


A Study on Traditional Funeral Customs in Rural Areas of Southeast China under the Influence of Christian Culture: A Case Study of XX Village

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Abstract

Taking a village along the southeast coast as an example, this paper discusses the influence of Christian culture on traditional funeral customs in rural China and the expression of cultural blending and conflict. From the macroscopic historical background, the spread of Christianity in the southeast coastal areas after the reform and opening up has been promoted by the policy opening and social changes; From the micro-level analysis, Christianity advocates the idea of soul salvation through simplifying funeral rituals (such as canceling the choice of a day, burning paper money, accompanying burial, etc.), which is in sharp contrast to the traditional culture of “emphasizing filial piety” and “emphasizing ceremony”. By using the methods of observation, in-depth interview and focus group discussion, the research found that there were both conflicts and commonalities between Christian funeral culture and traditional culture in terms of dress and ritual process. The Christian prayer ceremony and the focus on the characteristics of community mutual assistance have changed the social interaction pattern in the countryside to some extent. Although multi-faith families often face conflict over funeral ritual choices, the concept of respecting the wishes of the deceased is the key to resolving the conflict. The study believes that the spread of Christian culture on the one hand poses a challenge to traditional funeral customs, on the other hand also promotes the modernization and simplification of rituals. In the future, funeral customs may show a more integrated and open development trend under the needs of modernization and cultural diversity, providing new enlightenments for cultural inheritance and innovation.

Keywords

Christian Culture, Traditional Funeral Customs, Southeast Coastal Areas, Cultural Blending and Conflict, Simplification of Rituals

1. Introduction

Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, Christianity intersected with the diffusion of Western capitalist civilization in the southeast coastal regions of China and managed to endure. Bi (2001) argued that, from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the intense clash between Western and Chinese civilizations relegated Christianity to a precarious foothold in the southeast coastal areas. However, when strategic opportunities emerged, Christianity evolved into a compensatory force in the region. From a macro perspective, these opportunities primarily stemmed from the reform and opening policies implemented after the establishment of the republic. Alongside direct foreign economic and cultural exchanges, Lim (2020) observed that during the reform and opening period (since 1978), the pursuit of a market economy precipitated a significant weakening of local socio-political control. This erosion of authority catalyzed the rapid proliferation of Christianity, particularly Protestantism, in the region.

On the other hand, from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s, a series of anti-feudalism and anti-superstition campaigns in China dismantled the traditional norms and order of Chinese folk religions—strongly opposed to Christianity at the grassroots level (Lim, 2020). This change can be considered as the clearing of some obstacles and difficulties in the rise of Christianity. A similar phenomenon has also been reflected in the reform of funeral customs.

According to micro perspectives, the social and economic environment of rural areas, along with the unique backgrounds of individual believers, plays an important role in the spread of Christianity. Bi (2001) mentioned that the dual influence of the adjustment of rural industrial structures and the process of urbanization has made the characteristics of believers more distinct within this context. Combined with materials related to Christian elements—obtained by the author through conversations with a relative who was Christian during her lifetime, including statements such as, “Believing in God will bring long-term happiness, and not believing in God will lead to being bitten by pythons in hell”—it becomes evident that the pursuit of personal spiritual fulfillment, along with Christianity's capacity to address practical concerns, has become a significant factor in attracting believers (Bi, 2001).

Returning to the discussion of funeral culture and customs: funeral culture pertains to the final step of life and holds profound cultural significance. Ni's (2007) analysis of funerary customs in ancient China—such as painted pottery in the Neolithic Age, Qin terra-cotta warriors and horses, and Han Dynasty ware—along with Li's (2011) perspective, which frames funerals as a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism “customs” emphasizes the importance of burial

culture. Similarly, Ai (2012) highlighted that funeral customs are the tangible manifestations of deep-seated cultural heritage and the result of the dynamic interplay of various cultural factors. Funeral culture is not only a lens for cultural exchange but also one of the most significant components of people's lives. Therefore, this article will examine the communication and conflicts between Christianity and traditional Chinese culture in funeral customs in the southeast coastal regions and explore their influence and evolution.

In the previous research, Li (2010) carried out research based on the funeral customs in rural areas of Handan City, Hebei Province, and Sebillaud et al. (2022) investigated the relevant customs in northeast China. Though Bi (2001) has studied the Christian culture in the southeast coastal area, there are few studies on the cultural internal causes between Christianity and local funeral customs, and the research methods are relatively simple. To make up for this gap, this study conducts a multi-dimensional analysis of funeral customs in southeast coastal areas from the aspects of cultural internal causes, cultural conflicts and cultural influences through a variety of methods (including field observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions).

Specifically, this research analyzes the influence of Christian culture on local traditional funeral culture and customs based on the location of a southeast coastal village. The research methods include in-depth interviews with ten qualitative interview subjects, six of whom were in-depth interviews, and one focus group interviews (four people), as well as field observations by the investigators. This research seeks to present the complex interaction between Christianity and traditional culture through the analysis of cultural integration, livelihood motives, and social issues, providing a new perspective for the study of culture and folklore.

2. Literature Review

In order to analyze the traditional funeral cultural customs in rural areas of southeastern China under the influence of Christian culture, this study first reviews previous related research, from Christian funeral customs and cultural internal factors, traditional funeral customs and cultural internal factors in rural China, and the impact of Christian funeral customs on other areas (including China). The influence of funeral customs and the study of the reform and development of China's funeral customs are sorted out related research, and the achievements and shortcomings of previous research are analyzed, as well as the inspiration for this study.

