

James W. Kerry, the proponent of the concept of communication ceremony, believes that ritual "is a sacred ceremony that attracts people together as a group or community." [17] In my understanding, culture is the foundation of meaning and our so-called ritual is the integration of its transcendence in a specific time and space. Although we compare the concept of communication ritual with the concept of communication transmission most of the time, believing that the concept of rituals seems not to be a functionalist perspective. But in fact, as Durkheim discussed in *Basic Forms of Religious Life*, after linking the internal meaning of ritual with social relations and putting forward the propositions of "belief/ritual" and "sacred/secular", the ritual became a way of social control. Meanwhile, the observation and research of ritual became the interpretation and discussion of the overall structure of society.[18] When a ritual is formed, its social significance integration function has matured regardless of whether it's influenced by a certain class or force, which is also one of the few similarities between ancient festival consumption and contemporary consumption festivals.

However, it is in the functional perspective that the contrast between them appears again at the same time. In the construction of the "Double Eleven" festival, it is difficult for us to see the position of faith, so we cannot recognize its position in the cultural festival; On the other hand, the possibility of the birth of faith makes people immersed or afraid again. The latter means that although consumption ritual cannot become a religion, it tries to enchant it all the time from ecological construction to mysterious construction to form carnival. For example, as one of the main consumers, the employment and living expenses of young people are not optimistic. Confronted with the economic pressure, the preferential price reduction of "Double Eleven" has almost become a savior. The proper temptations such as "cheap price" and stimulative manners contain their expectations for

enriching consumption and improving their lives. In addition, we clearly understand that people are not spectators but participants in the ritual. Similarly, rituals are not what happens to someone but what people participate in.[19] However, under the clear functional framework of “Double Eleven”, people only exist as materialized identities of consumers and markets. This carnival is no longer rooted in the good wishes of those people but only aims at clearing inventory and emptying wallets. In this way, the impulse of spending money, that is, consumption, keeps pace with vivid human meanings such as reunion, resigning the old and welcoming the new, and love, which gradually steps into the ritualization of noumenon and festival construction with a hypocritical sacred face, even though we all don’t like this kind of capital game.

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