

From a Sacred Space to an “Exhibition Platform”: The Changes in the Nature of Modern Genealogy

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Abstract: This paper studies the history and development of the three genealogies of the S clan in 1946, 1994, and 2016, revealing the nature of the genealogy’s transformation from a sacred space to an “exhibition platform.” In traditional rural society, when the reproduction and daily life of the people completely revolve around their clan, the genealogy is regarded as a “sacred and inviolable” item because kinship is greatly valued and genealogy clarifies a person’s ancestry. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, due to changes in social structure and concepts, the functions of the genealogy gradually disappeared, and the sanctity of family genealogy has also weakened. Nonetheless, middle-aged and elderly individuals are leveraging their economic influence to assume a more significant role within the genealogy, transforming it into a platform for middle-aged and elderly people to showcase their achievements.

Keywords: Genealogy; Clan; Sacred space; Exhibition platform

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1. Introduction

Genealogy is an important element in a clan. Contemporary Chinese clans are gradually transitioning from a “social community”^[1] to a “club style clan”^[2], with significant changes in the ideology, compilation methods, and rules, which in turn changes the nature of genealogy. Research on this topic has pointed out that in terms of the author, style, content, and other aspects of the compilation, genealogy has been transformed from being led by Confucianism to being without ideological guidance^[3]. Secondly, there is a clear intergenerational differentiation in the compilation of genealogies, with the elderly valuing the “cultural connotations” of the clan, while the young value the function of the “address book” more^[2]. Thirdly, with the improvement of a woman’s status, women are becoming increasingly important in the compilation of genealogies^[4]. However, these studies have not emphasized the significance of genealogy for clans and its impact on clans and rural society. Therefore, this aspect will be explored in this paper.

Through field and textual research on the three genealogies of the S clan in 1946, 1994, and 2016, it was found that the significance of the genealogy for the people has gradually shifted from being a sacred item to an “exhibition platform.” By analyzing the changes in the nature of genealogy, we attempted to extract an

important mechanism for the changes in the nature of clans.

2. Genealogy as a sacred space and its construction

Genealogy is a social organization that is linked by three things: ancestral halls, genealogies, and clan fields ^[5]. Genealogies are an important basis for determining the membership rights of the clan. Besides, they are an important means to gain respect for the clan and establish a foothold in local communities. Genealogy is a representation of a clan's cohesion, organizational ability, and economic strength ^[6]. Once established, it becomes an enduring and organized entity that is not easily destroyed, carrying permanent value ^[7].

2.1. The origin of sacredness: The function and significance of genealogy for clans

Society is constantly creating sacred things from ordinary things, and the sanctity of genealogy is determined by its function and significance for the clan. Firstly, genealogy determines the boundaries of the clan as a social group. A clan is a relatively closed social group connected by blood ^[8]. The genealogy also determines the social membership of the clan members. Besides, when there are disputes between clans, genealogies also act as important evidence. Secondly, genealogy also determines the social structure and corresponding social norms within a clan. Genealogy serves as a vital instrument for organizing relationships based on blood ties, determining appropriate forms of address, and guiding social interactions within a clan ^[5], laying the foundation for interpersonal relationships among its members ^[9]. Furthermore, genealogy serves as a crucial repository for documenting a clan's historical narrative, with its primary psychological function being the commemoration of ancestors and the encouragement of descendants' aspirations for progress ^[6].

Overall, the genealogy organizes and defines the social structure and norms of the clan in written form, making the boundaries of the clan clearer, the group structure more stable, and the members can better identify with the clan. In this context, the greatest ambition of a clan is often to build ancestral halls and modifying genealogies. Once the genealogy has not been revised for more than thirty years, there is a strong sense of oppression and guilt toward ancestors and descendants. It was under the urging of oppression and guilt that the people of the S clan began compiling their genealogy in 1946.

In 1946, due to the impact of war, the S clan had not compiled a genealogy for decades, which made the clan chief (Chief A) at the time very anxious. Chief A considers genealogy to be a symbol of clan cohesion and a vital instrument for nurturing "harmonious and amicable clan relationships, generational distinctions, mutual respect, and the absence of estrangement." The absence of genealogy, in his view, has resulted in a "lack of uniform discipline," diminished filial piety, the complete absence of ancestral customs, and a loosening of the ties among clan members.

