

## A Summary of the Research on the Rural Sages Culture\*

LI Xiao-rong

Yancheng Institute of Technology, Jiangsu, China

As a cultural phenomenon rooted in the traditional rural society China, rural sages culture has played an important role in the inheritance of civilization and social stability. The new period, rural sages culture helps to cultivate rural civilization and promote the development of rural economy and rural social stability. In the process of innovation and development of rural sages culture, across the rural have all made great achievements, which initiatives in Zhejiang and Guangdong province is typical. On this basis, the mechanism to play rural sages' role mainly includes: researching rural sages culture, strengthening the construction of the scholarly society, attracting rural sages regression and remodeling of the rural elite etc.

*Keywords:* summary, research, rural sage culture

As a special field of Chinese cultural research, the culture of rural sages is closely related to the regional culture, the local culture, the surname culture, the celebrity culture and the tourism culture, but it has its own unique connotation and research value. In the new period, new rural sages grew up in the countryside and devoted himself to the countryside. His good words and unsophisticated deeds set a good example in the countryside and cultivated civilized local customs, which made the traditional Chinese virtues well inherited. Today, we study the culture of the rural sages, not only to promote the construction of rural society and cultural construction, but also to revive the countryside, to inherit the Chinese civilization, to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, and to realize the ideal of the Chinese dream.

### The Study of the Connotations of the Rural Sages Culture

Who are the sages and what are the culture of the rural sages? This is the basic problem of the study of the culture of the rural sages.

Who are the sages? At present, there are five main points of view in the academic circle.

First, it is interpreted as "the virtuous person in the countryside."

Second, it refers to the worthy people who are virtuous, talented and prestigious in the native land and deeply respected by the local people.

Thirdly, the township sage mainly refers to "virtuous people of a place." In addition to good moral character, the township sages often have talent and prestige requirements.

---

\* **Acknowledgements:** This paper was sponsored by Jiangsu Province Social Science Foundation Project "Sage Culture and Cultivation of Rural Socialist Core Values" (15MLB010), Jiangsu Social Science Foundation Project "Study on the Role of Sage Culture in the Construction of Rural Spiritual Civilization in Northern Jiangsu" (16MLB010), Jiangsu Province Educational Science Planning Project "Research on the Way of Promoting Rural Civilization Education in Northern Jiangsu Province by Township Culture" (B-b/2016/01/20), Jiangsu Provincial Education Department Project "The Role of Sage Culture in Practicing the Core Value of Rural Socialism" (2016SJB710012), Research on Tao Xingzhi's Peasant Educational Thoughts (2017SJB1546), a project funded by Jiangsu University Philosophy and Social Science Research Fund.

LI Xiao-rong, Associate Professor of Yancheng Institute Of Technology, China.

Fourth, the sages refer to the prestigious, capable old people and wise men in the countryside.

Fifth, sages are those who have moral prestige and outstanding achievements in rural areas.

The first explanation focuses on “Virtue” and is about to regard moral character as the only criterion for judging whether a rural person is a virtuous person. The second explanation is similar to that of the third. The standards of virtue, talent and prestige are regarded as the criteria for the evaluation of the country’s sages. In the fourth interpretation, although the criteria for evaluating the township virtues are similar to those in the second and third interpretations, the “township” in the “township virtues” is directly limited to “rural areas”. It also noted the composition of the villagers, the elders, that is, those with high age, high rank, and high moral integrity. It can be seen that the concept also limits the age of the sages. In the fifth concept, apart from the “virtue” and “prestige” mentioned in the first four concepts, the element of “achievement” is also mentioned. That is to say, the sages have to build immortal deeds or make great achievements in their careers.