2.1. Research on Christian Funeral Customs and Cultural Internal Causes

As the "bridge" between the dead and God, the church performs the function of communication between man and God through clergy such as priests. Ai (2012) pointed out that traditional funerals in the West are hosted by the church and presided over by the priest, and are organized by the church throughout the whole

process, from deathbed confession and purification to mass, hymns and burial ceremonies. Li (2011) added, at the beginning of the twentieth century in China, the priest “Shengong” led the deathbed to confession during funeral services and used religious rites to exonerate them. This church-led funeral culture, while emphasizing “equal individualism”, fundamentally embodies the Christian community’s collective gratitude to God. Therefore, the importance of the church and clergy in Christian funeral culture is not only the expression of faith but also the externalization of the values of the religious community.

Christian funeral culture is heavily influenced by the “dualist” theory of the distinction between soul and body. Ni (2007) analyzed and pointed out that Christianity believes that the soul is immortal, and the body is limited, which constructs the view of death with “Detach from worldly desires, Focus on what endures” as the core, and directly influences the formation of funeral customs. For example, the Christian custom of simple burial, including not paying attention to Fengshui (geomantic omen) in the cemetery, not choosing an auspicious day, not burying with items, etc., reflects the importance of soul rest, rather than the concern of physical placement. Although the Bible lacks a clear funerary norm, “dualism” lays the foundation for the Christian view of life and death, reinforcing the function of funerals as the soul being put into the hands of God. As Koontz (2009) points out, the central purpose of Christian burial is not to honor the dead but to release the dead to holiness.

Although the events that have been emphasized by Christian funeral culture are full of opposition to the traditional notions, there is a balance that can be reached in practice. Especially in the southeast coastal areas of China, the church and local conventional culture blend in funeral customs, which not only preserves the core values of Christianity but also reflects respect for local culture. This two-way interaction of culture further highlights the significance of funeral culture as a window of cultural exchange.

2.2. Research on Traditional Funeral Customs and Cultural Internal Causes in Rural China

The funeral culture in rural China is deeply affected by the kinship of the patriarchal clan and family connection, which not only has formed the basis of ideology and social rules but also directly shapes the procedures and customs of the funeral culture. Zhang (2015) claimed that the importance of the family concept in funeral customs stems from the influence of the patriarchal social organization. “In the period of self-sufficient agricultural civilization, the consanguineous family with land, and settlement life, formed the foundation of the patriarchal country.” This blood structure determines the kinship of funeral procedures. For instance, the “Wufu” system defines the range of clan relatives through senior ship and parallel relations. In some areas, “Wufu” has become a symbol of intimate relations and maintains the emotional connection within the family (Shang & Liu, 2016).

The funeral culture in rural China is not only the extension of blood relationships but also the embodiment of the integration and development of monism and

Confucian culture. Confucianism emphasizes the unity of heaven and man, which has shaped the unique Chinese view of life and death. Ni (2007) considered that the idea of “unity of heaven and man” not only explains the cycle of life but also injects moral and ethical significance into the funeral culture. Confucian classics such as Analects stipulate that funerals should be “rites” as the core: “While alive, treat them with respect; when dead, bury them with respect and honor them with respectful rituals.” This concept has laid the norm of Chinese funeral culture centered on rites.

In addition to the influence of the concept of life and death, Confucian culture also directly stipulates the procedures of funeral rites through classical books. Zhang (2015) pointed out that funerals in the Central Plains region are deeply influenced by the ritual system of Confucian culture, emphasizing the standardization and ritualization of funerals. At the same time, Buddhism and Taoism have allied more rituals, such as passing over the dead and offering sacrifices to immortal spirits. This multi-cultural integration makes Chinese funeral rites not only have a rigorous structure but also show rich spiritual connotations.

To summarize, the funeral culture in rural China is the result of the integration of patriarchal ideas, Confucian monism Buddhist, and Taoist religious thoughts. Blood relationship revolves around the social basis of funeral culture, while Confucianism and religious culture jointly build a unique traditional funeral system through the concept of life and death and ritual norms. These cultural thoughts have a profound impact on the formation and development of funeral procedures and provide important support for cultural diversity and the inheritance of traditional values.

2.3. Research on the Influence of Christian Funeral Customs on Funeral Customs in Other Regions (Including China)

The influence of Christian missionary activities on local funeral culture is usually shocking and reforming. This kind of influence, from the basic doctrine of Christianity to the ideology and the concept of life and death shaped by it, is different or even contradictory to the traditional culture in many regions. Li's (2010) record of field research shows that people's feelings about Christian burial practices tend to focus on the contrast between traditional practices, such as, “joss paper is burned for the dead, and when we all believe in Christ's death and go to heaven, joss paper is burned for the devil” (p. 175). This negation of traditional rituals such as burning paper money reflects the conflict between the Christian view of life and death and the traditional Chinese culture. Furthermore, Li (2017) mentioned in his study on the fusion of Chinese and Western funerals in the late Qing Dynasty those Christian precepts led to the cancellation of some traditional rituals, such as “rituals involving Christian precepts were abolished due to conflicts or omitted because they were not in their hometown” (p. 24). The Christian-tinged interpretation of traditional Chinese burial procedures has made it easier to abolish certain practices. For instance, Li (2010) observed that non-religious villagers often interpret the funeral of Christians as “simple” as “no joss sticks

burning”. As a result, Christian funeral rites that are more readily accepted and practiced and spread faster with traditional ethical frameworks.

In Non-Chinese areas, Christian missionary activity also brought about significant changes in funeral practices, but this change is more described as “transformation” than “integration” or “exchange”. Missionaries often examine local cultures from the vantage point of civilization and morality, attempting to transform them from “barbaric” to “civilized” and from “demonic” to “sacred”. In the process of this transformation, the local funeral culture is often strongly impacted. [Rutto et al. \(2020\)](#) studied the influence of Christian missions in the Marakwet region and pointed out that missionaries believed that traditional culture had demonic characteristics and therefore required converts to abandon their original cultural practices. This religious “transformation” directly changed Marakwet’s funeral rites. For instance, local Christian funerals no longer include traditional African customs such as dancing, shaving nails, and eating meat, but instead include new religious rituals such as reading the Bible and singing hymns. Intercommunity funerals tend to be further simplified and coordinated ([Rutto et al., 2020](#)). This phenomenon of hybridization and transformation indicates that the influence of Christianity on African funeral culture is not a simple cultural exchange, but a restructuring process with religious motives.

