

Filial Piety and Soul Beliefs in Contemporary Rural Funeral Rituals: A Case Study of Gansu “Lingyang” Ceremony

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Abstract: This paper explores filial piety and soul beliefs in contemporary rural funeral rituals, specifically focusing on the "Lingyang" ceremony in the Gansu region. Here, "Ling" means "to receive and connect," and "Yang" refers to "sheep." This ceremony holds unique and significant cultural symbolism in local funeral customs. Since ancient times, sheep have played an important role in Chinese traditional culture and ritual practices, symbolizing gratitude, loyalty, and virtue. In ancient times, being one of the three most important sacrificial animals, sheep were not only key offerings in rituals dedicated to heaven, ancestors, and deities but also embodied the relationship between humans and the divine. The "Lingyang" ceremony is a modern continuation of this cultural tradition within Gansu's funeral rituals. The ceremony is a core element of local funeral practices, where family members interpret the sheep's reactions to determine whether the deceased's soul is at peace or has unfulfilled wishes. The sheep's reactions are seen as a means of communication with the deceased's spirit and serve as a symbolic evaluation of the family members' filial behavior. This ceremony reinforces the ethical order within the family and reflects local beliefs in the immortality of the soul and the continuation of Confucian filial piety. Through an analysis of the origins, procedures, and cultural significance of the "Lingyang" ceremony, this paper highlights its crucial role in Gansu's rural funeral traditions. The ceremony not only commemorates the deceased but also functions as a social mechanism to monitor the moral conduct of the living. This paper aims to reveal how the values of filial piety and soul beliefs are preserved and practiced through this unique funeral ritual.

Keywords: Ancestor Worship, Cultural Transition, Ritual Process, “Lingyang” ceremony.

1. Introduction

In ancient Chinese sacrificial culture, sheep held profound cultural and religious symbolic meaning. The Chinese character for “sheep” is embedded in both these words, symbolizing gratitude and loyalty and being regarded as a representation of beauty and goodness. In Chinese, when the character for "sheep" is combined with a component that signifies "spiritual offering," it forms a word meaning blessings and prayers for good harvests, peace, and prosperity in the coming year. When combined with a component associated with "speech," it forms a word that expresses reverence for the gods and uses sheep as offerings to heaven in prayers for divine blessings.[1]

Therefore, in ancient sacrificial practices, sheep were not only material offerings but also spiritual symbols. The concept of “Three Sacrificial Animals and Six Livestock” was central to ancient

Chinese culture. The three sacrificial animals—oxen, sheep, and pigs—were considered as the most solemn offerings in sacrifices to heaven, ancestors, and deities. Meanwhile, the six livestock—cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, dogs, and chickens—played a crucial role in daily life, supporting agriculture and families. As one of the three sacrificial animals, sheep are always used in important rituals such as the Spring Festival, autumn sacrifices, funerals, and major family ceremonies. These rituals, through the sacrifice of livestock, expressed reverence for heaven and ancestors. The term "sacrifice" in ancient China specifically referred to animals used in rituals. These sacrificial animals gave up their lives to bring blessings on behalf of the people, and thus the term "sacrifice" gradually came to imply self-sacrifice.[2] According to the hierarchical sacrificial system of ancient times, the offerings varied according to the social status of the person performing the sacrifice. During the pre-Qin period, the highest level of sacrificial offering was called "Tai Lao," which included all three sacrificial animals—oxen, sheep, and pigs. The next level was "Shao Lao," which included only sheep and pigs. The ancient sacrificial system determined the type of offerings based on the individual's rank. The *Book of Rites* records: "The emperor offers sacrifices to heaven and earth with Tai Lao, and lords offer sacrifices with Shao Lao".[3]

Whether in the concept of the "Three Sacrificial Animals and Six Livestock" or the hierarchical sacrificial system of Tai Lao and Shao Lao, sheep were a key element of sacrificial offerings. This highlights the irreplaceable role of sheep in ancient sacrificial practices, solidifying their central position in ancient Chinese ritual culture.