In short, the “local sage” have both the requirements for virtue and ability and the restrictions on their geographical origins. Korean scholars, influenced by Chinese traditional culture, also gave similar definitions, such as Zheng Wenjiao, the president of the Korean chestnut Valley Education Institute, defined as “the sage of Jiangling”, “an excellent scholar who was born in Jiangling, respected the sages, made an example for morality, and the virtuous conduct became the example of the posterity.”<sup>1</sup> In addition, although some of the elders have the characteristics of virtue and talent, they belong to the list of the local sages, but the age is not a necessary element of the local sages. Whether or not it is a local sage, there is no age limit.

To sum up, there are three criteria to judge a country’s sages: one is virtue, that is, moral character, sages should have noble moral sentiments; the other is ability and knowledge, the local sage have certain knowledge and can use it to reform the practice, thus have a certain influence on the society. The last factor is the region, which is local, rather than confined to the countryside. The geographical restrictions of local villagers were limited to those born locally. With the deepening of reform and opening up, great changes have taken place in Chinese society and population mobility has also accelerated. More and more people, including those who have both ability and integrity, have left their hometown to work and live outside. These people work hard in the other city, selflessly and diligently, devoting their youth and even their whole life to their second hometown. Therefore, to evaluate whether a person is a country man cannot just look at the place where he was born. Those who work or live in the native land and have both ability and integrity can be counted as local sages. To sum up, we can give a definition to the township virtuous: township sages refers to the people born or living and working in a certain geographical area, with virtue and talent.

### **The Classification and Composition of the Rural Sages**

At present, the main points of view in the academic circles for the classification of the rural sage are as follows:

First, “traditional sages” and “new sages”. New sages refer to the advanced cadres, moral models and good people around the countryside, and the traditional sages are the people who have knowledge, virtue, talent and prestige.

Second, “the presence of local sages” and “absent local sages”. According to the difference between the local life and work place, the sages can divided into “the presence” and “the absent”. “The present sage” refers

---

<sup>1</sup> Zhang Yujun. *A New Study of Filial Piety Culture*, Chengdu: Sichuan publishing group, 2010, p. 622.

to those who take root in the country and pass on modern values to the villagers, that is, who are native-born, lives in the local area. The “absent sages” are those who go out and strive for success and give back to the countryside. They are born in the country, go to school, work or live abroad. Later, these sages returned home, rewarded their hometown, or made their hometown proud because of their extraordinary achievements.

Third, the ancient sage and the present. That is to divide the sages in the order of time. In ancient times, the connotations of the rural sage and the concept of the gentry had more coincidence, and they were mainly composed of those who had retired from the countryside in history. They are mainly composed of retired officials and those who have gained scholarly honour or official rank, fame and fortune. And the essential elements are four: the family is innocent, the family and the property are rich; he has served as an important family position as the leader of the clan; he can use his identity and relationship to win some interests for the local area. Today’s local sages, also known as new rural sages, grew up in the countryside, actively engaged in agriculture or services, and achieved good results. They came from the countryside, fought hard in the city and made important contributions. They are the virtuous people in the contemporary countryside and contribute to the public affairs in the countryside.

### **The Implication of the Rural Sages Culture**

At present, there are some different views on what is “rural sage culture”.

One view holds that the so-called “township virtuous culture” refers to a set of rural governance concepts and rural ideology established around the virtues of the township virtuous. It is the essence of culture, custom and enlightenment, and is the wisdom of folk governance. Typical representatives such as “Farming and Reading Family”, “Knowing Confucian Classics, Moral Correctness”, “A peaceful family will prosper”, “diligent and thrifty in running the household “ and so on. It can be seen that the local culture is a criterion that is rooted in the fertile soil of the countryside, and is widely respected and needed by the villagers.

One point of view holds that as an important part of regional culture, the culture of the local sage is the material achievement and spiritual wealth created by the local sage, which has the humanistic value, and is an important resource for the construction of the humanities.

New sage culture is different from the traditional sage culture. It is a form of Chinese traditional culture in the countryside. It has the characteristics of emulating those better than oneself, advocating virtue, keeping good, honest and friendly, etc..With the help of the traditional sage culture, the new sage culture has been given a new era connotation. It carries forward the good and beneficial remarks and noble deeds of outstanding grass-roots cadres, moral models and good people around them by taking the local conditions as a link. It is the creative transformation and creative development of Chinese traditional culture in the contemporary era.

