




Funeral Rituals in Village-Turned-Residential Communities: Transformation, Conflicts, and Management Strategies

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Abstract. This paper explores funeral rituals in China's villages-turned-residential communities, focusing on transformations and conflicts amid modernization. Using mixed methods, field observations and interviews in Hangzhou's A Community (Mar-Jul 2024) revealed shrinking traditional rituals while they persist. Attitudes differ among residents, migrants, and staff, posing challenges in balancing cultural respect and space utilization. Recommendations offer insights for effective community management and cultural adaptation in urbanizing contexts.

Keywords: funeral rituals, villages-turned-residential communities, cultural adaptation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Funeral rituals, as ceremonies imbued with the profound significance of connecting the past, present, and future, are deeply embedded in human society^[1]. China's funeral rites, characterized by geographical diversity, largely embody the integration of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and traditional folk beliefs, reflecting a profound understanding of life and death among the Chinese people. These rituals also uphold the ethical, moral order, and cultural traditions within the societal dimension. However, as society modernizes, traditional funeral customs confront notable conflicts with modern civilized values, such as the elimination of superstitious practices, economic thrift, and ecological preservation, due to potential issues like feudal superstition, extravagance, and land occupation^[2].

Current research on funeral rituals predominantly focuses on rural areas, often neglecting the unique community form arising from China's urbanization process—villages-turned-residential communities. These communities, rebuilt under the "villages merged into residential areas" policy, integrate urban housing styles and spatial layouts while retaining some rural cultural traits^[3]. In this urban-rural blend, funeral customs face evident adaptation challenges within these communities.

The transformation of internal spaces in villages-turned-residential communities, where flat, dispersed, and open-plan courtyards are replaced by organized blocks and multi-storied residential buildings, has led to the disappearance of traditional public

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spaces^[4]. This poses challenges to the spatial and environmental requirements of funeral activities. Additionally, changes in spatial characteristics have triggered alterations in interpersonal relationships and social structures. Under collective resettlement, residents from diverse villages form new communities, weakening the traditional "acquaintance society" characteristics^[5], it has brought about the disassembly and reassembly of social networks as well as cultural practices and local customs^[6]. Meanwhile, the relatively low rent in these communities attracts numerous migrant workers, exacerbating cultural disparities and conflicts between traditional funeral activities and the lifestyles and values of other residents. Consequently, the imbalance in funeral customs and the ensuing social relationship conflicts in villages-turned-residential communities have emerged as critical issues in community governance.

The research objective of this paper is to investigate the current status of funeral rituals in villages-turned-residential communities, elucidating the factors driving their transformation and conflicts. It also examines the attitudes of various groups (e.g., residents, tenants, property management) towards the current funeral ritual practices, delving into their needs and expectations for such rituals. Furthermore, this study aims to explore how to preserve traditional funeral culture while constructing ritual solutions that are compatible with modern community environments. Through specific case studies, this research examines the interplay between the physical environment, social relationship changes, and funeral rituals in villages-turned-residential communities, observing the adaptive evolution of funeral rites against the backdrop of modern society. It provides novel perspectives and practical strategies for effective community management and cultural adaptation.

2. METERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Deign

This study adopts a mixed-methods design to explore funeral rituals and cultural transitions in village-to-residential communities. The research was conducted from March 2024 to July 2024 and comprises two primary components: (1) direct observation of the physical environment and funeral rituals in the village-to-residential community, along with data collection on relevant cultural and social backgrounds; (2) in-depth interviews with community residents, outsiders, and property management to understand residents' attitudes, expectations, and needs regarding traditional funeral rituals, and to explore their perspectives on ritual innovations.

2.2. Setting

The study focuses on Community A, the largest resettlement area in Hangzhou's southwest, with a population of 20,000 and 5,122 households. Selected due to its unique cultural background and modernization challenges, Community A has undergone significant spatial transformation, replacing courtyards with high-rise buildings. Funeral

activities often disrupt limited public space and pose safety hazards. The influx of migrant workers and tenants has diversified the population, with outsiders accounting for 40% in 2020. This has intensified cultural differences, decreased ritual acceptance, and sparked conflicts, making Community A an ideal case study for exploring funeral ritual modernization and community governance.

2.3. Procedure and Analysis

Field Investigation. The author resided in Community A from March to June 2024, observing funeral activities to gain insight into their implementation and impact on public space. Five observations were conducted, meticulously recording details such as time, location, participants, behaviors, and interactions. Differences in participation and emotional expressions across cultural and social backgrounds were noted. Handwritten notes were transcribed into electronic text for analysis and comparison.

In-depth Interviews. The author recruited 10 original residents, 15 outsider tenants, and 6 community workers from the Management Committee through the community's online forum. Participants signed informed consent forms and were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews lasted 17 to 59 minutes (median 30 minutes), following a semi-structured conversational format. Topics aligned with research objectives, including descriptions, opinions, needs, and suggestions regarding current funeral practices. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and entered into NVivo-10 for content coding and theme identification, including preservation and change of funeral practices, attitudes and perceptions towards funeral culture, and management and challenges of funeral rituals.

3. RESULT

3.1. Current Status of Funeral Ceremonies in Community

Based on five field observations and in-depth interviews with A Community's original residents, this study systematically compiles and summarizes the main processes of current funeral ceremonies within A Community, as detailed below:

Announcement and Mourning. Upon a family member's death, relatives swiftly disseminate the news and mourn through firecrackers and weeping, signaling the funeral's start.