In contemporary society, a specific sacrificial ritual still exists in Gansu, centered around sheep, and known locally as the "Lingyang" ceremony. The "Lingyang" ceremony is an essential part of Gansu's funeral customs, where sheep serve as the key medium connecting the living with the deceased, symbolizing the transfer of the deceased's soul. Through this ritual, family members believe they can engage in a final symbolic conversation with their departed relatives, expressing unfulfilled filial duties and inquiring about any remaining wishes or unfinished business from the deceased's lifetime.

This paper will use the "Lingyang" ceremony as a case study to explore its origins, ceremonial procedures, and cultural significance. Through an analysis of its function as a moral evaluation tool, the paper will illustrate how Confucian filial piety is embodied in Gansu's funeral customs, addressing gaps in existing research concerning the moral and ethical aspects of the "Lingyang" ceremony.

2. The Role of Sheep in Contemporary Gansu Rituals

2.1. The Origins of the “Lingyang” Ceremony

The “Lingyang” ceremony, deeply rooted in the traditional culture of northwest China, has a long history dating back hundreds of years. Based on fieldwork conducted by the author in Jingtai County, Gansu, local villager LYZ shared stories of the “Lingyang” ceremony that she had heard since childhood. She recalled that her grandfather often recounted the details of the ritual emphasizing its importance as a tradition in Gansu families and communities. Similarly, KZ, a villager from Jingyuan County, confirmed this, stating that the “Lingyang” ceremony has a long-standing history in their local community, having been passed down from ancient times as a traditional sacrificial practice. These accounts from villagers of different ages and regions illustrate the continuous practice of the “Lingyang” ceremony within their communities.

2.2. The Ritual Process of the “Lingyang” Ceremony

In rural Gansu, funerals are held in the highest regard as momentous events, and their rituals are exquisitely elaborate and all-encompassing. After the passing of an elderly family member, the family

must immediately notify and invite senior members of the clan to discuss the funeral arrangements and choose a highly respected figure from the village to act as the chief organizer. Funerals typically last between three to seven days, during which the family consults a fortune-teller to select an auspicious burial date based on the deceased's birth chart. If an appropriate date is difficult to find, the burial may be delayed. The entire family participates in the funeral: adult men are assigned to dig the grave, women busy themselves in the kitchen preparing steamed buns and meat dishes, and older children help by serving food and doing other chores.[4] During the funeral, all family members younger than the deceased must wear white mourning attire. Family members kneel in front of the deceased's coffin, burn joss paper, and bow to express gratitude to those who come to pay their respects. Each night of the funeral, family members take turns keeping vigil over the deceased's coffin. Respected elders or the village chief often act as the master of ceremonies, providing a final judgment and evaluation of the deceased's life. The "Lingyang" ceremony, a key part of the funeral process, usually takes place the day before the burial. In the local dialect, the word "Ling" means to connect with the deceased's spirit. Through the ceremony, family members communicate with the departed one last time.

The preparations for the "Lingyang" ceremony vividly manifest its sacred essence. The sheep employed in the ceremony is not an ordinary one, but a castrated ram bought at the market. If a castrated ram is unavailable, a regular household sheep may be used, though this is not regarded as equally dignified. The close relatives of the deceased are obliged to either purchase a ram from the market or select one from their flock. In the "Lingyang" ceremony, the sheep is seen as an intermediary between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Before the ceremony begins, the ritual expert first burns incense and pours libations as a sign of respect for the deceased, while the sheep stands quietly in the vicinity. The host then kindles joss paper. Once the paper is fully burned, the deceased's soul is believed to have attached itself to the sheep, which then becomes the central figure of the ceremony, linking the living with the departed. Family members gather around the sheep, and one by one, from eldest to youngest, approach it and ask simple yes-or-no questions about the deceased's unfulfilled wishes or instructions for the living. After each question, all eyes turn to the sheep's reaction: if it trembles slightly, it is taken as a sign that the deceased's spirit has responded, signifying that the question has been answered and the deceased has no unresolved concerns, thus the "Lingyang" ceremony is successful; if the sheep remains still, it indicates that the deceased still has unfinished business, meaning the "Lingyang" ceremony has failed.

In some cases, the sheep may exhibit special reactions towards relatives who are considered to have been deficient in fulfilling their filial duties, such as biting them or remaining motionless when they are questioned. Once all the questions have been answered, the elder uses a needle to prick the sheep's ear, drawing a drop of blood, which is placed on a piece of joss paper and then burned. This symbolizes the final severing of ties between the living and the dead. After the ceremony, the sheep is slaughtered, and its meat is shared among those who come to pay their respects, completing the sheep's sacred role in the ritual.

