

Research on the Folk "Deacon" in Dongtun Town, Xinxiang City, Henan Province—Initial Investigation Report on Entering into Marriage Rituals

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Abstract: *With the continuous development of society, tremendous changes have occurred in rural areas in terms of culture, society, and economy, and rural marriage rituals have also undergone changes. The work of wedding organizers and "deacons" who assist in the ceremony has been impacted by the transformation of new-style marriage rituals. When the master of ceremonies of the new-style wedding enters the rural wedding, how do the "deacon" and the master of ceremonies cooperate to hold the wedding successfully? This article aims to explore what is the folk "deacon" and its changes, selecting Dongtun Town, Xinxiang City, Henan Province as the field survey point, and trying to present what is the folk "deacon" and explore the universal law of its changes through this case study by switching between different perspectives of the host and guest positions.*

Keywords: Deacon, Marriage Rites, Cultural Change.

1. The Concept of Folk Deacon

"Lao Dong'er was not elected at the beginning. He was not chosen through an election. At the beginning, whoever's family felt that he was good at handling affairs would invite him over. When everyone saw that he was good at handling affairs, they would all seek him out later. Lao Dong'er here has been around since before the founding of the People's Republic of China, and now there should be three or four generations of people. At the beginning, it was Wang Yishan, then Wang Wenhuan, Wang Shudao, Wang Xueting, Wang Wenhua has been working for the longest time, now he is over 90 years old, and now it is the younger generation, Baokui, Guoliang."

The Lao Dong'er in Dongtun Town mainly preside over weddings and funerals. These Lao Dong'er not only organize ceremonial activities in their own villages, but also those with higher prestige are invited to various villages in the town. Generally, people with strong organizational skills in the village will assume this role, which requires strong leadership and management abilities. According to interviews, at first, the Lao Dong'er were not publicly elected, but were appointed by a family based on their strong organizational skills, which spread through word of mouth. The training system of intergenerational inheritance is adopted among the Lao Dong'er; young people, either actively or passively, learn how to organize and preside over ceremonies from the older Lao Dong'er, using the method of master-apprentice to maintain the existence of folk deacons. Mostly, the older Lao Dong'er values the abilities of a young person, then asks his personal willingness, and brings him along to participate in several activities to gradually get started. The interviewer always emphasized that not everyone can be a Lao Dong'er, and the requirements for the attention to etiquette and the ability to plan things are very high, because they are all major events in life, so the error rate is extremely low.

2. The Lao Dong'er in the Wedding

The primary role of the 'Lao Dong'er' is to organize and guide the completion of two ceremonies: weddings and funerals. Here, we will mainly introduce the work of the 'Lao Dong'er' during weddings.

Half a month ago the wedding, the host family (the groom's parents) will invite Lao Dong'er to organize the wedding. After accepting the task, Lao Dong'er will inform the host family of the number of helpers, including guest coordinators, guest companions, cooks, and assistants, so that the host family can gather the necessary personnel. One week before the wedding, Lao Dong'er, the host family, and the cook will discuss the "menu" and arrange the banquet. Lao Dong'er will ask the host family's opinion and divide the banquet into three levels: high, medium, and low. The price and dishes of each level are different. Lao Dong'er selects dishes according to the level chosen by the host family, mainly referring to previous experiences of other families to provide samples, which is finalized by the host family. Then, the cook lists the necessary materials, which the host family purchases. In addition, Lao Dong'er will ask the host family how many "musicians" and wedding cars they need, which need to be booked in advance. Thus, the initial preparations are completed.

Lao Dong'er's work is mainly concentrated on two days, the day before the wedding and the wedding day itself.

2.1 The Wedding Day

2.1.1 Preparing dishes

The day before the wedding, Lao Dong'er would supervise the chef to prepare some complex dishes, such as time-consuming big fish and meat, for heating and consumption the next day.

2.1.2 Venue layout

In addition, Lao Dong'er is responsible for the layout of the venue. That night, he must arrange the tables, chairs, and stools for the next day's banquet guests, placing them under the erected canopy according to the specified number. In the past, Lao Dong'er would organize helpers to borrow tables, chairs, stools, and cutlery from various households. Now, the chef team preparing the banquet will make all the preparations.

2.1.3 Wedding room decoration

Lao Dong'er will lead everyone to decorate the wedding room by inserting pine and cypress branches everywhere to seek auspiciousness and wealth. Regarding the layout of the wedding room, since Lao Dong'er is a male, there are many inconveniences, so the bed-making and other rituals will be guided by female assistant, but the overall process will be guided by Lao Dong'er. At this time, the female assistant is the "Deputy Dong", who replaces Lao Dong'er. Generally, the groom's sister-in-law is selected to make the bed. The Deputy Dong will shout some auspicious words, and the bed-maker will scatter peanuts, dates, and other nuts on the bed, allowing children to scramble for them, symbolizing the early birth of a noble child. Below is an example of an auspicious word, which is not fixed.

