



Governing rural culture: Agency, space and the re-production of ancestral temples in contemporary China



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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a nuanced understanding of rural people's agency in cultural governance. Most of the existing literature on rural cultural governance in China confines the discussion of people's agency within the given political context of cultural governance, in which villagers are described as reactive agents in response to the state-oriented cultural transformation. I argue that rural people's agency in cultural governance has not been fully investigated and a richer understanding requires a close examination of the wider rural socio-spatial processes. In my case study of the re-production of traditional ancestral temples in rural areas of Xincheng Town, southeast China, I show that rural people develop great initiatives in promoting the transformation of lineage culture by drawing on their experiences of the changing rural environment. The state-sponsored cultural project, which seeks to convert traditional ancestral temples into cultural halls, memorials and elderly activity centers and to develop a modern, civilized and socialist countryside, is in fact incorporated into the self-development of modern lineage culture by local people. On the one hand, the state's cultural governance in Xincheng is significantly shaped and confined by specific rural socio-spatial relations. On the other hand, lineage groups take firm control of the construction of temple landscapes and even reproduce converted temples as 'extended' and 'shadow' temples. This paper contributes to understanding the complexity and flexibility of local people's interaction with the state in rural cultural governance.

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1. Introduction

Rural culture is an essential realm of state intervention in contemporary China. Over the past twelve years, the annual 'No. 1 Document', announced by the Communist Party of China and attending to the most urgent affairs of domestic development, has continuously given attention to three rural issues (*Sannong Wenti*), namely agriculture, rural areas and famers. One of its primary concerns is the low 'quality' (*Suzhi*) of peasants, which is partly attributed to their 'dissatisfying' moral and sanitary conditions and their limited knowledge about science and laws (cf. [Anagnost, 2004](#)). In the official discourse, it is argued that the enhancement of rural people's spiritual, intellectual and ethical wellbeing over the past decades strikingly contrasts with their substantially-improved material lives and has significantly fallen short of the expectation of the state. In this context, rural cultures, exemplified by traditions, rituals and everyday routines of peasants, are

constantly problematized and deliberately targeted for reconstruction. Their 'backwardness' is deemed as a great handicap of social development, and needs to be transformed through active state intervention. A variety of state-sponsored programs such as modern arts and authorized popular culture have been created to promote 'spiritual civilization' in the countryside (see [Thøgersen, 2000](#); [Dyner, 2008](#)). The diffusion of state ideology and scientific knowledge in rural areas is considered as an indispensable component of national socio-political stability and economic prosperity.

The regulation of rural culture in China reflects the changing arts of governing in modern world, by which 'culture' is re-evaluated and emphasized as an important 'technology of government' (see [Bennett, 1995, 1997](#)). Cultural governance, as discussed in this paper, is mainly emphasized as different sets of strategies, programs and techniques that enable governing at a distance through culture (cf. [Miller and Rose, 1990](#); [Rose et al., 2006](#); [Dean, 2010](#)). In the context of China, *Wenhua*, the Chinese word for 'culture', has been mobilized to stand for civilization, distinguishing itself from ignorance (*Mei Wenhua*) and low *Suzhi*. The Chinese government

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conceives culture as a governable object and also as an essential tool to harness the rural population and achieve desirable political schemes. The regulation and transformation of rural culture have indeed been well incorporated into the national strategy of modernization, civilization and socialism (cf. Oakes, 1998; Dynon, 2008). In many contexts, rural culture is objectified and made a resource and catalyst for economic development and regional regeneration (see Ying and Zhou, 2007; Li et al., 2014). It is also conceived as a useful means to change the mentality of rural people and forge their modern subjectivities (see Mueggler, 2002; Wang, 2006; Oakes, 2006, 2012). In particular, this idea of 'culture' is deployed by the government as a secular alternative to 'superstition' and 'backwardness' (Feuchtwang and Wang, 1991; Yang, 2004; Chau, 2006). This is highlighted in this paper in the state ideology of turning ancestral halls into spaces of 'cultural' activities.

In this paper, I examine rural cultural governance in contemporary China through the analysis of the re-production of traditional ancestral temples in Xincheng Town¹ in Wenzhou, southeast China. The ancestral temple is a symbolic space of the lineage, a group of people who share the same surname and link with one another due to their common paternal ancestors (Szonyi, 2002). According to dominant discourses of the modern, civilized and socialist countryside, traditional lineage culture is subject to reconstruction and transformation by the government (Yang, 2004). Many traditional ancestral temples in Xincheng are converted into cultural halls, memorials and elderly activity centers, which are called authorized cultural spaces or converted temples in this paper.