The following day, before sunrise, all family members proceed to the designated burial site to lay the deceased to rest. For the next three days, family members are required to bring food to the new grave. Afterward, they return to the grave every seven days for a total of forty-nine days. Each year, during festivals like the Spring Festival, Qingming (Tomb-Sweeping Day), and the anniversary of the deceased's passing—particularly on the third anniversary—the family conducts large-scale ancestor worship ceremonies at the grave. With this, the funeral rites are brought to an end. While many rural areas across China share similar ritual practices, in Gansu, the "Lingyang" ceremony is a unique element.

3. The Cultural Significance of the “Lingyang” Ceremony

Based on the writer’s field research in Gansu’s Jingtai and Jingyuan counties, the “Lingyang” ceremony occupies a crucial position in the local social fabric. Although this funeral ritual is simple in form, it is imbued with profound cultural significance. First and foremost, the “Lingyang” ceremony reflects the local belief in the afterlife and the immortality of the soul. Through this ritual, people believe that their loved ones, after passing away, enter another world, known as the underworld. The soul is thought to attach itself to a castrated ram, allowing the deceased to have a final conversation with the living. In this ritual, the sheep acts as a medium, connecting the deceased with their family members, enabling them to complete a sacred and final exchange to fulfill the deceased’s unfinished wishes.

Secondly, the “Lingyang” ceremony functions as a form of moral judgment. During the ceremony, family members pose questions to the sheep, and the sheep’s response—whether it trembles or not—is regarded as a sign of whether the deceased’s soul has found peace. If the sheep do not tremble, there are two possible explanations: either the questioner failed to accurately guess the deceased’s wish or the questioner did not fulfill their filial duties during the deceased’s life, preventing the soul from being at ease. For instance, a villager from Jingyuan County, KZ, shared an experience from his father’s funeral, where his sister, who had insulted their father and taken his savings without telling him, could not elicit any response from the sheep, despite asking the sheep repeatedly for over 20 minutes. Eventually, the questioning had to be stopped to avoid delaying the funeral. The entire village witnessed this, making it clear who had failed to fulfill their filial duties. Thus, the “Lingyang” ceremony is not only a religious ritual but also serves as a public assessment of the moral conduct of the living.

Thirdly, the “Lingyang” ceremony also symbolizes social status within the local community. The traditional and formal version of the ceremony necessitates the use of a castrated ram. However, because castrated rams are usually more expensive than regular sheep, some families might find it difficult to afford one. Castrated rams grow faster and have more tender meat due to the neutering process, making them more expensive than regular sheep. According to a villager from Jingtai County, LSD, some economically disadvantaged families choose to use ordinary sheep to reduce the financial burden. However, in such cases, the family may feel a loss of dignity and sometimes ask close relatives to help purchase a castrated ram to preserve the family’s honor. The “Lingyang” ceremony is thus not only about ensuring the peaceful transition of the deceased’s soul but also about maintaining the family’s social status and respect within the community. This reflects the hidden social pressures associated with funeral practices, particularly the tension between economic burdens and maintaining family honor in less prosperous families.

4. Filial Piety and Soul Beliefs in the “Lingyang” Ceremony: A discussion of the Beliefs Behind the Ritual

Filial piety is a central component of Confucian thought. Confucianism perceives filial piety not only as a crucial virtue encompassing the respect and obedience of one’s parents and elders but also as a fundamental basis for personal moral growth and societal concord. In Confucian classics such as the “Xiaojing” (Classic of Filial Piety) and the “Lunyu” (Analects of Confucius), Confucius repeatedly emphasized the importance of filial piety, viewing it as the bedrock of all virtues. The concept of filial piety can be divided into four aspects.

The first is caring for and respecting parents. Caring for parents entails the duty of children to look after their aging parents, ensuring they are well provided for in terms of food, clothing, and shelter.[5] Traditional filial piety not only demands material support from parents but also emphasizes an attitude

of love and respect. Confucius attached great significance to “respecting parents,” distinguishing the ability to respect parents as a fundamental disparity between gentlemen and common men.