The study of Christian funeral customs in Non-Chinese areas provides a reference for analyzing its influence on China. Whether abolishing traditional practices in cultural conflicts or promoting the spread of teachings through simplified rituals, these studies show the adaptation and transformation patterns of Christian funeral culture in different regions. This research framework provides a new perspective for understanding the role of Christianity in Chinese funeral practices while highlighting the complexity of religious culture in interacting with local traditions.

2.4. Research on the Reform and Development of Funeral Customs in China

To a certain extent, the reform of Chinese funeral customs has provided an opportunity for the penetration and spread of Western religious culture. Due to the policy disharmony between respecting religion and combating feudal superstition, some traditional religious cultures have been weakened, destroying the religious ecological balance, thus creating space for the development of foreign religions such as Christianity. [Wu \(2022\)](#) pointed out that the 2018 version of the regulations on Funeral and Burial Management respects the religious beliefs of ethnic minorities, such as the burial culture of Islam, while Han Chinese areas have been hit by traditional folk religious practices being treated as feudal superstitions. This practice “seriously damaged the ecological balance among religions but instead removed obstacles for the widespread of Western religions” ([Wu, 2022](#)). In addition, [Bi \(2001\)](#) analyzed the rise of Christian culture in the southeast coastal areas after the reform and opening up and pointed out that Christianity gradually penetrated all aspects of social life under the impetus of economic ex-

changes and policy opening up. The reform of Chinese funeral culture inadvertently promoted the spread of Christian culture in China, especially in coastal areas, and its impact was particularly significant.

Although the reform of funeral customs promoted the spread of Christian culture, the core concepts of traditional culture remain in modern funeral practice. The reform work is more focused on “simplifying the complex” to make funeral culture meet the needs of modern society without breaking its connection with tradition. Liu (2024) pointed out that “The grass-roots social workstation, together with the ‘HongBai’ (Wedding and Funerals) Council and other community organizations, to improve and innovate the current funeral ceremony, without changing the original funeral ceremony to play a role in grassroots social governance, to simplify, in line with the new requirements of the new era.” This reform mode reflects the respect and retention of traditional funeral culture, especially in the emotional expression and etiquette core still following the traditional values.

The reform of Chinese funeral customs has not only promoted the spread of foreign religious culture but also retained the core concept of traditional culture. This reform not only shows the balance between tradition and modernity but also emphasizes the adaptability of funeral culture in social changes. By focusing on cultural inheritance and flexibility, Chinese funeral customs continue to show their unique cultural value and social significance in the development.

2.5. Evaluation of Previous Studies

The research results on the interaction between Chinese traditional funeral rites and Christian funeral rites can be divided into two categories. One is based on field investigation reports. For example, Li’s (2010) research on Christian Funeral Rites in rural Hebei—A case study of Beihezhuang, Yongnian County, Handan City recorded the reform and influence of Christian funeral rites in northern China through in-depth interviews, and Li (2010) concluded that “rituals that are easily technicalized are more likely to be reformed, and the firmness of belief affects the degree of ritual reform, but the purity of belief does not completely determine the degree of superficial ritual reform” (p. 176). The other category is the analysis of “cultural internal causes” based on existing literature and cultural phenomena, such as the cultural perspective of the differences between Chinese and Western funeral customs explored by Shang and Liu (2016), and the research of Zhang (2015) on the differences between Chinese and Western social cultures. These studies emphasize the profound influence of Chinese and Western cultural composition (such as clan system and church system) and cultural thinking framework (such as “monism” and “dualism”) on funeral culture and customs and provide a wide range of cultural background analysis.

Although the existing research provides a lot of references for this paper, there are still some shortcomings. First, the separation between theoretical analysis and practical observation is obvious. For instance, though Li’s (2010) study focused on the influence of Christianity on funeral rites, it mostly stayed at the phenomenon description level and failed to deeply explore the internal causes of culture. How-

ever, most of the research on the analysis of “culture intrinsic causes” are based on the discussion of history, social structure and ideology, and lacks the support of field investigation. Last but not least, the research content on the differences between Chinese and Western funeral customs is relatively limited, mainly focusing on the cultural framework, social composition and the shaping of views on life and death but failing to explore other factors that may lead to differences or convergence. This disconnection between theory and field investigation limits the completeness and depth of the research.

Combining the achievements and shortcomings of the existing research, the following enlightenment can be drawn: the combination of theory and practice is an important way to study funeral culture. On the one hand, the research should include the deep observation of the integration of Christianity and Chinese traditional funeral culture through field research; on the other hand, it is necessary to carry out systematic theoretical analysis on the basis of research in order to come up with valid and in-depth conclusions. Additionally, the research should focus on the extension or reflection of the existing result, such as exploring new cultural causes or raising problems that have not been paid attention to. Through the combination of field investigation and theoretical analysis, this study will try to reveal the interaction mechanism between religious culture and local funeral culture, and provide a broader perspective for research in related fields.

Overall, the existing research has made important achievements in the analysis of the cultural framework and social composition of Chinese and Western funeral cultures and provided the basic evidence of the blending phenomenon through field investigation. However, its shortcomings lie in the separation of theory and practice, and the limitation of the analysis of cultural intrinsic causes. Based on this, this study complements the combination of theory and field investigation, explores the deep mechanism of the interaction between Christianity and traditional Chinese funeral culture, and promotes the further development of research in this field.

3. Methodology

This study was designed using multiple methods, including observation, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews, to comprehensively explore the influence of Christian culture on traditional funeral cultural practices in rural areas of southeast coastal China. The research site is a village in Taizhou, Zhejiang Province. As the representative of the reform and opening up and a key area for Christian missionary work, it reflects the characteristics of funeral culture in rural areas along the southeast coast of China as intended in this study. Through multi-level and multi-dimensional data collection and analysis, the dynamic process of cultural integration and conflict is revealed.