I focus on the exploration of rural people's agency by discussing how lineage members² are involved in, mediate and challenge the state-oriented cultural project in Xincheng. Lineage members are not passive participants but in fact take control of the re-production of temple spaces. They actively negotiate with the state and incorporate converted temples into their own developmental agenda of modern lineage culture. The agency of rural people is influenced by local socio-spatial conditions, including the prosperous private economy, lineage power, time-honored cultural traditions, limited administrative resources etc. Drawing on this case, I argue that the analysis of people's agency in cultural governance should move beyond the given political context of specific governing programs and instead be situated in wider rural socio-spatial processes. In this paper, the rural is understood as a relational space, constitutive of multiple, dynamic and interconnected relations that influence social, cultural, political and economic practices of rural residents (cf. Woods, 2011; Heley and Jones, 2012). Rather than merely being the background or container, rural space is inherently embedded into specific governing practices and the formation of people's agency. As key features in rural space, temples are articulations of these hybrid entanglements, and reflect the complexity and dynamism of historical, cultural, socio-economic and political relations and practices in/of the rural.

Before introducing the field site and research methods, I examine existing literature on governance, rural agency and cultural production, arguing for a nuanced understanding of the

complexity and flexibility of rural people's agency in the state's cultural governance. In the main body of this paper, I analyze the transformation of lineage culture in contemporary Chinese rural society with a specific concern with rural Xincheng. This is followed by the analysis of why and how the local government facilitates the conversion of ancestral temples into cultural halls, memorials and elderly activity centers by inventing diversified dominant discourses, which represent traditional ancestral temples as 'backward', 'empty' and 'illegal' spaces. Nonetheless, the state endeavor to convert lineage temples is confined by specific rural socio-spatial relations, whilst rural residents maintain great initiatives. In the subsequent section, I discuss how rural people's agency comes to the fore by shedding light on the re-making of authorized cultural spaces as 'extended' and 'shadow' temple spaces. I conclude with the summary of key arguments presented in this paper.

2. Governance, rural agency and cultural production

The research of rural governance has gained popularity in Anglophone rural studies over the past two decades in the context of dramatic rural restructuring and changing arts of governing (cf. Woods and Goodwin, 2003; Woods, 2005). Rather than resorting to force, modern countries adopt a wide range of strategies, programs and technologies to achieve flexible, pervasive and effective regulation and control of societies (see Dean, 2010; Rose, 1990, 1999). In rural areas, it has witnessed a shift from hierarchical control and coercive measures to inclusive and de-centralized governance, in which the government, local communities and individuals are all involved in the formulation, delivery and implementation of rural policies and programs (Mardsen and Murdoch, 1998; Goodwin, 1998). The power of governance is not anchored in the sovereign state or held by the authority. It does not grant the state a central position, but only exists through exercise. The 'new' arts of governing the rural have inspired scholars' reconsideration of the complex relationship between the government and rural society, as examined in a wide range of issues including rural resources (e.g. Cheshire et al., 2014), environment (e.g. Taylor, 2010), cultures (e.g. Moser, 2010), and housing and land use (e.g. Morrison et al., 2012). In this paper, I focus on rural cultural governance and people's agency.

As manifested in western societies, cultural governance is associated with neo-liberal rationalities. It presumes the agency and freedom of the governed, and incorporates them into governing projects (Rose, 1999; O'Malley, 1996). As Rose et al. (2006) argue, '[h]uman powers of creativity are centered rather than marginalized' (p. 99). Cultural governance encourages community initiatives and participation, and attempts to establish partnerships between the authority, local institutions and social groups (Ray, 1998). In many contexts, it allows non-state agents and individuals to govern the conduct of themselves and others while the government enacts the power through 'steering rather than rowing' (cf. Rhodes, 1996, p.655). It often contains various discursive and ideological techniques to influence people's mentalities, identities and capacities, thereby facilitating self-governance of people. For example, the ideas of self-help, community development and active citizenship are widely propagandized in many rural areas so as to stimulate community cooperation and participation in state-oriented programs (see Murdoch, 1997; Ward and McNicholas, 1998; O'Toole and Burdett, 2004; Cheshire, 2006).

Similar to western countries, governing strategies and techniques in contemporary China have also been diversified and mobilized. Instead of imposing state will through coercion, the Chinese government increasingly takes into account indirect and 'soft' mechanisms and projects to regulate the conduct of rural

¹ In 2011, Xincheng Town was renamed as Xincheng District, and officially incorporated into the future urbanization of Ruian, a county-level city. However, this paper still use the original name of Xincheng Town since most residents continue to use it during their daily life.

² It is worth noting that not all lineage members are rural people. However, the majority of members directly influenced by the production of converted temples are rural residents, as in most situations their urban relatives are not actively involved in this cultural project. Occasionally, a few members from the city in some clans will join in the discussion.

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