During the growing season in 1946, the S clan drew 20% of its labor force to participate in compiling genealogies. The process involved appointing representatives from each clan branch to research and augment the ancestral narratives, validate details regarding clan members' personal information, family status, and occupational background, and examine the collective assets of the clan. This process took two months. In the same year, the grain production of the S clan decreased by 10%, which was detrimental for them as they could barely produce enough food and clothing for themselves. After they had successfully compiled their genealogy, the S clan held a special ceremony, and each genealogy was placed on the altar at the main entrance of the eldest son's house of each branch. Incense was burned day and night for offerings, and the sale of genealogies was strictly prohibited.

Genealogy has always been a sacred item in traditional societies, with limited practical functions in daily life ^[10]. It is basically worshipped as a deity and put on a shelf ^[8]. But it is precisely the state of sacredness that

has become a symbol of the identity of the owner of the genealogy.

2.2. The development of sacredness: The meaning of genealogy for clans

The genealogy is sacred because the clan worships it. The sacred space does not exist naturally, but is endowed with sanctity by humans through their culture, experience, and desires when defining, limiting, and depicting it^[11]. Having a name on a genealogy signifies that a person belongs to a clan. The lives of the clan members revolve around the clan. In everyday life, the clan serves as the fundamental social unit in rural communities^[12], playing a pivotal role in organizing and overseeing various aspects of daily life^[13]. Economically, the clan functions as a “legal entity with shared assets^[14]. From an ideological standpoint, individuals frequently exhibit unwavering loyalty and attachment to their clans^[15].

The position of a clan member in the genealogy determines his/her position within the clan. The most important part of the genealogy is the genealogy table, which records the lineage and passing of all clan members. Genealogy represents the social significance of a clan’s life. As the saying goes “If a clan member is not included in a genealogy, it is equivalent to not having lived.” After death, people have to go back to their ancestors. Without registration on the genealogy, a person would not know where they are going to be buried, and nobody would mourn for them.

Under the influence of this cultural tradition, members of a clan hold great faith in doing this practice. The committee responsible for compiling genealogies allocates expenses based on population, which is close to the cost of a family’s rations for half a year. However, clan members are usually very enthusiastic about repairing genealogies, and if they would contribute either financially or physically depending on their capabilities.

In summary, as the fundamental community in rural society, clans depend on each other for survival. With the backing and acknowledgment of the clan, clan members maintain a fundamental sense of “reverence” for the genealogy. Being included in the genealogy is both their duty and a source of personal honor.

3. The changes in the compilation methods and norms of contemporary genealogy

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, traditional rural society has undergone significant changes due to the influence of modern national construction, modernization, and marketization. Clans have evolved into more of a cultural concept,^[16] and the way that genealogies are compiled is also gradually changing, from being guided by Confucianism to being solely determined by the local social structure^[17].

3.1. From patriarchy to gender equality

The family structures of traditional clans are formed based on the patrilineal lineage, with women at the edge of the clan. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the status of women in rural societies has improved through the implementation of new marriage laws and the establishment of a new rural political and economic system. Patriarchy has quickly been replaced by new concepts and principles such as “women’s liberation” and women being as important as men. While the genealogy still formally includes the concept of “encouraging women to strictly adhere to traditional female norms” within the family rules and instructions, notable changes have occurred in the documentation of women, highlighting an elevated status for women within the lineage map.

According to the rules of genealogy compilation, daughters and their husbands are excluded from the genealogy. As for the daughters-in-law, only their surnames are included without their full name or the information of their families. However, between 1994 and 2016, the names of daughters and their husbands began to appear in genealogies, and the full names and family information of daughters-in-law have also been

included.

Since 1994, all blood relatives within the S clan, including daughters, could be included in the genealogy, and daughters-in-law can have their full names and family information included in the genealogy. However, the daughter and son-in-law need to pay a certain fee (100 yuan) to be included in the genealogy. This cost is actually not much compared to the money spent by the male members of the clan, this entry fee indicates that the daughters- or sons-in-law obtained the right to access the genealogy through economic means. The daughters- and sons-in-law of the S clan were also very willing to pay. In 2016, the daughters and sons-in-law were allowed to have equal status as the sons as long as they paid the same amount of money. As long as the family pays, the entries for the daughter-in-law can be very long. The increase in female entries highlights the elevated status of women in the clan.

3.2. From seniority to highlighting personal value

Genealogies were traditionally compiled strictly according to seniority, from old to young. However, after social transformation during the collectivization period, the concept of elders being superior to youth was greatly challenged. The principle of hierarchy gradually transformed into the principle of equality.