3.1. Participants

Participants were divided into three categories, including religious villagers, non-

religious villagers, religious leaders and funeral service practitioners. Religious villagers are mainly composed of Christians and their family members, while non-religious villagers provide a cultural perspective outside of Christian influence. Religious leaders and undertakers play a key role in ritual processes and cultural practices. A total of ten qualitative interview subjects were selected in this study, including 6 in-depth interview subjects, and 4 focus-group discussion participants. In order to obtain a sufficient number of participants within the limited time and in the context of language barriers (dialects), the researcher of this study employed convenience sampling. The aim was to leverage its convenience to enable researchers to easily and efficiently contact the relevant participants in the field research, as well as the potential participants that the previous participants know, in order to obtain research information and conduct analysis.

3.2. Observation

Observation is an important method in this study. The whole process of burial ceremony is directly observed through videos and photos recorded in the past, and the specific manifestations of Christianity and traditional customs in the ceremony process, participants' performance and cultural symbols are collected. Although there are some defects in video and photo observation, it can also make up for the materials that are difficult to obtain by other research methods to a certain extent.

In qualitative research, observation is one of the oldest and most fundamental research methods. This method collects data through the investigator's senses, especially through systematic and meaningful observation and listening (McKechnie, 2008). Similarly, Adler & Adler (1994) described observation as "the foundation of all research methods" in the social and behavioral sciences.

In the process of observation, it focuses on recording and analyzing in detail from three aspects: ritual process, participants' performance, environment and cultural symbols. First, in terms of the ritual process, observe and record the preparation, formal links and post-funeral interaction. It focuses on the comparison of the unique characteristics of Christianity and traditional funeral customs, such as prayer, sutra singing in Christian ceremonies and cremation ceremony and burial clothes arrangement in traditional customs and analyzes the similarities and differences in ritual design of the two cultures and the possibility of integration.

Additionally, participant performance is another important concern. Observe the emotional expression of family members, villagers and religious leaders during the ceremony, and record their emotional reactions such as gravitas, emotion or resistance during the whole process. Through the analysis of these emotional expressions, we can gain a deeper understanding of the influence of different cultural practices on individual and collective emotions.

Finally, in the aspect of environment and cultural symbols, it focuses on the expression and interaction of Christian and traditional cultural symbols in ritual places. For example, whether symbols such as crosses, memorials, and tombstones coexist, and whether there is conflict or fusion in the ritual space. This kind of

observation at the symbolic level helps to reveal the fusion and collision between Christian culture and traditional culture in vision and space. By documenting these details comprehensively, the study can more systematically present the interaction between the two cultures in funeral practices.

3.3. In-Depth Interview

The main purpose of the in-depth interview was to explore the villagers' cognition and attitude towards Christian culture and traditional funeral practices. The interviews focused on a number of topics, including the villagers' religious background and its impact on daily life and funeral practices, the specific role of Christian culture on traditional funeral practices and the expression of cultural change, and the villagers' personal experience in cultural integration or conflict and its impact on community relations. In addition, the interviews also involved villagers' views on the future development of funeral customs to understand their expectations. The interviews would be conducted in a quiet, comfortable environment and will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes each, with audio recordings supplemented by detailed notes.

In addition to two interviews conducted online, the remaining four interviews are planned to be conducted face-to-face to enhance the depth and interaction of communication. The sample size used in qualitative research methods is usually smaller than that used in quantitative research methods. This is because qualitative research methods often focus on a deep understanding of a phenomenon or the meaning of a phenomenon (and the heterogeneity of meaning). This type of research usually focuses on a particular problem, process, situation, subculture, scenario, or set of social interactions and how and why. The goal of in-depth interviews in qualitative research is not to generalize in a larger group of people or to tend to rely on methods based on hypothesis testing, but to be more inductive and emergent in the research process (Dworkin, 2012). For this reason, this study only uses qualitative in-depth interviews with 6 subjects (Table 1).

Table 1. Information of in-depth interview participants.

Religious believers	Gender	Age	Religious Position	Serial Number
Christian believer 1	Female	55	Common believer	In-depth interviewee 05
Christian believer 2	Male	50	Regional religious host	In-depth interviewee 02
Christian believer 3	Male	45	Common believer	In-depth interviewee 03
Christian believer 4	Male	40	Preaching minister	In-depth interviewee 04
Christian believer 5	Male	65	Head of regional church	In-depth interviewee 06
Non-Christian believer			Occupation	
Non-Christian believer 1	Male	55	Funeral service agency	In-depth interviewee 01

3.4. Focus-Group Interview

Although both focus-group interview and in-depth interviews are common tools

for collecting qualitative research data, there are significant differences in form and purpose. Focus group interviews are conducted in the form of small group discussions, usually composed of participants with common characteristics, and focus on understanding the perceptions, thoughts and impressions of the group members on a particular topic. The discussion environment emphasizes non-threat and encourages participants to freely express a variety of opinions, even if there are distinctions, especially for small interest groups ignored by quantitative research. In contrast, in-depth interviews are one-on-one communications designed to provide insight into an individual's views, feelings, and experiences with the research topic through detailed narration. Focus-group interview pay more attention to the interaction between groups and the collection of diverse opinions, while in-depth interviews emphasize the in-depth mining of individual experience and causal interpretation (Milena et al., 2008).

In this study, the focus-group discussion aims to explore the collective cognition and consensus of villagers through group discussion. There are 4 non-religious villagers in the group. The discussion covered a variety of topics, including the conflict and integration between traditional and Christian funeral culture, the impact of funeral customs on society and changes in community relations, as well as the villagers' outlook on future cultural development and their specific suggestions for cultural integration. During the interview, the moderator will remain neutral, focus on leading the discussion, and record in detail the key elements that emerge from the group interaction. Special attention is paid to revealing the differences and consensus among villagers through discussions, so as to provide a more diversified and in-depth perspective for understanding cultural changes (Table 2).