### **The Role of the Rural Sage Culture to the Country**

As a special field of Chinese cultural research, the culture of the rural sage is closely related to the regional culture, the local culture, the surname culture, the celebrity culture and the tourism culture, but it has its own unique connotation and research value. In the new period, this culture plays an important role in cultivating civilized local customs, stabilizing rural society and developing rural economy.

First, the culture of rural sage culverts the culture of civilization and countryside.

Rural sage culture plays a positive role in inheriting Chinese civilization. In the traditional farming society, sages are the only social group that enjoys educational and cultural privileges. They are responsible for rural

education, etiquette, justice, public order, land tax, taxation and so on. They play an important role in continuing the development of social civilization and stabilizing social order in the farming era. The sages of the feudal dynasty also served as the duty to preach and teach the countryside. In addition to carrying forward the traditional Chinese virtues such as benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and faith, the new era of the local sages also rooted in the countryside, actively excavated the traditional village culture, and promoted the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture. New rural sage is not only familiar with Chinese traditional culture and rural conditions, but also understands modern knowledge, skills and values. Its function as a bridge makes tradition and modernity “translatable” and promotes the fusion and connection between the spirit of legal contract and traditional ethical values. The traditional local feelings and modern civilization have been seamlessly integrated, thus realizing the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional culture.

Second, the local sages stabilize the rural society.

With the development of the times, the rural social structure of China has not been completely collapsed, but the complex interpersonal relationship, which is caused by the family relationship maintained by blood, still exists widely. Rural prestigious sages are still playing an important role in stabilizing rural society. They play an indispensable role in cohesion of rural power, realization, coordination of contradictions and conflicts, and safeguarding social justice. The personality cultivation and knowledge strength of the rural sages are the ties that farmers maintain emotional contact, and let the villagers have a sense of honor in the community and a sense of belonging to the village. The rural power, which is condensed by the sages, provides spiritual comfort to the people who have left the countryside, so that they can keep their inner and spiritual stability, no matter how far away from home.

Rural sages play a positive role in maintaining the effective operation of rural society. In the process of Chinese traditional social governance, villagers are the intermediary between the government and the grassroots. On the one hand, their existence ensured that the central government decrees could be successfully reached and implemented effectively in the local areas. On the other hand, the social aspirations of the people were uploaded to the ruling people.

The sages can mediate the contradictions and conflicts in the countryside. Sages are not only the moral models and examples of the countryside, but also “safety valves” and “stabilizers” to resolve the social contradictions in rural areas.

They have the advantages of being familiar with people, places and villages, as well as their moral integrity and high prestige. Their words also have a high degree of fairness and conviction. Their participation can not only resolve trivial matters, but also deal with important issues of rural harmony, so they can bridge social differences.

The local men and women maintain social justice. The traditional villagers were once regarded as important maintainers of rural social equity and justice. They know the rights of themselves and the villagers, and once these rights are infringed by the government, they can effectively organize the people to strive to restrict the power of the local officials. The rural daily disputes can also be solved fairly by sages. In the new era, the sages played an important role in promoting the construction of the rule of law in the country. For example, villagers can serve as people’s jurors, liaison officers, lawsuits mediators, and propagandists of the rule of law. This is of great practical significance to the full implementation of the judicial justice and the duty of the people.

Third, the rural economy is helpful to the development of rural economy.