The second aspect is obeying parents. Obeying parents demands that children to follow their parents' guidance. While this concept may seem obsolete to modern minds, it reflects a key aspect of traditional filial piety. This obedience extends beyond attitude, requiring courteous and respectful behavior. When parents are in the wrong, children must gently offer suggestions, helping them correct their mistakes, which is also regarded as part of filial piety.[5]

The third aspect is continuing the family bloodline. [5] Traditional Confucian filial piety holds that one must marry and have children to ensure the continuation of the family and clan, which allows ancestors to be properly venerated. Failing to fulfill this duty was considered the greatest act of unfilial behavior toward one's parents and ancestors.

The fourth aspect is mourning and venerating parents. The core meaning of filial piety is "to serve one's parents well." Filial piety includes not only the care of parents while they are alive but also the continued respect and remembrance of them after they pass away.[5] It reflects the descendants' respect and remembrance for their deceased elders. Therefore, filial children should not only be dedicated to caring for their parents during their lives but should also continue to show respect and remembrance after their passing, completing the duty of "serving the dead" through funerals and rituals.

Although modern viewpoints may regard some aspects of traditional filial piety as outdated or feudal, they nonetheless form an essential part of this long-standing tradition.

Additionally, the “Lingyang” ceremony reflects the local belief in the existence of souls. The belief in souls refers to a non-material entity attached to a person's body, governing their perception, emotions, thoughts, will, and actions, and possessing considerable energy.[6] While the belief in reincarnation is widespread throughout rural China, the soul concept in Gansu differs slightly. According to local villagers interviewed during field research in Gansu, they believe that a person's soul is immortal. Through fortune-telling and rituals, people believe they can communicate with the spiritual realm. However, their belief centers on the idea that deceased loved ones or ancestors enter another world, where they continue to live and can influence the lives of the living, such as by providing protection.

For example, a villager from Jingyuan County, KDG, shared that although his grandfather passed away more than 10 years ago, he often appears in his dreams asking for paper money to be burned for him because he needs it in the other world. Another villager, LZ, mentioned that their family has an altar for her deceased grandfather-in-law, to whom they offer incense, food, and tea every morning. Whenever they seek blessings or protection, they offer incense again, believing that their ancestor continues to protect them in some way from the other world. Throughout the field research, villagers never mentioned concepts like “reincarnation” or “the next life.”

In funeral rituals, local people use the “Lingyang” ceremony as a final communication with their ancestors, helping the deceased fulfill their unfinished wishes. The entire funeral process is centered around the belief in the soul. The ceremony involves fortune tellers and experts specifically responsible for conducting the sheep-related rituals. These experts light incense and pour wine as offerings to show respect to the deceased, summoning the spirit. Once joss paper is burned, it is believed that the soul of the deceased attaches itself to the sheep, which acts as a medium connecting the living with the deceased. Although the living cannot directly communicate with the deceased's soul, they believe that through the sheep, such a dialogue can take place.

Filial piety is expressed through the respect and rituals performed by family members for the deceased, while the sheep in Gansu acts as an important link between the family and the ancestors, maintaining the bond between them. Through this ritual, the practice of filial piety is passed down

through generations in Gansu, not only reinforcing the sense of responsibility among family members but also reflecting the local belief in the eternal ancestral spirits.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the “Lingyang” ceremony in Gansu is not only a central element of the region’s funeral culture but also a tangible manifestation of filial piety and soul beliefs. The sheep, as a spiritual medium in the ceremony, plays a role in connecting the living with the dead while symbolizing the fulfillment of filial duties. The moral evaluative aspect of the ceremony prompts the living to reflect on their own acts of filial piety, further strengthening the central role of Confucian filial values in local society.

Further, the “Lingyang” ceremony reflects Gansu region's belief in the immortality of the soul and ancestral protection. Through offerings and rituals for the deceased, the living hope to receive the blessings and support of their ancestors. Therefore, the “Lingyang” ceremony is more than just a traditional funeral practice; it integrates the spiritual meanings of filial piety and soul beliefs. It continues to play a significant role in the social life of contemporary rural Gansu, maintaining the bond between family and ancestors while reinforcing the moral responsibilities of the living. This unique ritual not only reveals the cultural and spiritual beliefs of Gansu but also showcases the enduring influence of Confucian filial piety.

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