

Evolution of Clan Culture and Its Contemporary Significance

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Abstract

As a component of Chinese traditional culture, clan culture still has both positive and negative influences upon Chinese society at present for several thousand years goes by. It is necessary for us to sort out the process of the evolution of clan culture, make clear its contemporary influences and explore an effective approach to continue to give play to its positive effects and avoid its negative effects, with the expectation of gradually realizing its disintegration and extinction in the process of harmonious socialist social construction.

Keywords: clan, clan culture, evolution, influence, significance

Clan is an expanded family complex with the bond of blood relationship. Ever since the primitive society was disintegrated, it has accompanied with the historical development of China for several thousand years in a either loose or intense way with a variety of metamorphosing forms and has constituted an important component of the ancient, modern and contemporary Chinese social structure. Its particular organizational principle and activity means have become a particular historical and cultural phenomenon that suit with a certain development stage of productivity. It is of great realistic significance for the stability and harmonious development of contemporary Chinese society to study the historical evolution process of clan culture, make clear its influences upon the contemporary China and give full play to its positive effects.

1. Historical Evolution of Clan Culture

“A certain culture (culture in its conceptual and ideological form) is the reflection of certain social politics and economy and also exerts great influences and acts on certain social politics and economy.” (Mao Zedong, 1991) The same is true with formation and development of clan and clan culture, which undergoes the following three stages.

1.1 The Formation Stage of Clan and Clan Culture

In the primitive society, the productivity was quite low and people gathered together into a social community with the blood relationship as the bond in order to satisfy the need of subsistence, which laid foundation for generation of clan. However, during the period in which “the people knew their mothers, not knowing their fathers”, since “family” in a strict sense was not formed, the type and scale of gathering together by people could only be summarized by “clan”. It was said in “Er Ya Shi Qin” that, “a clan was constituted by patriarchal blood relations.” (Hao Yihang, 1982) Thus, construction of the clan was an outcome that identified part of relatives as the particular “clan relatives” from the blood relations according to the principle of patriarchal single pedigree. (Qian Hang, 2009) In the patriarchal society, although the paternity within the clan family was not really formed, the external characteristics of the patriarchal clan system had taken its initial shape. Especially by the later period of the paternal clan, the paternal position got established and the patriarch system was further politicalized, which gradually formed domination over the whole kinship group. With development of social productivity and continuous surplus of products, this sort of social mode which counted pedigree blood relationship by means of patriarchal system and inherited property further aggravated production of the private ownership, speeded up disintegration of the primitive society and appearance of class society and created the preconditions for formation of the patriarch system and prosperity of clan culture in a later generation.

1.2 The Prosperity Stage of Clan and Clan Culture

Just as Mr the modern leading intellectual Liang Qichao (1873~1929) said, "Politics in ancient China was family-oriented politics." (Liang Qichao, 1986) For several thousand years, the following phenomena generally existed in the premodern feudal Chinese society: no separation of family and the nation, unity of family and the nation, supplement of patriarchal clan system and the national law, joint ruling of clan power and political power, close connection of blood relations and geopolitics and clan power as extension and supplement of the national power. Although the clan system that is mainly characterized by paternity and clan power neither has the formal form and wide efficacy of the national political law system nor has any property of the national regime, in the feudal society in China for the past two thousand years or so, clan and clan culture have depended upon the traditional agricultural production means, deeply rooted in the vast local society, constituted the formal and legal value system and political system of the traditional Chinese society and dominated all aspects in the social life in the ancient China.

In the first place, in terms of ideological concept, the Confucianism with the major content and basic characteristics of patriarchal clan ethical thought is the ideological foundation for Chinese feudal society. In the long term evolution, a whole set of feudal law and discipline system was formed with the major content of the patriarchal ethical concepts of "principles of feudal moral conduct", "Qin Qin", "Zun Zun", "Jiu Zu" and "Wu Fu", and so on. The feudal clan organizations further carried out corresponding family rules and clan regulations according to these rituals and the realistic situations of the clan family. As a result, these feudal rituals and family rules and clan regulations became a vigorous weapon to safeguard the clan's ruling and imprisoning people's thought and behaviors.

In the second place, in terms of political rule, clan was combined together with imperial power. The imperial power and the patriarchal clan had absolute dominating power on the nation, while the imperial clan and the aristocracy always assisted the imperial family in politics. Combined together with the law, the clan carried out the principle of relative law to protect rights of the elders and the betters. The clan emphasized kinship in terms of judicature but ignored legal principles and the elders and betters had certain judicial privilege in that they carried out clan domination within the clan and assisted the domination of the government. The clan also cooperated with *paochia* system to become an important power in maintaining social stability.