Entering the door with joy, I make the bed for the newlyweds. The quilt is wide and the mat is long, symbolizing a lifetime of success for both partners. I fan the bedding, hoping that their children will grow up to be high-ranking officials. I move the pillows, symbolizing a prosperous and flourishing life. With the bed deity sitting on the quilt, there will be many descendants in the family.

Lao Dong'er set the schedule for the next day and informed everyone of the time to gather before calling it a day.

2.2 The Wedding Day

Gather early on the wedding day, Lao Dong'er made sure everyone was accounted for. After a simple breakfast prepared by the chef, they began their day's activities.

2.2.1 Arrange a fleet of vehicles

Based on the distance, Lao Dong'er has already set the departure time for the motorcade in advance, and they need to return before noon. Before departure, the person leading the car will set off firecrackers around the wedding car, which is called "beng jiao di" in the past, to drive away evil spirits and symbolize the start of the departure. Lao Dong'er needs to arrange other matters here, so he has arranged a "car leader", who will become the deputy Dong'er and replace Lao Dong'er to fetch the bride. Lao Dong'er needs to tell the car leader who will be in which car. The "front escort" will sit in the first car behind the wedding car (four males including the bride's brother); two "supporting family members" will sit in the second car (unmarried and widowed women, such as "half-people", are not allowed to support the bride, which later evolved into bridesmaids, and unmarried women are no longer restricted); the "rear escort" will sit in the car behind,

which is the relatives and friends with higher seniority.

2.2.2 Arrange the high hall

In addition to supervising the chef in cooking, Lao Dong'er needs to arrange for people to decorate the main hall. A bucket of sorghum and a scale weight should be placed on the table here, symbolizing wealth and auspiciousness. A red cloth with the double happiness character should be hung up to create a festive atmosphere.

2.2.3 Officiate

When the bride arrives, the Lao Dong'er asks the host family to offer incense to the heavens and earth, symbolizing the beginning of the ceremony. The bride gets off the car and starts to pay homage to the heavens and earth. Before entering the door, the bride steps on a red cloth. The Lao Dong'er will "call the ritual" to guide the newlyweds to pay homage to the heavens and earth, "First, pay homage to the heavens and earth, second, pay homage to the parents, the couple pays homage to each other, and then enter the bridal chamber." Before officially entering the bridal chamber, the Lao Dong'er will guide the newlyweds to pay homage to close relatives, each time "calling the ritual" for a different person, such as "paying homage to auntie", after which the newlyweds will receive a red envelope.

After Lao Dong'er shouted 'Enter the bridal chamber', everyone would start to play pranks and smear each other. They would use black soot from the bottom of the pot to smear on the faces of the newlyweds, close relatives, and others. The more black soot applied, the more auspicious it was considered. However, nowadays people advocate civilized marriage and do not advocate smearing.

After the bride and groom were sent into the bridal chamber, the Lao Dong'er arranged the person who carried the water for washing faces to be close by, usually selecting a young girl who had not grown up, such as the groom's younger sister. The Lao Dong'er arranged for a female assistant to perform the ceremony on behalf of him. The female assistant began to "call the ritual" - "carrying the water for washing faces" to remove the dirt on the newlyweds' faces. After eating dumplings, the "deputy Donger" female assistant began to ask questions such as "whether to have children, how many children to have". After the ceremony, the female assistant said a few auspicious words, and everyone left the bridal chamber to prepare for the banquet.

2.2.4 Inviting guests

Before the guests took their seats, Lao Dong'er had already arranged for the "gift table" (accountant) to start collecting gift money in advance. The "gift table" verified the authenticity of the money before entering it into the account. During this period, if someone used fake money, Lao Dong'er was responsible for helping to detain the person and asking them to change the money. After all the gift money was collected, Old Dong had to hand over the gift money to the host. At the same time, he informed the host of who gave the gift money but did not eat, and in the future, he would arrange "a bowl of dish, six Mantou, a slice of meat, and a meatball" to

be sent to the "gift giver".

Guest seating is also a matter of etiquette. The Lao Dong'er will guide the close relatives of the bride to sit at the table in the main room of the main house for dinner, while arranging for relatives with varying degrees of kinship to sit on both sides and under the long shed outside. The seating arrangement by the Lao Dong'er has its special significance. Placing close relatives closer to the dining room is to prevent trouble makers and ensure the normal progress of the wedding ceremony.

After the guests took their seats, the Lao Dong'er arranged "accompanying guests" for each table to accompany the guests for drinking and eating. Additionally, "supporting guests" were assigned to wait on each table, providing tea and water, and delivering any missing items. "Helpers" were arranged to start serving dishes, while Lao Dong'er closely monitored the chef to ensure timely preparation of dishes to avoid any delays in serving.

