

Anthropological Research on the Essence of Rural Revitalization

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Cultural consciousness is the essence of rural revitalization, which is a process of transformation from cultural consciousness to cultural self-determination. “Dialogue” is an inevitable choice during rural revitalization among different participants, but “participation” of the main population is the only available path in this regard. Conscious “dialogue” and “participation” of rural population are indispensable for rural revitalization.

Keywords: rural revitalization, cultural consciousness, dialogue, participation

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with wide application of technological tools such as modern communication and transportation, production efficiency is getting higher and higher, and more convenient communication has shortened the distance between people, meanwhile the emotional gap between them is becoming more obvious.

Incubation, growth and development of emotion of people take time, which is foundational but not cultivated with efficiency. Pursuit of higher efficiency, which shortens distance between people while diluting emotions among individuals, causes inevitable loss.

People’s value orientation changes these days while the society develops with high speed while prioritizing efficiency. Similar trend is found in the process of poverty alleviation, supported by funds of the nation being distributed among the low-income families. There is also an emotional care during this process. Rural revitalization is worthy of reflection in the above context.

This article demonstrates rural revitalization in southwestern China from the perspective of cultural consciousness in villages. The author conducted field research in Liubo Village, Hekuzhen Town, and Liubo Village, Hekuzhen Town. Both of the two villages are in Fenghuang County, Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture of Ethnic Tujia and Miao, Hunan Province. By carrying out in-depth interviews among villagers and observing the changes in rural communities, the author analyzes impacts of rural poverty alleviation projects. The anthropological research conducted in the villages for years also included focus group interviews and one-on-one conversations with senior villagers, village leaders, and young generation such as returning youth and students, which in general show clearly the importance of cultural self-determination in rural revitalization.

CULTURAL CONSCIOUSNESS: ESSENCE OF RURAL REVITALIZATION

Over the last hundred years, modernism has speedily developed in China resulting into nibbling of villages as a sacrifice. Rapid urbanization in the country, especially after reform and opening up of China in the early 1980s, has caused a prominent expression of depression in villages. The strategy of rural revitalization has been put forward to meet the urgent need for construction and development in villages. China is no doubt an agricultural country. Addressing the rural issues is fundamental necessity for helping the people earn their livelihood, and ensuring welfare of the people at national level. At present, the principal contradiction in Chinese society is the one between the ever-growing material and cultural needs of the people and the low level of production. Such imbalanced and insufficient development is also a prominent problem in rural society. To be specific, the issues include: serious rural ecological problems, low level of overall rural development, defective urban-rural mobilization, shortage of peasants' adaptation to productivity and market completion, and disproportion of educational resource allocation. Rural revitalization strategy is an inevitable choice to overcome the issues listed above and to achieve sustainable development. The Central Government of China has set up the basic principles for rural revitalization as adhere to the Chinese Communist Party's management of rural work; prioritize agricultural and rural development; stick to the main role of farmers; uphold the comprehensive revitalization of rural areas; adhere to the integration of urban and rural development; adhere to the harmony between man and nature.¹ It can be inferred from the basic principles that rural areas should prioritize agriculture in villages, and put rural development to an important position. However, rural construction is not an overnight project. It takes joint efforts of the government and the villagers. Experience of previous projects indicates that the rural construction was focused on economic development, neglecting the cultural aspects.

“Rural area means villages, which is a term in contrast to cities. It refers to areas where farming is the main livelihood source and the population is scattered” (Long and Gong 2018, 4). The brief definition of rural areas shows that such areas are agricultural, and villagers manage agriculture activities and take agriculture as the main source of life. Rural areas cover village history, geographical space and religion of the countryside, including rural economy, ecological environment, faith and many other interrelated subsystems. Each village located in the same region is an organic whole which is independent but closely connected with one another. Thus, it is necessary to treat villages as a systematic and comprehensive organism.

Each individual, nation and country has its own culture which is different from that of others. Their survival, development and continuation rely on cultures. Cultural trait is also a prerequisite for each country, nation and individual. The development and growth of a nation is carried on by the heritage of culture from generation to generation, and the loss of culture means extinction of a nation. The success of a culture means the prosperity of a nation, because culture is closely related to the development of the nation. In essence, the most striking feature of culture is the heterogeneity and integrality. Rural societies in different regions also show external differences and internal integrity. However, villages do have certain common factors: “The peasants love their land; they are not able to leave their native villages and communities; home is the center of their universe; marriage is a prerequisite for financial and material prosperity; staying in the ancestral houses, and following the norms for continuing the ancestral line by males” (Redfield 2013, 117). Anyhow, difference of geographic environment, history and social structure constitute various rural society, which carries different types of culture. Every village has its characteristics and differences, and its internal order to sustain development and stability of rural society. Therefore, each village has its own development path which is different from others. The external difference and internal integrality of rural areas constitute an organic whole, which promotes the development and continuation of rural society under the role of culture. People are one of the carriers of culture, and the elements of culture also include the houses to live in, the land to live on, the religion to believe in and so on. The main body which constitutes rural society includes people, house, land, industry, belief and other aspects, which together form the carrier of rural society. From the view of all elements

which constitute culture and the platform that carries rural development, rural society is the reflection of all elements of culture. From this perspective, rural revitalization is actually cultural revitalization.