In the third place, in terms of social life, it can be said that clan relationship was a primary social relationship of people in the traditional Chinese society. Any of the significant life issues could hardly break away from the clan, such as, marriage, making a living, sacrificing, burying and succeeding, etc. At the same time, clan also played certain positive social functions in terms of maintaining social ethics, stabilizing social order, protecting the interests of the clan people and so on and became an indispensable power in the traditional Chinese society.

1.3 The Recession Stage of Clan and Clan Culture

Ever since the 20th Century, as a result of attack by political reform, economic development, social thought and value concepts, the economic, political and cultural foundation has been shaken that the clans have depended upon and the clans and their cultural power have also gradually dispelled and declined.

Firstly, the clan culture thought has been cleared up. Ever since the modern times, in the process of saving the nation from subjugation and ensuring its survival, the Chinese bourgeois revolutionists have given profound critics on the clan system, the patriarchal clan system and the feudal ethical morality and have attacked strongly the clan system and the patriarchal hierarchical system. Especially during the period before and after the May 4th Movement, the advanced intellectuals represented by Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Lu Xun and so on gave a systematic and sharp criticism on the feudal clan system and encouraged people to emancipate themselves from the constraint of the patriarchal thought.

Secondly, the clan organization power has collapsed. Ever since the 20s in the 20th Century, the National Government began to set up the administrative units in villages and made the regime agencies extend from counties to villages. From then on, the clan gradually lost the legal rights of administering social affairs in the vast rural areas in China. Especially during the period of the new democratic revolution and the period of socialist revolution, the Communist Party of China further collapsed the clan system at the levels of economic basis, ideology and clan function, etc. After the new People's Republic of China was founded, the CPC took more vigorous measures to ban all sorts of clan activities by explicit order, continue to criticize the clan system and make the old clan organizations thoroughly collapse.

1.4 The Rejuvenation Stage of Clan and Clan Culture

Ever since the reform and opening up, with further penetration of the economic system reform in China, “rejuvenation” has appeared, to a certain extent, in some local clan organizations. People began to re-write the pedigree of the clan, build the ancestral hall and repair the ancestral grave. The clan people began to be bound up in seeking for roots and their ancestors. The social and political influences of clan activities and clan power became more and more obvious.

2. Influences of Clan Culture in the Contemporary World

As an important part of the traditional Chinese culture, clan culture has both positive and negative influences upon the contemporary Chinese society, especially the vast rural areas.

2.1 Positive Influences

It helps to maintain public order and mitigate social contradictions. The abundant ethical and moral thought in the traditional Chinese culture is well inherited and exercised in the contemporary clan organizations and activities. Although feudal ideological residue and outmoded conventions and undesirable customs are still unavoidable, it can't be denied that the thoughts of benevolence and good-neighborliness, modesty and courtliness, honesty and trustworthiness, and emphasis on righteousness and negligence of benefit, etc. advocated by the clan have played a quite important role in maintaining the public order of the grass-root society, and especially in maintaining the human relations order at an ethical level and mitigating social contradictions.

It helps to safeguard the interests of the clan people. This sort of collaborative consciousness and credit mechanism that is established on the basis of blood relations in the clan makes the clan possess a more reliable relationship network than any other social organization. This is of great assistance to safeguard the interests of members in the clan and promote all sorts of economic activities within the clan or outside the clan.

It helps to offer emotional sense of belonging and rich spiritual and cultural life. Rejuvenation of the clan per se refers to release of the psychology and emotional energy that has been repressed for a long time and the fear and guarding psychology of people caused by the social changes as well as the reflection of people's attitude towards seeking for historical stability sense. (Gong Zhiwei, 2006) A variety of cultural activities in which the clan is regarded as a unit has not only made intimate people's emotion and has enriched people's spiritual and cultural life, but has also played an important role in such social affairs as paving a road and repairing a bridge, supporting the poor and alleviating the poverty.

2.2 Negative Influences

Clan culture affects democratic election and devastates autonomy of the grass-root public. Autonomy of the grass-root public is one of the political systems with Chinese characteristics. In the vast grass-root organizations, especially in rural areas, some clans even play favoritism, commit irregularities, interfere, disturb and even manipulate the election for consideration of their own interests in the process of election of cadres at the basic level, with the aim of electing an “appropriate” candidate who can mostly represent their interests. In the meantime, when villagers make an election, they often determine their own objects of election by considering the blood relationship instead of considering the factors of competence and popular trust of the candidates. Therefore, the result of the election is often that the clan that occupies the predominance wins the political manipulative authority of the election village and the village-based organizations, to some extent, become an outcome for the clans to balance their rights and become a clan organization “under a legal cloak.”