Ceremony Setup. Family members choose sites within the community (e.g., gardens, building entrances, roadsides) to erect temporary sheds adorned with the deceased's portrait, wreaths, and paper decorations. They fold paper ingots, symbolizing posthumous blessings.

Ceremony Execution. Professional teams recite scriptures and play music in the sheds, with older members present to show respect. Family members light candles from the residence to the sheds and burn paper ingots and money as tribute.

Procession and Banquet. On the second to third day, dressed in white and holding wreaths, family members escort the coffin. A banquet follows, inviting relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Post-Funeral Commemoration. Following the funeral, family members hold commemorations on specific days (e.g., the 7th, 21st, 35th, 100th day, and first anniversary), primarily lighting candles and burning paper ingots or money, expressing ongoing remembrance. These activities, while simpler, reflect the family's enduring grief.

3.2. Changes and Conflicts in Funeral Ceremonies

This study interviewed individuals across diverse ages (21-73), cultural backgrounds (locals, migrants), and roles (tenants, homeowners, property managers) to capture varied perspectives on funeral ceremonies. All 10 original residents had participated in or organized such ceremonies, while 3 of 15 migrant tenants had participated and 12 witnessed them multiple times. Six community workers, equally split between locals and migrants, were also interviewed.

Preservation and Evolution of Funeral Customs. Amidst A Community's transformation, core traditional funeral rituals persist but have shrunk in scale and duration. Community managers have designated areas in public spaces to regulate activities and minimize disturbances.

Varying Attitudes Towards Funeral Culture. Interviewees' attitudes towards funeral culture differed by age and background. Original residents, as tradition bearers, respect and identify with ceremonies, while migrants and younger residents show unfamiliarity and misunderstanding. Some expressed dissatisfaction with disruptions, but most tolerate and respect differences. Community workers reported frequently mediating conflicts, mainly due to noise (80%), space occupation, and safety hazards.

Managing Funeral Ceremonies: Challenges. Balancing cultural respect with space utilization poses a challenge for community managers. With limited space, arranging ceremonies to meet needs without harming others is difficult. A Community hosts 3-5 ceremonies monthly, with 80% occupying public areas or fire lanes, leading to numerous complaints.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Analysis of Roles and Functions

In Community A's funeral ceremonies, diverse participants with unique identities and roles collectively shape the ritual framework, embodying the interplay of social structure and cultural traditions.

Local Residents: Hosts and Core Actors. Local residents, especially family and friends of the deceased, serve as primary hosts and core actors. They plan, organize, and execute ceremonies, liaise with service providers, and prepare items and feast foods adhering to traditions.

Community Property Management: Support and Supervision. Community property management provides both support and supervision. It offers material conditions, site allocation, and environmental restoration, while also managing ceremonial activities to ensure order and maintain community harmony.

Tenants: Non-direct Participants' Voices. Tenants, not directly involved in ceremonies, have significant perceptions and evaluations. Concerns about noise, crowd movement, and space occupation reflect challenges of diversity and integration in the community.

4.2. Suggestions for Space and Service Optimization

From the perspective of space planning and functional optimization, given the frequency of funeral ceremonies in Community A and their significant occupation of public spaces, it is recommended to plan and construct a facility for wedding and funeral events within the community. This facility should integrate traditional and modern elements, meeting the needs of funeral ceremonies while aligning with modern aesthetics and functional requirements. To reduce noise disturbance to neighboring residents during funeral ceremonies, it is suggested to install soundproof booths around the facility and potential ceremony venues. These booths should employ efficient soundproof materials to ensure effective noise control during ceremonies.

From the perspective of community management and service innovation, to enhance management efficiency and resident convenience, it is recommended to integrate the funeral ceremony application process into the community's mini-program. Residents can submit ceremony applications online through the mini-program, including information on time, location, and scale. To minimize the interference of funeral ceremonies with community daily life, clear regulations on ceremony times should be established. For example, funeral ceremonies could be scheduled within specific morning to evening timeframes to avoid nighttime noise disturbing residents' rest. Additionally, for cer-

emonies exceeding the stipulated times, prior communication and consent from neighboring residents should be obtained to ensure community harmony. Furthermore, modern technological means such as virtual worship should be promoted, including establishing virtual worship platforms and providing online prayer services, to enrich the forms of funeral ceremonies and gradually guide the transformation of traditional ceremonies towards modernization, aligning with contemporary lifestyles and worship needs.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1. Research Contributions and Significance

This study delves into funeral rituals in China's villages-turned-residential communities, finding that traditional rituals, while still present in the process of modernization, have decreased in scale and duration. Differences in attitudes among residents, migrant tenants, and community managers pose challenges to balancing cultural respect and space utilization. Key findings include the preservation of core traditional funeral rituals in a simplified form, greater respect and identification among locals, and unfamiliarity among migrant tenants and younger residents. Community managers face challenges in balancing culture and tradition. This study has significant implications for community management and cultural adaptation, revealing the challenges faced by funeral rituals in village-turned-residential communities and providing suggestions for space planning and service optimization.

5.2. Research Limitations and Future Directions

While successful, this study has limitations. Our qualitative approach, though insightful, may lack generalizability due to a small sample and limited resources. Expanding the sample with quantitative methods could enhance universality. Additionally, focusing on core participants overlooked broader stakeholders like service providers and government bodies, which could offer deeper insights. Future studies should include these actors for a more comprehensive understanding. Moreover, this study was confined to one community, lacking cross-regional and cross-cultural analysis. Employing such approaches could reveal unique aspects of funeral customs and their impact on social structures, enriching our understanding of funerary traditions. These avenues promise to enhance knowledge and refine approaches to managing funerary rites.

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