Rural sage culture is an important force for developing rural economy and promoting rural development. In recent years, the lack of driving force in rural areas caused by the brain drain of rural elites is an important factor that causes the lag of rural development. Historical experience and lessons show that the success of rural governance and rural construction depends on whether there is a driving force from the rural interior. The key to the construction of rural driving force is to promote the return of sages and the cohesion of social forces. As a modern elitist with dedication, the sages come from the countryside and return to the countryside to promote the construction of the new countryside with their knowledge, expertise, skills and experience, which is the main force of the rural social and cultural construction. This is also the fundamental reason for cultivating and developing the driving force of rural social development. At present, the “sage feedback” has become a new growth point of China’s economic development. In some places, the rural sage culture is vigorously developed by linking “family affection, friendship and homesickness”. Through interworking information, holiday condolences, visiting friends and other ways, we explore a new employment model to encourage villagers to return home and start their own businesses.

### **A cAse Study on the Innovation and Development of the Rural Sages Culture in Various Parts of China**

The rural sage culture is rooted in the countryside, which contains moral strength of virtue and goodness. In recent years, rural sage cultural activities have been carried out in various parts of China, and have made achievements in various places, especially in Zhejiang, Guangdong and other places.

First, Zhejiang Province.

Zhejiang Province is rich in historical and cultural resources, and has a unique advantage in the process of carrying forward the sage culture, of which Shaoxing is a typical practice.

Excavate the resources of the villagers. In 2001, the first regional Sage Research Association was established. The group has done a lot of work in activating and carrying forward the cultural resources of the sages, making a unique cultural brand in the country, taking the aim of spreading the spirit of the sages, saving the cultural heritage, excavating the history of the hometown and serving the local development.

Help the sages to feed back. Shangyu pays more attention to the leading role of the sages in social undertakings. At present, more than 180 public welfare funds have been set up by the local sages, involving education, health, pension and assistance. The total amount of the principal amounts to 1 billion 800 million yuan. There are more than 30 schools named by the sages in the whole region, which are known as the “Shangyu fund phenomenon” by the outside world.

Promote rural autonomy. They focus on enhancing the ability of self-management and service at the grass-roots level with the help of local sages. Taking advantage of the change of the village committees, they will attract a number of township virtuous people with management mind and social prestige to the ranks of village principal cadres, exerting its power of rule by virtue and good governance has promoted rural autonomy and harmony and stability at the grass-roots level.

Make the model play a role. Shangyu district pays great attention to educating villagers and gathering people’s hearts with the help of local sage culture. They carried out commendation activities such as “good sages in Shangyu” and “ten moral models”. These activities promote people to see a wise, good man and try to emulate him, so that the sages are constantly emerging.

Second, Guangdong Province.

As a major economic province, Guangdong has done better in attracting the return of the sages and promoting the economic development of their hometown. In recent years, Guangdong province has stepped up the efforts of attracting investment, accelerating the improvement of the undertaking platform, ensuring the use of land and other measures, agglomerate the strength of the sages, encourage the returning of the sages to return to their hometown and invest in the industry, and give full play to the promoting role of the sages to the economic development of their hometown. The Huadu District of Guangzhou, for example, is famous for its hometown of overseas Chinese. Through the holding of overseas fellowship and other means, the place builds bridges for local friendship and provides entrepreneurial conditions for returned overseas Chinese. They attract powerful overseas townsmen to return home for investment and settlements, guide overseas townsmen to care for the people's livelihood and support the construction of their hometown. In addition, there are many typical examples of Guangdong's combination of local characteristics and the development of sage culture. Whampoa village, Haizhuqu District, Guangzhou is a civilized ancient village. Its abundant cultural resources have made positive contributions to the promotion of the sages culture, the protection of ancient civilized villages and the inheritance of Chinese culture. Heyuan takes the family training culture as the carrier, carries forward the culture of the sages culture, and practices the core values. In addition, based on the natural village, Yunfu started the cultivation and development of the Sages Council. The association assists the Party committee and the government to carry out the construction of public welfare undertakings in rural areas and to participate in the construction and management of rural society.

### **The Mechanism of the Function of the Rural Sage Culture**

In the new period, to play the role of the local virtuous culture, we should study the local sage culture, advocate the reading of the whole people, attract the return of the local sages, and reshape the local elite.