Clan culture affects democratic administration and weakens authority of administrative organizations. In light of the great power of the clan, it often occurs that some cadres at the basic level often have such a psychology that they “hold back from taking action for fear of injuring others” when they deal with the public affairs, which affects the prestige of organizations and cadres at the basic level. There are even some cadres at the basic level who are successful in being elected just owing to their relationship with the clans who have difficulty in dealing with the public affairs in an objective and justified way just for consideration of human relationship or a variety of interests, which may even make the national administrative organs descend to a private agency that safeguards the interests of the clan.

Clan culture impedes the progress of law-based construction. In places where the clan power is relatively prevailing, the following phenomena are common: the clan controls politics in the village, the clan replaces the village rules and regulations or the autonomous regulations of the villagers with the clan rules and regulations, the clan resolves a dispute illegally and without any consent and abuses the illegal punishment, etc. This phenomenon that the legal power gives place to the clan power and rule of people gives place to rule of law seriously departs from the modern democratic spirit of rule by law and impedes the progress of socialism

law-based construction.

Clan culture weakens the democratic consciousness of the people in the clan. The clan strengthens constraint, management and control over the clan people by means of all sorts of activities and the teachings or rules of the clan and re-shape the cultural environment in which the traditional clan takes control over an individual. The clan has restrained functioning of people's independence, creativity and enthusiasm, damaged freedom of the personality of an individual and impeded realization of the self-value of an individual.

Clan culture affects the production and operation activities and the spiritual civilization construction. In some places where the clan organizations have great power, some economic complex of the same surname and the same clan even conduct illegal operation activities and interfere in development of the collective economy and normal economic order in order to protect the economic interests of the clan and big clan family. In places where the power of the clan is strong, the feudal etiquette and customs resurge. For example, the clan activities of repairing the family tree, recovering the ancestral hall and occupying the ancestral grave never cease at all, which not only increases burden of people, but also seriously constrains the spiritual civilization construction.

3. Countermeasures to Direct the Clan Culture in Playing Its Positive Role

The double influences of clan on the contemporary society calls us to dialectically treat with this historical and cultural phenomenon. At the time when we bring the positive influences of clan on the society into the track of standardization, institutionalization and legalization, we should also eliminate its negative influences in the social development and ultimately make it disintegrate and wither away step by step in the process of socialism modernization construction.

It is necessary to strengthen grass-root regime construction and eradicate clan organization power. The relationship between improvement of clan power and grass-root organization and the condition of grass-root regime construction is waxing and waning. Therefore, we have to strengthen grass-root organization and regime construction, get rid of interference of clan power and select the grass-root cadres who have perfect professional competence and strong sense of responsibility and who are dedicated to the public affairs. Thus, it is necessary to intensify construction of grass-root security association and mediation association, allocate sufficient and powerful personnel, carry out the treatment policy, give full play to its role as the first line of defense in constructing a harmonious countryside and keep down extension and expansion of clan power.

It is necessary to intensify law-based construction and give strict attack to any illegal clan activity. We have to draw up and complete relevant laws and regulations concerning clan problems and scientific clan administration methods. As for any illegal behaviors triggered by the clans, such as, fighting with weapons, illegal election, riding roughshod over the villagers and triggering disputes and so on, the government departments and the judicial agencies have to respond with resolute attack. It is necessary to strengthen legal education among people and form a great atmosphere in which the whole society resists together any illegal clan activity.

It is necessary to reinforce material and civilization construction and eradicate the social sources for the clan power. Closing the door to the outside world and backwardness is the social source that breeds the clan power. Development of productivity and prosperity of market economy can break through the relationship of blood relations and geopolitics and weaken influences of the clan power. In the meantime, development of economy may also reinforce the material foundation of grass-root organizations, stimulate development of a series of social public services and facilities, such as, culture and education, scientific sanitation and social security, etc., set up the rallying power, cohesive power, public trust and fight capacity of grass-root organizations and keep down development of the clan power.

It is necessary to improve the clan culture and intensify spiritual civilization construction. The clan culture not only contains excellent traditional cultural quintessence, but also contains dross of feudal thoughts. Thus, on one hand, we have to bring in advanced culture from the outside world to improve the clan culture and to make it suit with advanced socialism culture. On the other hand, we have to strengthen spiritual civilization construction, direct social culture with advanced and lofty socialism culture, widely convey the positive and progressive advanced thoughts in the enriched form that the ordinary people are delighted to see and hear and clear up the ideological and cultural foundation for existence of clan culture fundamentally.

To sum up, as a component of the traditional Chinese culture, existence, development of exerting an influence of clan culture all have certain social and historical origins. In the process of building a harmonious socialism society, it is not only necessary to take into consideration the objective reality of its existence and provide scientific direction and standardization with appropriate procedures and plans, but also necessary to pay enough

attention to the negative influences of clan culture and expedite construction of socialism material civilization, spiritual civilization, political civilization and ecological civilization, with the expectation of ultimately realizing disintegration and eradication of the clan culture in the process of modernization construction.

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