Rural construction in history was not to build development zones. It did not have much external factors such as power and capital intervention. It accumulated and expanded gradually, and shaped kinship by villagers' self-psychological motivation. "Of course, the rural construction movement did not come into being by accident. It is instead completely driven by the national and cultural consciousness. The so-called national consciousness is the consciousness of self-reliance" (Yan 2004, 214). Rural areas contain large room for self-generation and operation, and relies on development within such areas. Villages construct large a number of ancestral temples and halls, which establish the way of rural social order. Temples and ancestral halls remained in the villages, and rites and worships are all to be given new life and new energy. Policies need changes to get closer to reality, to mobilize cultural resources, and to make villagers willing to return home. Rural space, welfare, industry, literature and history are ultimately cultural re-construction and cultivation. Rural revitalization is to retrieve cultures which departed from rural regions, to develop culture facts, and to apply culture to creative rural management. In modern concept, villages are lagging behind, while cities are advancing more and more. However, to pursue normal human civilization, village is the starting point. "Because villages are the beginning and cities are the end. Originally, village was home of human beings, while cities were established for certain purpose. Human organizations originated from villages are from the bottom up, and from the scattered to congregated conditions. This is in accordance with normality, and with normal human civilization."

(Liang 2015, 186-187) To keep the original connection and order, one should have a real relationship with the villages. Such relationship is above individual benefit and will. This internal connection is the value that the villages have given to the whole culture.

Essence of rural revitalization is to give power of discourse back to local villagers, activate their creativity, and enforce the process of cultural consciousness to cultural self-determination. "Cultural consciousness is a hard process. Only when people know their culture well, understand diverse cultures contacted, could a culture find its position in the world of merging cultural diversity. After self-adaptation and learn from each other, diverse cultures will be able to jointly form a principle which contains a mutually recognized order and peaceful coexistence, individual advantages and collaborative progress."

(Fei 2009, 186) Rural construction nowadays is going on speedily, with intention of achieving quick success of a thorough change within three to five years, which needs reflection. Depression in rural areas hinders urban development. So reconsideration of rural management and construction in such context is thus necessary. People are the subject of poverty alleviation, no matter the poverty alleviation projects are local ecosystem or resettlement oriented. To achieve the goal of eliminating poverty and getting rich, projects should rely on residents' subjective initiatives, local natural and cultural resources and promotion of industries.

Nature of rural revitalization is cultural consciousness, and the tasks are inheriting traditional cultures, and re-activate villages' energy so as to place rural culture in modern cultural system. Rural culture has its characters and diversity. Foundation of rural cultural confidence is based on understanding and restoration of rural cultural values, as well as promotion of cultural renaissance in villages, which allows peasants to be the main body of rural culture so that the culture could play a broader role.

EQUAL DIALOGUES

Village is the source of culture. The character of "village" in Chinese means two persons sit face to face and eat together intimately. It reflects dialogues, exchange and communication among families and kinship. In this sense, rural society is ethical and emotional. Villages are links among villagers, as well as bridges for dialogues and communication. Rural revitalization today is a top-down movement of politics and economics, enhanced by national and external powers which reframe rural structure. From the perspective of state and social relationship, government has a fairly loose control on rural society, the tie between national power and rural society is relatively vulnerable. The revolution and movement since the

modern times are the penetration and transformation of rural social activities by state forces, the social integration from top to bottom, and to some extent, the social movement led by "outsiders", which is promoted in the form of formal projects. However, "Formal projects are actually parasitic on informal processes, without which formal projects can neither arise nor exist. Nevertheless, formal projects often fail to acknowledge, or even suppress the informal process. It not only damages the interests of the project's target audience, but also ultimately leads to the designer's failure" (Scott 2004, 6-7). The promotion of state power has boosted the development of rural society and economy, but the state's attempt to transform society is likely to backfire.