Table 2. Information on focus group interview participants.

Participants	Gender	Age
Participant 1	Male	50
Participant 2	Female	20
Participant 3	Male	60
Participant 4	Female	55

3.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative analysis method was adopted for data analysis, combining observation records, in-depth interviews and focus group interviews to identify the main themes of cultural integration and conflict. The researchers will initially encode all the data to identify key issues such as cultural conflict, integration patterns, and social motivations. Then, by comparing the behaviors and attitudes of religious and non-religious villagers, the profound impact of cultural changes on the community is summarized, and multi-source data is integrated to reveal the specific role of Christian culture on traditional funeral customs.

3.6. Research Ethics

In order to ensure the ethics of the research, the principle of informed consent was strictly followed. Prior to observation and interview, fully communicate the purpose and methods of the study with participants to ensure their informed consent. Participants' personal information will be encrypted and stored for research purposes only. The researcher will participate as an observer to avoid interfering with the normal conduct of the ceremony or expressing personal positions.

4. Research Finding

4.1. Observation and Discovery Thematical Analysis

4.1.1. Theme 1: Traditional Funeral Rituals

Traditional burials are mainly characterized by Buddhism and conducted by monks and involve a variety of rituals. During burial, the body of the deceased is placed in a shed and covered with the quilts used in life. Burning paper money in front of the shed, symbolizing the dead to offer wealth; The coffin wrapping ceremony around the body is led by "Dashi" (monks). In addition, Buddhist scriptures (such as "Amitabha") are played during the ceremony to bless the dead and to show respect for the dead through collective bowing and prayer. Finally, the relatives complete the worship in the way of individual farewell. The overall ritual reflects the forgiveness and protection of the dead and the continuation of traditional filial piety, emphasizing a good death and happiness in the life hereafter.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Symbol of Traditional Funeral Dress

Traditional funeral dress embodies the dual symbol of identity and function. Among the immediate family members, the son should be dressed in mourning and white clothes and hat; Grandchildren wear jute belt and only participate in the mountain burial link; Other women and the younger generation wear white hemp bands, while the general relatives wear white towels. Clothing materials and colors (such as linen and white) symbolize filial piety, and the way they are worn distinguishes the social stratification of family members. Being in mourning and white clothes and hat emphasizes family ethics and shows the core position of traditional filial piety. These dress traditions continue in traditional funerals and carry profound cultural significance.

4.1.3. Theme 3: Distinction between Choosing a "Good Day" and Christian Burial

Traditional funerals are influenced by the idea of a "good day", and the body may be stored until a suitable funeral date. Cremation, funerals, and burial are often performed separately to ensure the peace of the dead and the auspice of the living. For this reason, the separation of traditional funeral rituals has led to higher funeral costs, including expenses for body storage, etc. However, Christian funerals are not affected by the idea of choosing a "good day", but the believers pay more attention to the immediacy of time, which means that they generally choose to complete all ceremonies on the same day. Traditional funeral ideology emphasizes

the “afterlife” of the dead, while Christianity focuses on “soul conversion”, reflecting the different understanding of the timing of the two cultures; additionally, the economic requirements of traditional funeral are generally higher than those of Christian burial.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Similarity between Christian and Traditional Funeral Rites

Although there are significant differences between and Christian burial in the core of belief, there are certain similarities in ritual forms. In terms of clothing, the white clothes and white hats of the traditional immediate family members are like the white clothes and linen belts of some Christian believers; Both prayer sessions and family participation also show filial piety. Nevertheless, the difference lies in the elements of traditional funeral rites, such as burning paper and choosing a “good day”, while Christianity emphasizes the return of the soul to the Lord and does not make material offerings. Such similarities and differences reflect the uniqueness of cultural integration and belief.

4.1.5. Theme 5: Gender Dimensions in Funeral Rituals

The responsibility of genders does not show significant distinctions between Christian and tradition funerals. In the funerals of both, males take the dominant role, directly participating in the discussions and decision-making processes of the funeral ceremonies and rituals. However, unlike the traditional funeral rituals that emphasize the patrilineal lineage, in Christian funerals, the majority of participants are females. Apart from the male relatives of the deceased (such as the spouse, son, etc.) and the presiding priest, the personnel conducting the relevant rituals, including the choir members, are also mostly females. This can be the reflection of the gender composition of local Christian group, which show that the prevalence of Christianity is higher among females than among males.

4.1.6. Theme 6: The Future Development Trend of Funeral Ceremonies

Traditional burials continue traditional practices such as burning paper money, choosing a day, and dress codes, demonstrating strong cultural stability. At the same time, the simplification of Christian funeral schedules and ritual details gradually influenced Chinese society. In the future, there may be more Traditional and Christian combining burial trends, such as similarity in dress and simplification of rituals. The influence of Christianity is particularly evident in the need for modernization, pushing funeral culture towards a more inclusive and simplified direction.

4.2. In-Depth Interview Thematical Analysis

4.2.1. The Tension between Modernization and Tradition of the Funeral Industry

The funeral industry is transitioning from tradition to modernization, and the marketization trend is particularly significant, but the difference between urban and rural areas still exists. Interviewee 01 of the in-depth interview pointed out

that in big cities, funeral services have been highly market-oriented: “In Hangzhou, Shanghai, Guangzhou, those places, after a phone call, 10,000, 20,000, 30,000 yuan will be done according to the process and specifications of the funeral.” In contrast, rural areas are still dominated by traditional methods, he said, adding: “It is still unclear what Wenling is now. In the future, funeral houses will develop and move closer to big cities.” The information provided by this interviewee indicates the prominent “specialized funerals in the urban funeral industry, which also reflects the supply-demand relationship between the “bereaved families” as the customer group and the “funeral service providers” in the market. It also further demonstrated that the development of the funeral industry to some extent reflects the trend of marketization. Interviewee 04 also mentioned: “In the countryside, the funeral industry still relies on families and clan people to help organize, but the funeral parlors in the city will be more specialized.” While interviewee 06 of the in-depth interview emphasized that the younger generation is more inclined to accept modern service models: “Modernization is a trend, especially among young people, who do not want to spend a lot of time on traditional ceremonies and prefer to choose fast and efficient ways.” These reflect that the modernization of funeral services has become an irreversible trend, but the acceptance of different regions varies according to cultural and social resources.