In traditional Chinese writing, conveying concepts of social hierarchy and status is often achieved through the use of vertical orientation, relative positions within the text, and the presence or absence of blank spaces in characters. This writing technique is also employed in genealogies. Both the 1946 and 1994 editions of the S Clan genealogy used this format, emphasizing the father as the central figure and the order of generational progression through upper and lower sections of the text. However, in the 2016 genealogy, the writing style transitioned to a horizontal format, eliminating the vertical dimensions of hierarchy and status. Instead, it emphasized equality between fathers and sons across generations. Furthermore, in the lineage map, individual information became more detailed, encompassing aspects such as education, work experience, life stories, and more.

In 1994, the previous generation's genealogical data from the 1946 edition was continued. The genealogy committee collected information through inquiries with clan members. During this period, landlords still held a degree of authority. As migration became more common, many entries were filled in by the head of a clan branch. By 2016, the genealogy underwent a revision. The committee sought information from clan members on a family-by-family basis. Clan members reported their own information to the head of the clan. However, during this period, decision-making authority shifted towards the collective family, and the head of a clan branch could no longer modify the information provided.

Genealogy compilers no longer possess the authority to filter or control the information included in genealogies. Compilation now heavily relies on individuals providing their own information, which, in turn, encourages individuals to use financial incentives to emphasize their status within the genealogy. An example of this is the inclusion of personal biographies. In accordance with previous genealogy compilation norms, unmarried deceased individuals were not allowed to be registered in the genealogy. This was because the clan viewed "inheritance" as the true indication of an individual's membership in the clan. In a specific instance, there was a soldier from the S clan who sacrificed his life during wartime. He was not included in the 1994 genealogy but was incorporated into the 2016 genealogy. This is because the clan members collectively believe that sacrificing oneself for the country is an honorable act and should not disqualify someone from being considered a member of the clan simply because they have no descendants. Every clan member can have a personal biography in the genealogy for only 10,000 yuan. If one wants to add a family photo, he/she is required to pay an additional 1000 yuan. Biography is not written by a genealogical committee, but rather by an

individual, which is then sent to the genealogical committee for direct printing without making any changes.

The conventional standards of social hierarchy once constrained the representation of an ordinary person's life in genealogies. These entries were limited to basic information such as birth and death years, residence, and offspring. The primary focus of the clan was centered around the act of giving birth to future generations. However, the contemporary refinement of these genealogical entries not only underscores the depth of an individual's life experiences but also significantly broadens the collective significance of the clan's world.

3.3. From distinctive relativity to non-blood relationship

The purpose of compiling a genealogy was to define the blood relationships and kinship of a clan. Therefore, the branches of the clan were prioritized. Traditionally, when recording an individual's name in the genealogy, the customary practice involved listing the person's first name directly. The father's name was placed above, followed by the wife's name below, and then the son's name was recorded underneath. Special cases that pertained to unconventional family bloodlines, like stepsons, instances of infidelity, or adoption, were explicitly indicated. However, in the 2016 genealogy, all of these norms that used to reflect distinctions in familial relationships were disregarded.

Although the bloodlines of some families are rather chaotic, they are still accepted by the clan members. On one hand, the process of compiling genealogies has transitioned to rely more on emotion rather than strict order. On the other hand, the reduced familiarity between different clans has diminished the importance and significance of one clan towards another. Some individuals even express the sentiment that they would prefer not to be included in the genealogy if recognition is not mutual. In this evolving context, both genealogists and ordinary individuals have a decreased desire to adhere strictly to the traditional rules.

Nevertheless, the influence of individuality on traditional rules has become more pronounced, resulting in a disorderly application of rules, leading to simplistic or even ambiguous entries for ordinary individuals. Conversely, clan elites have started to utilize genealogies as a means of self-expression, causing genealogies to transform into platforms for self-display.

4. Genealogy as an “exhibition platform”: A type of competition

As the rules of genealogy compilation began to shift from being patriarchal and seniority-based to being based on emotional connection and economic status, genealogy is no longer a tool for recording clan property and historical facts, or showcasing a clan's strength. During this process, the nature of the genealogy gradually changed from a sacred space to an “exhibition platform.”

4.1. Who is competing: Intergenerational differences

The members who are considered elites in a genealogy are often members who were actively involved in the process of genealogy compilation. These elites invested more money and effort in the process of clan construction and resolved conflicts between families. Therefore, they want their contributions to be highlighted in the genealogy, so as to establish their authority.