Taking Heku in Fenghuang County, for example, the government is building some resettlement areas, which are the biggest in Hunan Province. The state invests 590 million yuan to build uniform houses, hospitals, schools, farmers markets, cultural squares, and museums in good locations with convenient transportation. However, villagers are not willing to move to the new areas, and therefore the resettlement project has encountered difficulty situation. According to the Communist Party leader in Lebo Village, due to customary concern, the old people do not want to move and leave their native homeland. According to the local tradition, all the villagers must come back to attend old man's funeral. Villagers worry that such cohesion will no longer exist after moving from their villages. Some villagers mentioned that after moving out of their villages, their old houses will be pulled down. They do not wish to see this since the old houses are inherited from their ancestors and thus are their root and soul. If they move out, it means their root disappears. In addition, livelihood becomes a problem after relocation. Villagers will not have land to farm and they are not able to conduct cultivation industry, how could they make a living? Such series of questions are for villagers to face. To some degree, relocation projects mean disappearance of belief, dissipation of culture, and livelihood challenges.

At the national level, relocation is for the villagers' benefit, to help them leave the areas with so-called vulnerable ecological systems, and to support them to eliminate poverty. It is also an approach of implementing rural revitalization. However, the reality is that such resettlement projects also dispel village culture. Resettlement houses are designed and constructed with uniform methods, with modern concrete-steel structure and external ethnic cultural aspects. From the national perspective, the new houses are superior, which are clean, comfortable and convenient. Nevertheless, villagers are not willing to accept them since such poverty alleviation projects to certain degree ignore their belief, inter person communication and cultural essence. Perhaps the final result is just as what the foreword of the book *The Nation's Perspective: How Projects that Try to Improve the Human Condition Fail* says: "How well-intentioned leaders devise projects to modernize their people and landscapes. These projects are so huge, so ignorant of the basic facts of ecological and social life that they are carried on regardless even after the deadly consequences have been revealed" (Scott 2004, 2). There is a contradiction between the state's intention and the villagers' will, which are opposite to each other. "How to view man's relationship to the environment is one of the great moral problems of our time" (Shrader-Frechette 1981, 28). There is a lack of exchange and communication. In this way, the poverty alleviation is lack of "equal dialogue", and the final result may not please anyone.

For a long period of time in China, cities are developed at the expense of villages, that is, peasants contributed to urban construction. However, rural revitalization nowadays requests help from urban citizens. In people's mind, the countryside is backward and despised, while the city is advanced and desirable. Especially in the current process of pursuing efficient and modern development, the so-called advanced concept of the city is more popular. The reason for this phenomenon is that a deep-rooted "de-agriculturalization" thought has deeply affected people. It is defined that things farmers do in the countryside are called farming, but in the cities, called working. And now, the implementation of rural revitalization is to let urban people do things in the countryside. So how should this be called? When the city people help the villagers to implement the revitalization of the countryside, they need to understand the rural things. If not, it means that the rural construction is empty.

To certain degree, rural revitalization means development and prosperity of rural economics. "Out comers", while helping rural development, need to pay attention to rural progression and earnings. In July 2018, the author learned during the research in Liubo Village, Hekuzhen Town, Fenghuang County that

the current pillar industry of the village is flue-cured tobacco. Under the leadership of the village party secretary, a flue-cured tobacco cooperative has been set up, adopting the management mode of "cooperative + peasant households", and the sales mode of direct purchase by the state. During the tobacco harvesting season, villagers are hired to pick tobacco leaves in the hills. With no limit on the amount of leaves to be picked, villagers receive an allowance of 80 yuan per person each day. Another industry is crisp date called "long peng". Villagers make full use of wasteland in the mountain to plant date trees. They sign sales agreements with city people from Changsha, Zhejiang and other places. Villagers sell most of dates online. Wholesale price is 10 yuan for 500 grams. It also takes villagers 80 yuan per day to hire one villager to pick dates in the mountain during the harvest season. The cities and the villages need each other, and they reach agreements for sales, which help the village fundamentally.

Rural revitalization requests integrated development of rural and urban areas, which means villages are equally important as cities. This needs "dialogues" and "communication" between cities and villages. With such "dialogues", rural needs and culture could be understood fundamentally and rural revitalization could be actually implemented.