4.2.2. The Filial Piety and Symbol of Traditional Funeral

Traditional funeral ceremonies express filial piety through dress and behavior, reflecting family ethics and respect for the deceased. Interviewee 01 of the in-depth interview mentioned: “Filial son wears filial clothes and takes white filial staff. The daughter-in-law wears a hat with something yellow on her head, straw shoes tied with twine around the waist.” The way of wearing straw sandals even has symbolic significance: “If a person (one of people in marriage) is still alive, the straw shoe is one right and one opposite; If both husband and wife are dead, they wear it backwards.” Interviewee 02 further added: “In traditional ceremonies, the roles and clothing of each family member are strictly regulated, such as the jute belt worn by grandchildren, which indicates the seniority of the family.” In addition, the in-depth interviewee 04 noted that filial piety also takes the form of body farewell and funeral procession: “Children usually do not attend the funeral process, but will participate in the burial process, and close relatives must participate in the farewell ceremony.” These traditions highlight the respect for the deceased and the importance of family ties through details.

4.2.3. The Simplification of Christian Burial and Cultural Conflict

Christian funeral pays attention to the simplification of the ritual, and at the same time has a certain conflict with the traditional culture. Interviewee 03 of the in-depth interview mentioned: “Christian funerals are very simple, unlike traditional funeral, which chooses the day and looks at ‘Feng Shui’. We send off the souls of the deceased mainly through prayer.” At the same time, Christian funerals remove many traditional elements, such as filial staff, portraits and burning paper money,

as interviewee 01 of the in-depth interview described: “Christian funerals in the Zeguo town side do not hang portraits and do not carry filial staff. In Chengnan town, they wear Christian cards.” And the in-depth interview respondent 04 further pointed out: “We do not worship ancestors, only commemorate ancestors, will not bow down at the grave to burn joss sticks.” However, this difference from traditional customs can lead to cultural clashes in rural areas where Buddhism characterized folk is at the dominant position. Interviewee 03 admitted: “Buddhism (characterized folk) focuses on choosing dates and observing ‘Feng Shui’, while Christianity does not accept these practices, which sometimes brings conflict.”

4.2.4. Conflicts and Harmony in Multi-Faith Families

Multi-faith families often have conflicts over funeral rites, but they are usually resolved through negotiation or compromise. Interviewee 01 described a typical family conflict: “If there are four sons in the family, two are Buddhist and two are Christian, there will be arguments and even fights. The two sons threw paper money in front of them, and the two sons chased after them.” In order to solve such problems, family members often choose to respect the wishes of the deceased, as interviewee 04 said in the in-depth interview: “If the deceased wishes to follow the Christian ceremony, we will ask the family to sign an agreement confirming that there will be no funeral wreaths and no worship.” Interviewee 02 of the in-depth interview mentioned another way of negotiating: “Sometimes if two Buddhist believers are not willing to do it the Christian way, they avoid attending.” These cases show that conflicts in funeral practices among multi-faith families can be resolved through compromise and coordination.

4.2.5. The Social Function and Dissemination of Christian Burial

Christian funerals are not only a farewell ceremony for the dead, but also an important opportunity to spread the Gospel. Interviewee 03 of the in-depth interview mentioned: “The Christian funeral service allows more people to see and understand our faith. Through funerals, we can preach the Gospel to our less fortunate relatives and friends.” In addition, the participation of church members also increases the community impact of the ceremony. In depth interview respondent 04 pointed out: “In addition to relatives and friends, Christian funerals are also attended by brothers and sisters in the church. If the deceased is an active member of the church, more people will go to see them off.” “The spirit of mutual help in the church is very important, for example, when a brother or sister is sick, brothers and sisters will go to pray and offer help,” added interviewee 06. This public ceremony not only enhances the cohesion of the Christian community but also gives more non-believers the opportunity to contact and learn about the Christian faith.

4.2.6. The Fusion and Simplification of Funeral Culture in the Future

The future of funeral culture may show a trend of convergence and simplification, especially among the younger generation. Interviewee 01 of the in-depth interview

mentioned: "Now young people can basically integrate the customs slowly. They don't adhere to the traditions of the older generation and are more inclined to accept a simplified approach." At the same time, interviewee 03 of the in-depth interview believes that the future funeral culture can gradually infiltrate Christian elements: "I hope that future funerals can contain more Christian elements, so that more people can know the Lord." Interviewee 06 emphasized the importance of simplicity: "I expect funeral services to be more simple. A lot of complicated rituals can be removed, but the memorial needs to be taken seriously." This indicates that as the values of young people change, along with the continuation and deepening of Christian missionary activities, the "simplicity" and "individual-centered" viewpoints advocated by the younger generation have merged with some Christian elements. Funeral customs may gradually evolve towards modernization and simplification while maintaining the core of the culture. At the same time, the funeral ceremonies conducted by the younger generation will inevitably incorporate more Christian elements and abandon the traditional funeral ritual procedures. However, policies aimed at regulating the spread of foreign religious such as Christianity will hinder the dissemination of the Christian elements that should be integrated into the funeral culture. For instance, the interviewee 02 of in-depth interview pointed out: "Some have a close relationship with the government because our policies are somewhat related (to the religion). So, if we talk about it openly, it could cause some negative aspects of our church." And the interviewee 05 of in-depth interview mentioned: "Nowadays, the church does not be allowed. This is a national restriction that prevents Sunday school. So my granddaughter does not have a Sunday school anymore." This highlights the restrictions imposed by the policies and the national decisions on the spread of Christianity. Therefore, in the future funeral culture, "simplicity" and "Pragmatism" will be the main development features instead of religious or cultural diversity, and will also be one of the most prominent differences between the younger generation and the older generation regarding funeral culture.