First, study the culture of the sages. To carry forward the culture of sage culture in the whole country, we should start with encouraging all localities to carry out sage culture research according to local conditions. Specific measures include research, excavation and collation of regional literature and history materials, we should rescue the endangered cultural heritage, focus on the overall situation of building and developing cultural think tanks. On the basis of collecting, excavating and rescuing the historical materials of the sages, we should do well the inheritance and protection of traditional culture. We must activate the sleeping cultural resources so that they can be used as much as possible for today's social development. We also need to contact the visiting sages to convey warmth and cohesion. We should organize educational activities and cultivate students' love for the countryside.

Second, advocating universal reading. There is no end to learning. Reading makes a man wise, purifies the soul, dispel the anger, and is beneficial to the world. Most of the people who have won fame and fortune at home and abroad are those who love reading and learning. The formation of the culture of the sage cannot be separated from the collection of books in the family. Good books condense the essence of the sage's ideas and experience, can clean up miscellaneous ideas, guard the soul, and inspire good deeds. Therefore, we should build a book-fragrant society, advocate reading for all, and meet the needs of the public through the construction of libraries, farm bookstores and other facilities. We should transform theoretical knowledge into personal wisdom and public literacy, so as to sublimate its values and national spirit. To build a strong cultural country and a powerful country in education, we need to attach great importance to library culture and speed up the pace of construction of the society.

Third, to attract the return of the sages. At present, the process of urbanization in China has been accelerating, and the rural population has been flowing to cities. Young and middle-aged people with knowledge and culture in rural areas often go out to work and start their own businesses or move their families to cities, and the loss of rural elites is very serious. The operation of the urban-rural dualism has intensified this trend, causing many villages to face the danger of “hollowing out”. This is not only the biggest crisis in building a new socialist countryside, but also the biggest predicament facing the development of sage culture. Therefore, attracting the return of rural sages has become a key issue that must be considered in the development of local culture.

We should tap the local historical and cultural resources, rescue cultural heritage, expand regional influence, and enhance the sense of identity and pride of the local culture of the emigrant. We should serve the local sages, and care for them. For those who return home to start their own businesses, we should coordinate the project’s acceptance, tracking, negotiation and implementation, and do a good job in attracting investment. The government should do a good job in all kinds of exchanges and communication, establish a system, build a platform, let the sages know their hometown, participate in the construction of their hometown. Through revising the village regulations, building the rural volunteer team and evaluating the moral construction demonstration households, the rural civilization action is carried out, the memory of the rural morality and the folk customs is rebuilt, and the traditional rural culture is continued.

Finally, the cultivation of the local elite. It is not enough to carry forward the local sage culture, only to call for the return of the local sages, but also to strengthen the reconstruction of the local elite, and vigorously strengthen the selection and training of the new rural sages. At this point, the “ten thousand people plan” in Shaoxing, Zhejiang province has provided us with good experience. Their practice is to appraise stars for a skilled farmer. That is to say, the level of skill assessment for farmers in production and living technology, arts and culture, management and service, and characteristic industries. This activity affirmed their achievements and made them realize their value and pursuit. Architects are entitled to farmers who have the technology of building houses. The agronomist is entitled to those farmers who have planted technology, and so on. The level varies from one star to five stars. Competition and review are the main methods of evaluation. Among them, one or two star rating is assessed by village (community), association or enterprise. The three-star level is assessed by towns and townships (streets), and the four or five stars are assessed by the city and county level. The campaign builds a platform for grassroots people to show off their skills and create an environment in which everyone can be successful and make full use of his talents. This is also an important measure to strengthen the construction of non-governmental talents and carry forward the culture of local sage. We should use the qualified personnel to train farmers, improve their production skills through technical teaching, experience exchange and learning and training, and set up a stage for the farmers to develop their talents and the path to grow up, so as to speed up the training of rural practical personnel and new professional farmers.

### Reference

Zhang, Y. J. (2010). *A new study of filial piety culture*. Chengdu: Sichuan Publishing Group.