There has been a division in the compilation of genealogies. Many elderly people born before and during the early stages of liberation have a deep affection for their clans, and were also the main advocates and leaders of the revision of the genealogy in 1994. The thirty-year process of collective construction has led to the disappearance of many old practices in genealogy compilation. In the absence of old precedents, compilers at that time created a new paradigm for genealogy continuation through literature search, recollection, and other means. At that time, the elderly held much authority in genealogy writing.

During the period of collectivization, many middle-aged people began to open up the boundaries of their clans and work together with other clans. Following the land division into households, social conflicts escalated, prompting the resurgence of mutual assistance relationships founded on blood ties. Middle-aged individuals gradually recognized the significance of “clans” in their everyday lives. In the process of compiling the genealogy, the hierarchy of a clan is clearly mapped and the members of the clan are clearly listed, along with their lineage and blood relationships with one another.

In 1994, the genealogy compilation committee was composed of 19 members, including a chairman aged 70–80, a deputy chairman aged 70–80, a chief editor aged 80 or above, a deputy chief editor aged 70–80, a finance officer aged 40–50, and a liaison officer aged 30–40. The three co-majors were 60–70 years old, 50–60 years old, and 40–50 years old, respectively. The ten editors comprised three members aged 60–70, four members aged 50–60, and three members aged 40–50. Due to the fact that young people had already started working outstation at that time, many of them did not participate in the compilation process, and they relied on their elders to collect the information needed.

The importance attributed to clans and genealogies by family members had started to vary across generations. With active involvement from the elderly, a neutral stance from middle-aged individuals, and reluctant cooperation from the youth, the genealogy was successfully compiled. The cost, which was shared by the extended family, roughly equals one month’s living expenses. The older generation bore the responsibility for funding and cost control. Compiling genealogies was primarily driven by its significance for the elderly.

The compilation of genealogies in 2016 became a “carnival” for middle-aged and elderly people. Clan leader F expressed pessimistically that after his generation passes, this practice could only be maintained for one more generation. When young people born in the 1980s and 1990s grow up, they no longer have the sense of mission and reverence for their ancestors. Perhaps, they may even hold an indifferent attitude towards the genealogy. In 2016, the compilation of genealogies was mostly led by elderly people, and even middle-aged people did not participate in it. The compilation committee consisted of one chairman, one vice chairman, one editor-in-chief, three vice editors-in-chief, one finance personnel, one liaison officer, three associate editors, and ten compilers, with a total of twenty-one members. The executive director of X County Genealogy Research Association was also specially hired as an advisor. Among the 21 people, 3 were aged 80 and above, 12 were aged 70–80, and 5 were aged 60–70. There were no participants under the age of 50. The finance and liaison personnel were relatively young. The participants were mostly retired elderly people. Due to the improvement of the financial capabilities of each household, the funds for the funds allocated for genealogy compilation were a decent amount.

As generations evolve, the sanctity of the genealogy within the clan gradually decreases. The sacredness of genealogies is most profoundly embodied in the elderly, who possess a profound understanding of the significance of genealogies for the entire clan. They are also the ones most dissatisfied with the phenomenon of “having closeness and estrangement without elders and children, and having elders and children without closeness and estrangement” resulting from uncompiled genealogies. In 1994 and 2016, they played a pivotal role in genealogy compilation and subsequently became the driving force behind genealogies as a performance platform. Middle-aged individuals have grown up in rural society and thus harbor a certain sense of identification and belonging to the blood community. However, their grasp of more profound concepts such as intimacy and dignity remains relatively weak. Under the subtle influence of the elderly, they have come to comprehend the importance of genealogy, though the sacred meaning of genealogy has gradually diminished due to a lack of urgency and anxiety. The younger generation who grew up after the reform and opening up lack the experience of working together and have not truly participated in the resolution of clan conflicts, so their

sense of belonging to the clan is constantly weakening. Young people who grew up outside of rural society are generally ignorant of the sanctity and importance of genealogies. Therefore, most young people believe that the compilation of genealogies is a “game for the elders.”

4.2. Competition through financial status

Since the 1990s, with the rise of migrant workers, rural society has gradually moved towards mobility and openness. The communication of people in rural areas is no longer ethics and community-based. Instead, they have grown to be more individualistic. The principle of compiling genealogies has also shifted from strictly following old norms to relying on economic status. The genealogy has become a platform for ethnic people to transform their economic status into their political and cultural status within the tribe. The middle-aged and elderly are the main “actors” and “audience” of the genealogy exhibition platform, and most of them obtain more entries through economic means.