4.3. Focus-Group Discussion Thematical Analysis

The participants of the focus group interviews were non-religious individuals. A thematic analysis of the interview results revealed the following themes:

4.3.1. Cultural Comparison of Funeral Customs

In the discussion, non-religious villagers clearly described the main differences between Christian and traditional funeral practices. Respondents mentioned that the core of a Christian funeral is singing poetry and praying, while a traditional funeral involves rituals such as burning paper money, offering sacrifices and chanting sutras. For example, the researchers asked, "What kind of rituals does Buddhism (characterized folk) have?" Participant 3 of the focus-group discussion responded, "Of course Buddhism (characterized folk) has to worship, everything." At the same time, focus-group discussion participant 1 also added: "burn paper money." This highlights the ceremonial complexity of traditional funerals, while

Christian funeral rites are more simplified. In addition, when it comes to the use of funeral wreath in Christian funeral ceremonies, participant 4 of the focus-group discussion said: “Christianity is not to burn paper money, not to send funeral wreath.” Thus, Christian funeral rites differ significantly from those of traditional or folk beliefs, especially in terms of ceremonial form and the use of symbolic objects.

4.3.2. Culture Conflict and Ritual Adaptation

Respondents discussed the conflict between Christian burial practices and traditional village practices, especially in terms of specific ritual arrangements. For example, participant 4 of the focus group interview mentioned: “Your mother’s friend sent a funeral wreath, he (the Christian host) refused to accept it, and then he said not to put it in the front, but to put it in the back.” The incident shows how the rigor of Christian rituals can lead to disagreements between religious and non-religious groups over the funeral process. When the researchers asked how this conflict was resolved, participant 4 of the focus group interviews responded: “It was unpleasant anyway.” This shows that in a village dominated by traditional customs, the implementation of Christian funeral is not completely smooth, but experienced contradictions and adjustments in the practice process.

However, in the face of different family beliefs, villagers generally believe that the faith of the deceased should be respected. For example, the researchers asked, “What if the elderly person’s family is Christian?” Focus group interview participant 4 replied: “Yes, according to his willingness, to complete the process.” This shows that even if other family members do not believe in Christianity, they will still respect the faith of the deceased and carry out the funeral in a Christian manner. This concept of “personal faith above all else” mitigated cultural conflicts in the village to a certain extent, allowing family members to find a balance between traditional and modern, religious and non-religious.

4.3.3. The Social Impact of Christian Faith

In interviews, some interviewees mentioned the strong social support networks that Christian communities display during the burial process. For example, the researchers observed that when Grandma passed away, many Christians came to see her off and asked, “Are there more Christians?” Focus group interview participant 4 replied: “A lot of people, anyway, your grandmother went to many churches. Several places.” This suggests that Christian community gatherings and social networks may influence the composition of funeral service participants, giving Christian funerals a unique collective atmosphere in the community. However, some respondents questioned the closed nature of the Christian community, for example, participant 4 of the focus group interview mentioned: “Can’t both believers and speak to each other?” This questioning reflects the concern of some villagers about the lack of interaction between religious groups and the possibility that different beliefs may affect harmonious relations within the community.

4.3.4. Changes in Personal Beliefs

In the interview, some of the interviewees shared their own experiences with Christianity and discussed why they did not become religious. For example, participant 4 of the focus-group discussion recalled, "I went to [church] before becoming a mother, listened to the pastor, sang, and prayed." However, she eventually chose not to become a believer, explaining: "I haven't been there since, I can't do anything if I believe in Christianity, too many limitations." This view reflects the discomfort of some villagers with the restrictive nature of religious life, preferring to maintain personal freedom. In addition, participant 4 of the focus-group discussion mentioned that her mother-in-law had tried to persuade her family to be Christian, and when she was sick, she suggested that "no wonder people who do not believe in Jesus often get sick." The experience made the participant uncomfortable, further confirming her choice not to be religious. This case illustrates that in situations where family beliefs are inconsistent, an individual's choice of faith may be influenced by close relationships but ultimately remains an individual's independent decision.

4.3.5. Views on Future Funeral Practices

When talking about funeral customs in the future, villagers expressed their hope for simplified funeral rituals. For example, participant 2 of the focus-group discussion said, "I wish it were simpler, not so much." But at the same time, some people think that funeral customs will not be easily changed, for example, participant 4 of the focus-group discussion mentioned: "It should not be changed, it should be like this." This shows that although some villagers want to simplify the ceremony, they still believe that traditional funeral customs will not change fundamentally in a short time. In addition, the researchers explored the possibility of cultural integration, whereby people of different faiths keep their own rituals at funerals. For example, the researchers asked, "You pray yours, I worship mine, you scatter your paper money, I hold up my cross, is that OK?" But the response of participant 4 in the focus group interview was: "We don't believe it anymore, we don't care about it anymore." This answer reflects the indifference of some villagers to religious integration, who prefer to be independent of religious affairs rather than promoting the integration of different cultures.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1. Conclusion of the Study

This study first found that the funeral industry is transitioning from traditional to modern, and this process has obvious differences between urban and rural areas. This shift reflects the tension between the efficiency brought about by modernization and the emotional value of traditional rituals. This finding answers the "How to represent cultural conflict" part of the research question: Modern services have gradually weakened the social functions of traditional clan funerals, but their effects have shown significant differences between urban and rural areas.