2.2.5 End of work

After the guests dispersed, Lao Dong'er led all the wedding participants to eat. After dinner, everyone cleaned up and began to wrap up the work. At this time, Lao Dong'er had to settle the wages with the host and the host family, and Lao Dong'er paid everyone and thanked them.

2.2.6 Agree on the return visit arrangements

After everyone dispersed, Lao Dong'er would lead the groom's family to the bride's parents' home to discuss the return visit. The two families would sit together, and Lao Dong'er would inform both sets of parents of the etiquette. Typically, the return visit would last three days, and the dates for sending the bride back to her parents' home and for bringing her back to her husband's home would be set. Once Lao Dong'er's work was officially over, he could leave the scene.

3. Master of Ceremonies and Folk Deacon

When Western-style weddings are gradually integrated into rural weddings, how do the emcee and the folk deacon coordinate to complete the wedding? When wedding companies organize rural weddings, the emcee becomes an important host for folk weddings. The emcee presides over the bride's arrival, the ceremony of worshipping heaven and earth, and the wedding ceremony. With the transfer of the right to preside over these important marriage ceremonies, the work of Lao Dong'er in Dongtun Town has also changed.

The tasks previously carried out by the "deputy dong'er" are now more personally handled by the Lao Dong'er, such as eliminating the "car leader" for the bride's arrival and starting to join the motorcade to welcome the bride. Of course, there may be conflicts between the master of ceremonies and the Lao Dong'er, such as the control of important time nodes - when to set off to welcome the bride, which is now more controlled by the master of ceremonies. The master of ceremonies also directly encroaches on the work of the "deputy dong'", such as the transformation of the female

assistant host's "horseplay at weddings" into the master of ceremonies' hosting. This potential competition for hosting rights manifests as the invasion of the master of ceremonies causing the Lao Dong'er to lose some of his power in the wedding. However, this potential conflict between the master of ceremonies and the Lao Dong'er will not erupt directly, as they are both employed by people and share the common desire to promote the smooth completion of the wedding. However, there is no clear formula for the division of hosting power, which all depends on the tacit cooperation between the two.

However, it is certain that due to the varying levels of traditional etiquette literacy, the integration of emcees has gradually brought Western-style wedding ceremonies into traditional marriage rituals. The author has attended many weddings hosted by emcees, and it is not that the emcees do not master traditional wedding etiquette, but rather that they urge the wedding to be completed quickly throughout the entire process, which also indicates that wedding etiquette is being impacted by commercialization. It can be seen that the competition between emcees and traditional marriage rituals is actually a potential competition between Western-style wedding etiquette and traditional marriage rituals. Here, the author does not compare the merits of the two, nor is he committed to preserving traditional rituals, as the choice of these folk rituals belongs to the people themselves. It is only through such a pivotal shift that thoughts on the changes in wedding etiquette are generated: in the modern society that pursues speed, is there anything desirable about traditional "red tape"? Where will it go from here?

4. Conclusion

Due to the impact of force majeure factors, the author's initial entry into the field was quite hurried. This article is at best a field note and not a research report, so there are still many problems with the research.

First, I was supposed to interview Lao Dong'er himself, but due to the ongoing epidemic and the lack of connections, the interviewee this time is another important participant in the Dongtun Town wedding - the accountant.

Second, the study of this kind of folk deacon is not yet mature. Firstly, its specific origin and historical evolution need to be investigated through historical materials and interviews with the group of old deacons themselves. Secondly, in rural rituals, regardless of how the marriage rituals change, the presiding power of the old deacons in the funeral rituals is inviolable, which may be related to the public's concept of "treating the dead as if they were alive". The study of folk deacons must inevitably explore comprehensively whether there is any experience crossover between wedding and funeral deacons, which requires follow-up.

Third, due to financial constraints, hiring a wedding emcee costs between 10,000 and 20,000 yuan, so most people still choose to use traditional emcees. However, whether there will be any changes in the future requires continued follow-up investigations. As society continues to evolve and rituals continue to blend, traditional emcees are also advancing with the times to meet the needs of the public. Emcees are also

constantly mastering traditional rural rituals through ritual performances. The changes and integration of traditional rituals brought about by this transformation require long-term follow-up investigations.

Fourth, the inheritance method of the Lao Dong'er tradition requires further exploration and investigation. Currently, there are four known generations, and the changes in the civil deacons over these four generations have also led to the evolution of marriage rituals, which is worth examining. The meaning and transformation of each ritual require further cultural interpretation.

In modern times, the "deacon" in Dongtun Town is a folk variation of the "ritual scholar." Regardless of how it has evolved, its fundamental function of overseeing rituals remains unchanged. The role of managing rural folk rituals, shaped by local characteristics, has sparked interactions between rituals and customs, and it still plays a significant role in guiding rituals, managing sacrifices, and educating the public.

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