Due to significant changes in the financing methods for compiling genealogies, the rules for compiling genealogies have shifted from being based on clan norms to being based on economics. In 2016, in order to raise funds, the allocation method changed from being per person to being based on the number of words. At that time, the average apportionment amount was 100 yuan per person. However, due to the changes in the fundraising method, the traditional rules were bent to fit the demands of the members. The number of words or entries in the genealogy soon became a symbol of financial status.

In 2016, another section was added to the newly revised genealogy, titled “Record of the Charisms of the Sages in the Clan.” To be included in this section, individuals were required to pay 10,000 yuan. According to statistics, a total of 18 people, constituting 25% of the clan (including their joint families), chose to participate. The total cost of compiling the entire genealogy reached approximately 300,000 yuan. This transformation shifted the purpose of imparting a neutral genealogy as a moral model for people to admire and learn into a performance platform where individuals could showcase their strengths through economic means.

During the compilation of genealogies, following the principle of economy, middle-aged and elderly elites have made donations and shared their family photos in the “Record of the Charisms of the Sages in the Clan.” They hope to gain recognition from their peers and ancestors through these contributions. In the midst of competition and celebration among these middle-aged and elderly elites, the younger generation often finds themselves as bystanders. The abundant material resources in contemporary life render the human and material resources required for genealogy compilation negligible for united families. Within the context of intergenerational relationships marked by “filial piety but disobedience”: descendants often aim to fulfill their parents’ wishes and make them “happy” in this competitive environment.

4.3. Why competition happens: Remaining relevant

When the principle of compiling genealogies shifted from being based on clan norms to being based on economics, the nature of genealogies underwent significant changes. The importance of a genealogy lies not only in its role of illustrating the lineage and emphasizing kinship, but also in its social recognition of its people. However, today’s genealogy has gradually lost its original social significance and is more inclined to record the identity of members in the core family.

The changes in the nature of a genealogy can be seen from the position it is placed. In 1994, everyone began to put their genealogies on shelves. They were no longer placed on an altar and given offerings. In 2016, many people took their genealogies home and put them in warehouses, and some genealogies were lost. Only a few versions of the manuscript were unchanged, locked in a wooden box, and still placed next to the ancestral

tablet, receiving incense offerings day and night.

The economic and social changes since the establishment of New China have had a huge impact on the clan system, completely depriving the legitimacy of the clan in terms of economy, politics, and culture, and the clan no longer exists in its original form^[18]. In the past, the small and comprehensive social organization model also caused the entire society to be divided into cells. Individuals have a sense of belonging in these cells, and it is difficult for people to exist without cells, but there is a lack of interaction between cells. This results in people depending a lot on their clans^[19]. However, through collective transformation, the concepts of equality, state, and citizenship have gradually penetrated the people's minds. There is no longer a hierarchy within a family, and everyone is equal. Since the reform and opening up, marketization and industrialization, economic differentiation, occupational division, and regional separation have led to a shift in farmers from homogeneity to heterogeneity, and the blood community has gradually disappeared.

Under the influence of these factors, the clan transformed from a strict social organization into a blood community of "equality for all," and was further divided into several core families under the impact of modernization. On one hand, individuals' and families' dependence on clans has decreased, and individuals have gradually been separated from the locality and integrated into the modern state and market system, leading to the dissipation of the sanctity of clans. On the other hand, the preservation of local society and acquaintance communities has resulted in the preservation of a certain degree of commonality within the clan. Hence, even as the genealogy loses its sacred status within the clan and becomes less effective in controlling clan society, it still holds a significant place in the lives and meaning world of middle-aged and elderly individuals, and a degree of publicity remains.

5. Conclusion

By studying the changes in the content and compilation methods of the genealogies of the S clan in three periods, we can trace the transformation of clans. This evolution applies to genealogies and other forms of clan artifacts. Although the sacredness of genealogies has eroded, they still have some publicity. The genealogy has turned from a sacred item that is worshipped into a platform for showcasing financial capabilities. In the past, the genealogy carried the most important values and meanings of the clan. However, genealogies are now gradually transforming into one of the tools for demonstrating class distinctions within clans, and this transformation in nature and function is definitely worth thinking about.

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