Secondly, this study finds that traditional funeral customs reflect filial ethics and family structure through dress and behavior. Details such as “wearing hemp in mourning” and “wearing straw shoes” mentioned in the in-depth interviews, as well as the ceremonial arrangements for the body’s farewell, further emphasize the emotional bonds and social hierarchy within the family. This theme reveals the core value of traditional funeral culture, namely strengthening family cohesion and filial ethics through rituals, which is related to the research question “How Christian culture influences the core of traditional culture”: the simplified tendency of Christian funeral may challenge the ritual expression of traditional filial piety.

Thirdly, the study also found that Christian funeral culture was characterized by simplified rituals, reducing traditional elements such as burning paper money, choosing a day, and filial staff, while introducing prayer and hymns. This change has led to a cultural clash between Christians and Buddhists, especially in multi-faith families. This topic answers the “How Christian culture has changed funeral practices” part of the research question by exploring the “replacement” or “reduction” of traditional rituals by Christian rituals.

Fourthly, this study also found that in multi-faith families, there are frequent cases of conflict over the choice of funeral rites. The study found that multi-faith families were often able to achieve a degree of compromise by honoring the wishes of the deceased and negotiating within the family. This phenomenon shows the dynamic process of cultural conflict and fusion, answering the part of the research question about “How traditional culture and Christian culture interact”: despite the conflict, the emotional needs of family members and individual belief choices promote the gradual adaptation of the two.

Fifthly, this study finds that Christian funeral rites serve as a platform for evangelization, demonstrating the community cohesion and social support functions of Christianity. Through prayer and mutual help by church members, Christianity further expanded its influence in rural communities. This topic addresses the part of the research question “How Christian culture permeates local societies through burial practices”: Through public burial rituals, Christianity increases its influence on communities while providing new avenues for the spread of the faith.

Finally, this study found that the younger generation is more inclined to accept simplified and integrated forms of burial. The simplification trend involves reducing burdensome rituals, while the integration trend is reflected in allowing family members to follow Christian or traditional ritual requirements respectively. This trend answers the part of the research question “The future direction of funeral customs”: In the future, funeral culture may gradually take on the form of “pluralistic coexistence” to meet the needs of modern society.

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of Christian culture on the traditional funeral culture in the rural areas of southeast China. Through the analysis of the above themes, the following conclusions can be drawn: Christian funeral culture has formed a significant conflict with traditional funeral culture while simplifying rituals, but multi-faith families have achieved partial integration

through negotiation, showing a dynamic process of cultural adaptation. Although the ethics of filial piety and family ties in traditional funeral practices have not been completely replaced by Christian culture, their manifestations are being challenged by the trend towards simplification. The trend of modernization and diversification of funeral customs has gradually integrated traditional and Christian culture, especially under the impetus of the younger generation, which may form a more inclusive funeral culture model. Through the observation and interview of the process of funeral culture change, this study comprehensively answers the research question of how Christian culture influences traditional funeral customs and provides an example of combining practice and theory for future cultural studies.

5.2. The Contribution of the Study

Through field observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this study explores the influence of Christian culture on traditional funeral customs in rural areas along the southeast coast of China, filling the gap in the analysis of the interaction mechanism between religion and traditional culture in existing studies. First of all, this study reveals the cultural conflict and fusion between Christianity and traditional folk beliefs in funeral customs by simplifying rituals and reconstructing the meaning of beliefs, providing a new perspective for understanding how religious beliefs shape local culture. Secondly, this study focuses on the cultural conflicts and compromise strategies of multi-faith families, demonstrates the complex dynamics of religious interaction in families and communities, and expands the practical dimension of religious culture studies. Third, this study also reveals the impact and adaptation of the modernization trend of the funeral industry on traditional rituals, and discusses the evolution of funeral culture in modern society from an intergenerational perspective, which provides inspiration for policy makers to find a balance between promoting funeral reform and cultural protection. Through the profound analysis of the integration of Christianity and traditional culture, this paper not only deepens the theoretical understanding of funeral culture in rural China, but also provides an important practical reference for the study of religious transmission and social change under the multicultural background.

5.3. Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. First of all, in terms of samples, only a rural area along the southeast coast of China is selected as the research site, and the samples have strong regional characteristics, which may not be able to fully reflect the funeral culture and its changing characteristics in other regions. In addition, the number of participants in in-depth interviews and focus group interviews is relatively small, and the proportion distribution of religious and non-religious villagers is different, which may affect the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the research results. Secondly, in terms of time span, the data collection in this study is mainly based on short-term observation and interview, and

there is a lack of follow-up analysis on the long-term dynamic evolution of funeral customs. The change of cultural customs usually takes a long time to accumulate, and short-term research may not be able to fully capture this complex process. Finally, from the perspective of religion, although this study focuses on the influence of Christianity on traditional funeral customs, there are few discussions on other traditional religions such as Buddhism and Taoism, and the interaction mechanism between multi-religious cultures is not deeply explored. At certain level, this limits the comprehensive understanding of cultural blending and conflict.

5.4. Future Research

In order to make up for the shortcomings of this study, future research can be carried out from the following directions. First, the research scope can be expanded to include rural communities from different regions and cultural backgrounds to explore the influence of Christianity on traditional funeral culture in different regions and reveal the commonalities and differences across regions. Second, long-term fieldwork methods should be used to track the dynamic evolution of funeral customs to gain a deeper understanding of the persistence and complexity of cultural change. Third, the research perspective can be expanded, and the role of Buddhism, Taoism and other religions in funeral customs and their interaction with Christianity can be deeply explored, so as to reveal the cultural blending and conflict mechanism under the background of multiple religions. Finally, future research can also focus on intergenerational attitude differences, especially the acceptance of traditional funeral customs and Christian culture by the younger generation, to explore the future development trend of funeral culture in the context of modernization. The research in these directions will further enrich the understanding of the changes of funeral culture in rural China and provide a new theoretical and practical basis for the coexistence and integration of multi-culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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