FULL PARTICIPATION: ONLY APPROACH TO RURAL REVITALIZATION

The target area of rural revitalization is villages. However, who should be the main subject in the implementation becomes a question. If the main subject is the urban residents, they need to "dialogues" with villages. However, if it is the villagers, they must become the actual main subject. "The so-called subjectivity of peasants means that they have the dominant right to participate, to express, to profit and to consume in economic, social, political and cultural aspects" (Wang 2018). Conscious "participation" plays a role of core force in the strategy of rural revitalization. Rural revitalization strategy is grand, and it needs not only strong support and resource input from the national level, but also cooperation from different social sectors. Village beneficiaries' active participation is essential. Rural revitalization depends on villages, where villagers participation embodies values and contribution substantially. Rural society is small, everywhere in the world there are small groups of all kinds, living and dying on their own, sort of like small groups of animals. Each of these small groups has its own culture and small, isolated social structures (Redfield 2013, 11). Thus, participation and implementation by individuals in the small society assures effectiveness.

Poverty elimination is the premise of rural revitalization. To help villages reduce poverty and become rich, the state forces present are transforming the villages in the form of projects, most of which are enterprise and marketing oriented. Ultimate goal of enterprises are profit. All enterprises are profit oriented, and not preservation focused. At least eighty percent of outcome of enterprises are for money. Therefore, real rural revitalization requests in-depth reflection. Villages are nourished by land, and damage to natural resources without emotion to land makes rural revitalization impossible. Especially the projects today do not include attachment to land and peasants' rights of decision. Such projects deem to fail, no matter how ambitious they are. Peasant participation in the past was forced, allured and driven, and now it becomes in-depth self-conscious. However, actual rural revitalization lies in villager's confidence and voice, which is not sufficient nowadays. The movement of "One Village One Product" in Japan encourages every country to design and make their own local product, which is non-copyable by others. Such approach promoted villagers attachment to their countries. We could learn from it, making peasants design and sell their own village products. Rural revitalization is not about technology, for technology will not be effective without emotion of peasants. On the contrary, technology could progress if the peasants acknowledge it. This is particularly true for local knowledge, which reflects all technologies in rural areas. Nowadays, people always think technologies from the west are advanced, while traditional skills are behindhand. The concept of using western technologies to measure traditional skills and overturning technical rationality needs to be changed.

One key aspect of rural revitalization is the promotion of education. Firstly, the importance of village schools should be acknowledged and rural education system should be improved. Yan Yangchu (2004, 222) has mentioned: "Village schools are the political center of rural culture, and rural construction must

go through education. The standard to implement at the construction of rural education system must set all villagers as receivers, and the whole village as the target site. The real life content of the rural education should include the adaptation, improvement and creating of real life.” Education power is a favorable condition for rural construction. Village schools are not only rural educational organizations, they are also platforms of traditional cultures, as well as carriers of native knowledge. Village schools exert a subtle influence on rural civilization, folkways, customs, habits, traditional moral concepts and belief, all of which educate school children. The problem that exists now is that village schools are combined into the model of one school in each town, and have turned into a type of “away from home” schools. The distance between schools and villages is getting farther and farther. Some families send their children to schools in the cities for better education conditions, thus traditional village culture is hard to carry forward. If the village is to be constructed by villagers, then a question exists: are villagers capable enough to handle this responsibility and burden? Current problem is: the loss of traditional cultural resources and shortage of peasant needs for spiritual culture, as well as the deviation and discrepancy in the interpretation of the village cultural values by the whole society, lead to the hollowing out and nihil of the rural culture, and its ability to connect with modern cultures. Rural revitalization needs planning, construction and knowledge. Thus it needs rural education. Failure of rural education may directly lead to rural depression.

Rural revitalization requests villagers self-motivated participation. The promotion of rural industries is an important security measure of rural revitalization. Meanwhile, “A person is a biological organism, a social being and a unique individual; perceptions, attitudes and values reflect all three levels of being” (Tuan 1974, 245). Villagers’ self-motivated participation is the key to the prosperity of rural industries. When villagers become the owner of development, they lead the industries following their will, and the industry will then have good future.

Changputang Village in Liaojiqiao Township, Fenghuang County, Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture of Ethnic Tujia and Miao, is a well-of model village. The village locates 7 kilometers from the ancient town of Fenghuang in the east and 20 kilometers from Tongren Airport in the west. It covers 3 natural villages and 6 groups of villagers. The author’s field research records that there are 208 households and the population is 906, mainly of whom are Ethnic Tujia. In November 2013, President Xi Jinping visited the village and proposed to support the construction of ecological fruit industry and poverty alleviation work in the village. During the field research, the author finds the fruit industry driven by kiwi fruit and honey pomelo has enhanced rural revitalization. This fruit industry has been promoted by “able man” in the village.

In 1995, the village planted 200-300 mu of kiwi fruit. At that time, the price of kiwi fruit was 5 yuan/500 grams, and the prospects looked quite good. When the villagers who planted large tracts of land were too busy, they asked neighbors to help. Influenced by the “able man”, fruit plantation in the village expanded gradually, reaching 6,000 mu today. Kiwi fruit is now the major product of the village industry. In 2018, per capita income in the village was 12,000 yuan, 90 percent of which was from the fruit industry, and only a small portion was from wages of migrant workers. Development of rural industry attracted villagers to return home from cities. At present, the population of the village is 3,035, among which only 120 are working outside. The return of the rural population provides a strong guarantee for the development of the industry. Women in the village have established a “team of grafting”, which have been working for Guizhou, Sichuan, Chongqing and Shaanxi, earning annual income as high as 3 million. The development of industry in Changputang Village is led by “able men”. Under the influence of such “able man”, villagers involve in planting willingly without interference from the state forces. On the one hand, such industry model is owned by villagers, who contribute to the industry development with spontaneous initiative. It inspire the enthusiasm in cultivation. On the other hand, the government offers good guide and proper support. This is a step to integrate the bottom-up power and top-down policies to boost the development of rural revitalization.

Rural revitalization needs support from belief system. There is a stone tablet in Zaoqi Village, Heku Township, with the following inscription: “Ancestral grave up, ancient road down, never make offerings, concluded by Long and Wu families, in the spring of Guangxu 14”. This tablet shows that there were two

families in this place. One family lived at the upper part of the landscape and the other at the lower part. Before the tablet is a land and behind it is an ancestral tomb. The family living in the lower place wanted to remove a stone to make the farmland wider, however the other family disagreed to disturb their ancestral tomb. The two families invited a local necromancer called Badai to solve the conflict by setting up a stone tablet as a boundary maker. From the inscription, one can feel that faith or local “god-like” persons played special roles in the villages, which deal with issues that could not be resolved by regulations. Some officials of the village poverty alleviation team take advantage of such moralities to deliver among villagers the concept of “God observes what people do”, while identifying poverty-stricken households. Accepting such concepts, villagers follow their conscience to select low income families. To restraint residents with concept of God is an effective reference for rural revitalization.

It is on the basis of these informal rules that some rural regulations, codes of conduct and stability and harmony in the countryside have discovered the traditional cultural resources that the villagers are willing to share and adapt to the modern times, and formed a modern governance system in which the rule of virtue, the rule of law and the system of democratic autonomy complement and integrate each other. The diversity of the world is exactly the opportunity for the revival of traditional culture and national culture. Ethnic cultures roots in extensive villages What the society lacks now is faith, the law is only the bottom limit, and ultimately relies on the maintenance of belief system. But in the impetuous society, if the concept is applied to the market, there are certain difficulties. However, in impetuous society, it is difficult to apply such concept into marketing.

Rural revitalization is a long-term process, which requires a modern system of agriculture, industry, production, and operating, as well as a sound rural governance scheme (Shen 2020, 1). Furthermore, rural revitalization is not only to build a substantial environment, the most important aspect is to develop rural community members’ conscious participation in public affairs, which is a process of transformation from cultural consciousness to cultural self-determination.

CONCLUSION

Villages contain the genes of 5,000 years old Chinese culture, thus, acting as a platform of the traditional culture. Rural revitalization requests preservation of the traditional culture, so as to cultivate and make full use of local educated people, to attract the youth to return home and keep them working at home. It is necessary to take advantage of resources on the basis of reality and balance the development of various industries. Rural construction carries forward the villagers' autonomy and utilizes the folk regulations effectively. To develop specific villages sustainably, villagers should take ownership. They should organize themselves by following certain regulations, which are folk regulations, and also an aspect of culture. In the past, policies, strategic plans focused more on the state and enterprises, while the village development and rural society was relatively overlooked. Due to lack of communication mechanism, good will did not necessarily bring in good outcome. Participation includes forced and self-motivated. Today’s rural revitalization should solve problems through self-motivation, spirit-building, and self-independence, as well as self-reliance, rather than relying on the state support. Villagers ought to shoulder their own mission, take ownership of choosing, utilizing and developing their own resources, , and improve their organization capabilities. Doing so can make the rural construction valuable.

Essence of rural revitalization is culture renaissance and cultural consciousness. It is an effective connection between bottom-up power and top-down policies. Without cultural consciousness, the development of rural revitalization is empty and void. “Dialogue” of cultural consciousness is an inevitable choice for the rural revitalization, while rural main population’s “participation” is the only path. The approach of revitalization through self-motivated “dialogue” and “participation” is also an opportunity for national rejuvenation.

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ENDNOTES

1. Cited from “Opinions of the State Council of the CPC Central Committee on the Implementation of the Rural Revitalization Strategy”, issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council of China on January 2, 2018.
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